

## CHAPTER 7

### FROM KHORA [SPHAKION] TO OMALOS

[Itinerary: Glykia Nera – Anopolis – Aradena – Agios Pavlos – Agia Roumeli – Samaria gorge – Omalos]

About two miles west from Hora Sphakion by the sea and a mile east of Loutro is a place of which the story is told by Gregorios Papadopetrakis in his *History of Sphakia* (*Ιστορία των Σφακίων*). This is Glykia [Glyka] Nera, Sweet Waters, and it was here that on Holy Thursday, April 7<sup>th</sup> 1821, the elders of Sphakia met together and resolved to join in the struggle for freedom from the Turk. There is a church of the Holy Cross, *του Τιμίου Σταυρού* there. I have never been to this place where it seems fresh water comes out just by the shore as it does by the Church of St Paul near [Agia] Roumeli. This is a general mark of the formation of these regions, and the fountain from which the Hora is supplied is as close to the sea as possible, just on the western border of the town. There is also by Glykia Nera a place in the sea where fresh water may be drawn up from the sea itself with a bucket. This I saw done when early in 1916 I went round Crete in the Jonquil,<sup>1</sup> and the water was nearly quite fresh. Some of our party landed, I think, at Glykia Nera itself.

But the road leading westward from the Hora does not go by the sea: the rocks fall so sheer that it would be impossible. The path at once ascends the hill – it is conspicuous from the sea – and enters a narrow but not deep gorge. The name of this is given in *Χριστιανική Κρήτη*, I, p. 494, as the Dizzy Gorge, for so I suppose we should render the name *Νίλιγγας και Τλιγγας, φάραγξ μεταξύ Χώρας Σφακίων και Ανωπόλεως*.

An hour and three quarters from the Hora the col is reached and presently the little upland plain of Anopolis, planted with corn, olives, figs and many mulberry trees, with several settlements, mostly placed at the edges of the plain like the hamlets all round the plain of Lasithi. Only in the middle of the flat ground lies the place called Kambos, *Κάμπος*, The Plain *par excellence*. Here is the police station where I slept. It and two other houses are the only ones in the place with red tiles. All the rest keep to the old fashion. Here too, close to the station, are the ruins of the house of Daskaloyanni,<sup>2</sup> and at Kambos too I was shown the place on the slopes of the White Mountains where he is said to have been caught by the Turks, though this story does not agree with the general account that he was taken treacherously by the Turks when he went under safe conduct to Candia. Nearby too is the old double church, now whitewashed inside. Outside it are old arched tombs still in use for the temporary burials which are the custom of the Greeks.

On the south edge of the plain is the hamlet called Gyros [south-west of Anopoli]. From here one sees very well the slopes of the White Mountains all dotted with wood and even what seems to be the summits are visible. In Gyros there are two notable buildings. One is the old house called the House of Georgios Zavetis [Zabetis?], which still has a good doubled-arched window with square dripstone and dogtooth ornaments all in the late Venetian style. The other is the eighteenth-century church of St Spyridon. On the lintel of the west door is an inscription cut in good capitals with accents and breathings. A good deal has been broken away from the middle, but the only thing entirely lost is the Christian name of the Vardoulakis who erected the church in July 1760 in honour of “our father among the saints Spyridon the wonderworker”. The surname, of which the consonants of the first two syllables are uncertain: *P* or *B*, and then *P* or *B*, and *A* or *Δ*, may be restored as I have done,

because Pashley (II, p. 245) mentions a man of Anopolis called Manusis [Manousos] Vardoulakis. The inscription reads:

Θ Θ Κ Θ Θ Θ Σ  
 απξ ινδικτιώνος η εν μηνί Ιουλίω  
 ανηγέρθη ο ναός [του εν] αγίοις πατρός ημών  
 Σπυρίδωνος [του θαυματουργού υπό του δού  
 λου του [Θεού ..... Βαρδ]ουλάκη

[1760 in the eighth indiction in the month of July was erected the church of our saintly father Spyridon the miracle-worker by the servant of God [...] Vardoulakis]

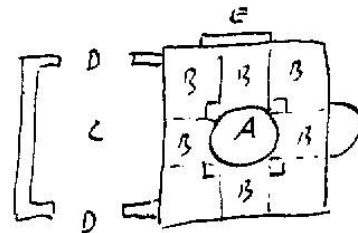
Of the letters in the first line I can make nothing.

On the hill to the south of the Anopolis plain, which separates it from the steep slope down to the sea, lie the remains of walls which mark the site of the ancient city of Anopolis. I went up to this place from Gyros with the policeman. From the top there is a view over the coast lying far below and a birds-eye view of the peninsula of Loutra [Loutro] and its two harbours. In my notes I see that one looks down over Loutra as from a balloon. On the peninsula is the tower of a ruined windmill: it had been broken by the wind and in general the winds are so violent in these regions that there are no windmills in Sphakia. Perhaps, too, the winds are not regular enough for the old-fashioned Cretan windmill that could only set its sails one way and therefore needed regular winds blowing always in the same direction. However this may be, all the milling in Sphakia is done by water power. Hence the very existence of the hamlet of Roumeli [where there is a watermill run by the abundant water which comes down from the gorge]<sup>3</sup> and probably some of the corn goes or went to be ground at the watermills in the gorge by Myrthios [where the next nearest mills are to be found].<sup>4</sup>

On the site of the ancient city of Anopolis is an old Turkish fort, possibly of those that were built after the great insurrection of 1866. By the fort is the church of St Catherine. The Turks tried first to build their fort on the top of the church, but the saint always threw the stones down. A Turk, too, tried to defile the church and all his entrails fell out. After these disasters the Turks left the church alone. It is not old: it is said to have been built by a descendant of Daskaloyanni as a thank offering for his son's recovery from an injury to his head.

