

CHAPTERS 15 and 16

IDA

15



THE KAMARES MOUNTAIN FROM NEAR PHAISTON. (From a Photograph by Monsieur Boissonnas.)



Two views of Mt Ida (Psiloreitis) range from the south by the Swiss photographer Fred Boissonnas (1958-1946), published at the beginning of the report on the 1913 Kamares excavation (see below). “Digenis’ saddle” is top left in the left-hand photo.

Spratt begins his book on Crete with a description of the view from Ida, and thus makes it in a manner the centre of his survey. I went up Ida somewhere about 1904 with Currelly and Miss Edith Hall, but have very few notes. We went from Candia up through the village of Anoyia and so to the Nida plain where we slept by a chapel not far from the famous Nida Idaean cave.¹ In the early morning we climbed up the ridge and saw the sunset [rise] from the summit where there is a little chapel. Descending again to the plain, we went through the southern opening of the Nida basin and so round the wooded slopes to the right as far as the Kamares cave, which we could not enter as it was all choked up with snow.² When I excavated this cave in 1913 the season was hardly more advanced, but there had been very little snow that year and the cave was in consequence quite free and there was even no water in the inner cave. It is not necessary here to describe the cave which I have done in the account of the excavation.

On the way from the plain to the cave we passed a spring where there was a group of shepherds, all in the usual Cretan dress. The piece of skin below the knee of one boy was so very black that we asked when he had last had a bath. “When I was baptised.” There is, I believe, a sort of idea against washing away the waters of baptism by any subsequent and less holy lavation.

The Nida plain is interesting for several reasons. It is a grassy basin draining towards the south, and at its edge is the Idaean cave excavated by Halbherr:³ one of the first sites in Crete to be examined. The name Nida is the only relict of the old name of the mountain, being for *eis tin Ida*. The mountain itself, though it has now generally regained its ancient name, has been for many centuries known as Psiloritis, the High Mountain. Not far from the mouth of the cave we saw on the turf a space marked out by a line of stones. It was the grave of a man who had been shot there in a quarrel not many years before.

Indeed, the mountain villages on the two sides of Ida, notably Anoyia and Kamares, do not seem to have always been on the best of terms.⁴ The main causes of trouble were disputes as to grazing grounds and sheep stealing. In 1913 when we dug the Kamares Cave we explored the slopes above it for any other traces of antiquity, and we found a bottle-shaped hole in the open hillside, rather like a deep pot-hole in a river, and it was full nearly to the brim with the flayed skins and the bones of sheep – no doubt the remains of sheep stolen, killed, flayed and eaten.

Of plants on Ida I particularly remember the pink, extremely fragrant dwarf almond. It grows in masses round the mouth of the Kamares cave and, I think, on the slopes about the summit of the mountain. This summit is a long ridge. From Candia the length of the ridge is seen, but from the west side Ida appears as a peak and is much more impressive and beautiful.

Of the villages on the slopes of Ida I speak in describing the routes along the skirts of the mountain.⁵

Dittany⁶

With Mount Ida is particularly associated the herb dittany, though it is in fact found in many other parts of Crete. It is a small, woolly-leaved perennial with an agreeable aromatic scent and a terminal spray of flowers, growing in crevices of rock. On Ida, and perhaps generally in Crete, it is collected for sale, which may account for its comparative scarcity: one never sees very much of it anywhere. I have found it myself in Sphakia in the gorge going up from Komitades to Askyprou [Imbros gorge], on the headland below Myrthios, in the Lasithi district between Kroustas and Prina, and on the rocks by the Katholiko in Akrotiri, where Pashley also found it.⁷ It has now several names. Its most usual name is *atitamos* (ατίταμος), a form clearly deriving from the ancient *dictamnus*. But at Meseleroi I heard it called *paradokhorto* (παράδοχορτο), which would mean money-wort.⁸ Another common name is *erotas*, love. This I have heard in east Crete and it is given by Tozer (p. 46),ⁱ who also calls it *stamatokhorto*, the herb which staunches blood, for which he quotes Virgil, Aeneid II, 412-415, a passage which suggests that in antiquity it was used in this same way.ⁱⁱ Its modern use I do not know. Pashley quotes from Theophrastus and Pliny, who both thought that the plant was peculiar to Crete.ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱ The Cretan form is accurately *έρωντας*.

ⁱⁱ Virgil here mentions its woolly leaves and purple flower, an epithet whose correctness must not be pressed. He then alludes to goats using it when wounded by arrows, which we find also in Theophrastus.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pliny, *N.H.*, XXV, 8: *Dictamnus non est alibi quam in Creta*. Theophrastus, *H.P.*, IX, 16, who says the same, describes the plant and says it is used especially to help women in childbirth.

16: SOUTH SLOPES OF IDA

Digenis and Ida

It is amongst the southern slopes of Ida that the Digenis legend is preserved in Crete. The medieval hero, Basilis Digenis Akritas, was the son of a Christian woman and a Moslem Emir – hence the name Digenis, of double birth. He fought in the twelfth century against the Saracens on the eastern marches – whence the name Akritis – of the Byzantine Empire.⁹ From his achievements sprang a copious stock of legends which have been preserved in folksong and legend, in local traditions as well as in a long literary epic. But as the Digenis stories spread from their historical centre, they more and more lose their historical character, and in Crete at least Digenis is no more than a giant of miraculous strength.¹⁰

The two-pointed mountain above the Kamares cave is the saddle of Digenis, *του Διγενή το σελλί*. Somewhere near is a footprint of Digenis, and between the villages of Panassos and Gergeri a great flat-topped ridge in the valley is known as the tomb of Digenis. I have read that his tomb was said to be in this place, and it struck me that this ridge might be it. When I passed by along the hillside to the south of it on the way from Agia Varvara to the Mesara, where one looks down over it, I asked a passing countryman the name of the ridge and he said at once “The tomb of Digenis”, *του Διγενή το μνήμα*, adding that when the hero played the game of pitching stones (*αμάδες*), he threw them right over mount Ida. A song has been published (Politis, *Eklogai*, [no.] 78)¹¹ about the giant playing this game:

No house could cover him, no cave hold him;
he would [stride] over the mountains, he would leap over the tops of the
hills,
he would play pitch and toss with the boulders, he would shift the firm-set
crag.

The Tomb of Digenis near Gergeri¹²

The so-called tomb merits a fuller description. A valley runs up from the Mesara plain northwards towards Ida. Just past the village of Apomarma this valley divides, one branch passing east [= NE] to Panassos and the other running up to the west [= NW] past Gergeri towards Kamares. In the triangle of lower land thus formed, a long narrow ridge rises following fairly closely the line of the lower undivided valley. It is perhaps 200 feet high and is more than a mile long and about ¼ of a mile broad. The top is quite flat. The path between Panassos and Gergeri goes through the narrow passage between its north end and the main slope of Ida. This flat top and regular shape make the tomb a very striking object as it really resembles a long barrow. It is just the sort of place that to the popular imagination would call for some explanation. At the south end of the “tomb” is a sort of bend in the regular outline and this is supposed to mark the point where the head of the buried hero is supposed to be bowed over his breast as he lies in his grave. Geologically the “tomb” must be formed by a strip of an earlier stratum which has resisted the denudation by water which cut out the valley by being in a position between the two branches of the valley.

The way to see the tomb is either to pass by its north end on the direct path from Agia Varvara – Panassos – Gergeri – Nivritos – Vorizia – Kamares, or else better to look down upon it from the south by going from Agia Varvara straight to