West of Anopolis the plain continues like a shelf on the slope of the mountains. Then it is cut by a gorge as it were by a knife. The road goes down into this gorge and at once ascends from it to the village of Aradena, which lies on its western lip.<sup>5</sup> At the very edge of the precipitous side of the gorge is the cruciform narthexed church of St Eleftherios. The church is of the cross-in-square type as appears from the plan:

- A. Dome
- B. Barrel vaults
- C. Narthex covered with a barrel vault
- D. Arched openings to narthex
- E. Ruined tomb with arch above



Inside the church there are remains of frescoes, and on the inner face of the capital of the NW pier is an incised inscription which seems to contain the date 1411 [fragmentary inscription not reproduced here].

On the outside of the dome earthenware basins have been let in. The east window is double with an oblong shaft between the lights and an oblong tapering capital of the usual kind.

The houses nestle among many trees and all the buildings have a curious ruddy tinge from the red earth used instead of mortar. The place is oddly primitive and as out of the way as any village in Crete, but the really notable and wonderful thing is the view to the east over the gorge.

After leaving Aradena the road continues on a level among the small pine-trees until it descends by zigzags to the coast and where it passes the church of St Paul.

### **Agios Pavlos near Agia Roumeli, 11 June 1918**

From the Aradena plateau the road descends to the sea by very steep zigzags. Of this slope called *η Σελλούδα* the road has in great part been recently paved and is very steep indeed.<sup>6</sup> The descent begins sharp from the plain like coming over an edge. Shortly after the path reaches the sea there are behind sheer cliffs and below them screes, both with pine trees. The path lies along the screes near the sea.



The chapel of Agios Pavlos (10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup> century)

Three quarters of an hour east of Agia Roumeli on a little built platform placed just where the beach gives way to the rocks is the little cruciform domed church of St Paul, details much weatherbeaten and the frescoes inside all but entirely disappeared. The action of the salt on the masonry makes it look as if freshly pointed, the mortar looks so white. Inside there is a string course round the spring of the roof and the proportions are good. The church has very much of that casket-like look of small Byzantine work and in its lonely situation looks like a little treasure dropped there. This very civilised, refined look adds to the look of desolation, like a jewel dropped and lost in a wilderness.<sup>i</sup>

Below the church, just at the edge of the waves, fresh water runs out among the sand and shingle for several yards, and by scraping a hole one gets a very cold and

<sup>i</sup> [Ms note by Pendlebury] And out at sea. Trevor Battye p. 86 & p. 217.

quite fresh draught within a foot of the point reached by the waves. This is really very striking.<sup>ii</sup> Nearer to Agia Roumeli water comes out in the same way but too close to the waves for it to be possible to get it. Every time one makes a hole to collect it a wave comes up and floods the place.

### Agia Roumeli, 11 June 1918

The small knot of houses and the police station where I stopped are all to the west of the river. In this little delta is the mill, a café, a very few houses, and the water rushing through great thickets of oleander all in flower down to the edge of the beach. Just above the houses is the old church of the Panagia, and by it about 150 wicker beehives. There are hereabouts too the remains of the ancient city. The view westwards is closed at once by the mountains coming down to the sea. To the east one sees as far as Selouda, the slope down which the road from Aradena zigzags to the sea level. A fairish amount of wood. The scenery here at the mouth of the gorge is very bold with a great crag to the east, and the way in which the view is cut off on both sides makes the place seem very much out of the world, as indeed it is. Just above the hamlet by the sea is another hamlet equally called Agia Roumeli with houses amongst trees but no room for fields at all. Just below it is the church of Agia Triada by the roadside. It has this inscription on the lintel over the west door [fragmentary inscription containing queried date “?1765” not reproduced here].

The same evening I reached Omalos and have no notes of the journey. The [Samaria] gorge narrows at once after leaving the sea. The most wonderful point is the Portes, where the river flows some 15 yards wide between vertical walls of rock and one must wade. A little above this is the point where it rises from the ground. Then, in a deep hole just at the end of the gorge, is Samaria tucked away amongst its mulberry trees, and then begins the wooded ascent to the Xyloskala,<sup>7</sup> passing the church of St Nicholas under its great cedars with wild peonies, and then the steep,



Church of St Nicholas in the Samaria gorge

though much exaggerated for difficulty, ascent until one suddenly comes to the lip and finds oneself in the grassy plain of Omalos. Just at the top, one place in the *skala* is a little giddy, but what gives it its character is the great amphitheatre all round, and on the left a high, absolutely bare mountain of rock seen across the gulf, up the side of

<sup>ii</sup> Pol[itis], Παρ[αδόσεις] no. 197: tradition that St Paul was baptized in the water and that it is therefore fresh now and not salt. See Pashley II, p. 259. But Pashley says nothing of the [?]; cf. also Löher, Kretische Gestade, 1877 p. [?286].

which the path goes. Then, when one gets over the lip, the scenery suddenly changes from the austerity of the deep slope and the top of the forest to the grassy flats. The view from the edge of Omalos looking back is wonderful. At the lip one sees the valley of the *skala*, but a few yards in this is quite hidden and one sees the grassy field suddenly end and there, beyond the great gulf, rises the big bare rock.