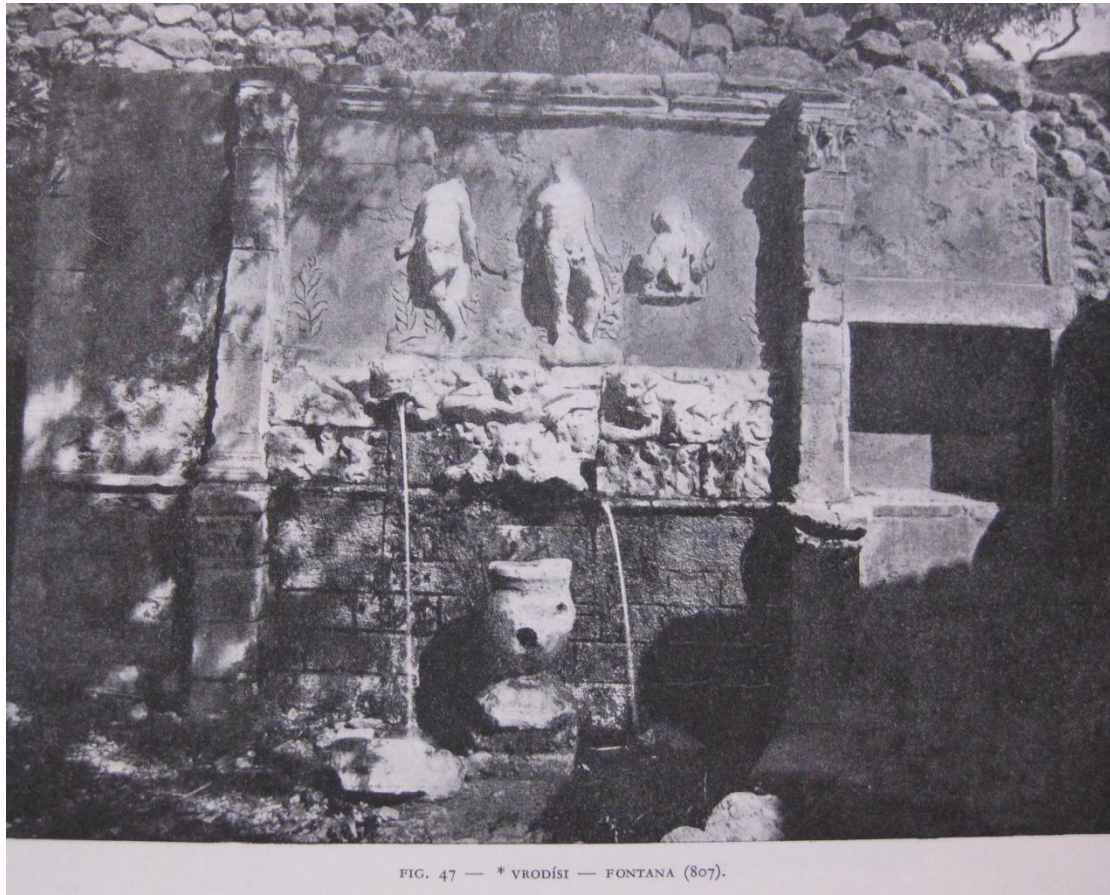
Apomarma on the road to Rouphas and Moires.¹³ By this way one does not descend from Agia Varvara to Panassos but keeps on the level after leaving Agia Varvara.¹⁴

There are Pitching Stones of Digenis in other places as well as here. Thus two people from Melambes, one a policeman at Agia Galini and the other the judge at Khersonnesos who told me the foundation legend of Agia Galini, have told me that on the south side of the hill upon whose north slopes is the villages of Melambes is a stone called *tou Digeni i amada* [Digenis' *amada*¹⁵], and the giant is said to have brought it there from the top of Ida. The place where the stone is and perhaps the stone itself, the policeman told me, are visible from Agia Galini, but the dusk had fallen and I could not see very well. A part of the same hill, just visible from Agia Galini, is called *tou Phoka to Selli*, the Saddle of Phokas.