The scenery here is on a larger scale than anywhere else and none of the other gorges in west Crete can compare with it. Samaria is thus for some part of the year quite cut off. The path down from Omalos is closed by the snow and the gorge below from Agia Roumeli is impassable because the water is too deep at the Portes.

Omalos is some size and is like a more fertile Nida, but with much lower mountains around. The hamlet is at the north end near where the path goes to Lakkos [Λακκοί]. I left the plain on the west side and went to Kantanos. I slept in a hut used for cheesemaking which was temporarily taken for a police station. There is on a knoll a big two-storey house belonging to a rich man lately dead who has an enclosed garden by the station. Though two-storey and conspicuous on its knoll, it is not offensive as it is so very bare and suits the place.<sup>8</sup>



The house of Hadzi-Michalis Yannaris at Omalos

### Peonies near Agia Roumeli

The great cedars by the chapel have evidently been spared when their fellows were mercilessly destroyed. The wild peonies, when I passed by, were in seed so I do not know their colour. But I have seen the white variety in flower in the woods on the slopes of Lasithi above Kritsa, and in 1903 I saw the plant in the same region, between Kalamafka and Kalohorio. It would probably be a commoner flower in Crete if more of the woods in which it prefers to grow had been left: it requires shade and some moisture.

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### Peter Mackridge's notes

<sup>1</sup> I don't know whether this was the sloop HMS Jonquil, or (more likely) a much smaller boat.

<sup>2</sup> Daskaloyannis (1725-71) is considered to be one of the great Cretan heroes. His real name was Ioannis Vlachos, and he was a shipbuilder and shipowner in Sphakia. He was the leader of one of the many insurrections that broke out in Greece at the



instigation of Catherine the Great during the Russo-Turkish War of 1768-74. In the spring of 1770 Daskaloyannis and his men killed the Ottoman tax collector and a number of Cretan Muslims. They continued their guerrilla operations till Daskaloyannis and a number of his men were captured. He was flayed alive in June 1771. Hania airport is now named “I. Daskaloyannis Airport”.

<sup>3</sup> The village of Agia Roumeli was within the gorge (now abandoned). The present-day settlement of Agia Roumeli on the coast dates from the era of tourism.

<sup>4</sup> Bracketed material from separate slip “Mills (Αγία Ρουμέλη)”. According to Simon Price et al., “Sphakia in Ottoman census records: a *vakıf* and its agricultural production”, in Antonis Anastasopoulos (ed.), *The Eastern Mediterranean under Ottoman Rule: Crete, 17645-1840* (Rethymno 2008), p. 96, the Samaria gorge is the only place in Sphakia where water mills have operated in living memory. Dawkins makes no mention of the special privileges that the villages of Sphakia enjoyed under the Ottomans, where they formed a *vakıf* [religious foundation], the income from whose taxes was supposed to go to support the poor of Mecca and Medina (*op. cit.*).

<sup>5</sup> The zig-zag *kalderimi* (stone-built path) running across the Aradena gorge is one of the most spectacular paths in Crete, if not in Greece. A road bridge was built over the gorge for the first time in 1987. In this way Agios Ioannis, which had been the last village in Crete to be unreachable by car, was at last joined to the road network (Oliver Rackham and Jennifer Moody, *The making of the Cretan landscape* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996), p. 158).

<sup>6</sup> We climbed the Selouda from the chapel Agios Pavlos to the village of Agios Ioannis in 1992. It was indeed very steep, and the going was made more difficult because the paving stones had slid away or had become covered by scree in various places. When he says the “road” has been “paved” Dawkins means that the paving stones of the path had recently been re-laid; what we today would call a road Dawkins calls a “carriage road”. We also drank fresh water by scooping it from under the sand as the waves retreated, as Dawkins describes below.

<sup>7</sup> By Samaria Dawkins means the village of that name (the only settlement in the gorge), which was abandoned by its inhabitants after the gorge was declared a national park in December 1962. Llewellyn Smith (1965: 135) describes Samaria, as “the remotest village in Crete”. The point at which one enters the gorge at the north end is called Xyloskala (literally wooden staircase/ladder) because the local people had built a kind of rough wooden stairway to help themselves get in and out of the gorge. This has since been replaced with a stone path with a balustrade.

<sup>8</sup> This was the house of the rebel leader Hadzi-Michalis Yannaris (1833-1916). There’s a bust of him in the garden of the house.