In the same part of Crete, this time to the east of Ida, there is a whole set of stones connected with the name of Digenis; these are all near Prinia. This village lies on a slope facing east and on the opposite side of the valley to the new road from Candia to Agia Varvara. At the bottom of the valley is a stream and on the lower part of the slope below the village to the stream are a great number of boulders called *τη Πρινιάς τα χαράκια*.¹⁶ Amongst them is a tall crag which juts up as from a lower formation, but the boulders are clearly fallen from above and belong to the same set of rocks as those which crown the *Patelli tis Prinias*.¹⁷ To these rocks the name of Digenis is attached. There are a number of boulders close together, called by a boy I saw there *τη γριάς τα τυριά, τ' αθοτύρια τη γριάς* [the old woman's cheeses]. Vlastos, in *Κρητικός λαός*, gives details, but I could not identify anything except the cheeses. He says that at Spartovrisi [near Prinias],^{iv} where I did not go, but it is a little lower down the valley, is an *αμάδα του Διγενή*, at τα χαράκια, *αμάδα του παιδιού του Διγενή* and between them the "mark or target" of Digenis.¹⁸ But one of the rocks at the *τυριά* is just the sort of flat rock called *αμάδα*, though bigger than any described by Vlastos. It is shaped like a flattened cottage loaf and 25 feet across and 8 or 10 feet high. There is possibly a good deal of local uncertainty, but the fact is clear that the name of Digenis is attached to these remarkable looking rocks. My servant, Yanni, called them cheeses before ever he heard the story, and the villagers are well aware of it. To the place above Prinia, where according to Vlastos is a rock called Digenis' Kitchen, I did not go.

All over this part of Crete these Prinia stones are known. A man from Zaros, a village quite near the "tomb", whom I met once (3.vi.1918) on the road near Agia Varvara, told me that some stones apparently near Spartovrisi are called the Cheeses of Digenis. On another subject: it was at Zaros, when I spent a night there in November 1917, that I was told that there is a constellation which the shepherds call the *Mandra*, the Sheepfold, and that in it the sheep, the shepherd and the dog can all be distinguished. But I could learn nothing more exact. Digenis occurs elsewhere in Crete: Miss Manou told me that near Canea, somewhere close to her family house, there is *castro* called Frangokastello, and by it a Tomb of Digenis and near this tomb a big round stone called the Pitching-stone of Digenis, *η Αμάδα του Διγενή*.

^{iv} Vlastos says that some of these stones have been destroyed to get metal for the new carriage road. The place Spartovrisi is on the east side of the valley by this carriage road, just where it comes into sight of Prinia from the south. This being so, it is only too likely that he is right and that the *αμάδα* and target of Digenis have been broken up.

Monastery of Vrontisi (midday, 30 November 1917)¹⁹

Gerola IV 71



IMG_2700



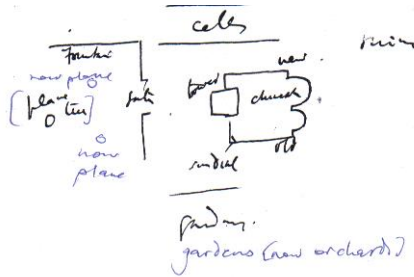
IMG_2701 The plane tree

The monastery lies just above the road from Zaros to Kamares. It is on the slope of Ida facing south over the undulating country on the north side of Mesara. Only the north side of the court has been built. The entrance is on the west end. Outside it is the fountain; the usual wall adorned with headless statues of Adam and Eve; below these four heads, only one of which now works, serve as water spouts. The style is much that of the Candia fountain [Bembo fountain].²⁰ In front of the fountain are a big plane and a cypress. The door has been broken down, but from a jamb left it looks Venetian. The church is double with a few remains of frescoes, but mostly whitewashed. Only

the south part is old. On the SW corner is a sundial, probably reset as it does not give the time right.²¹ At the west end is a tower.



IMG_2702



East of the church are ruined buildings and below the court (to the south) is the garden. There are now a few monks there, but in Turkish times it was occupied by a Turk of, I think, Gergeri, who took away a lot of the stones. Poor and rustic. The charm of the place is the view and the shady place outside the gate with the big plane tree in front of the fountain.

Beehive domed shepherds huts on Ida²²

In 1913 below the Kamares cave I noted the *mandra* on the spur below the cave on the way to the village of Kamares. It is a dome built in the Mycenaean way by advancing each slab forward of the one below. Inside the dome there is access to a smaller beehive in which the cheese is kept and a strong door between. Xanthoudidis thinks this method of building a Minoan survival. He told me that they are found all over Ida.

At Zaros, where I slept on November 30th 1917, a shepherd described these beehive *mandras* of Ida to me. The inner room is called the *tyrokelli* and has a very strong iron door and so much stone on the roof that a thief would find it too big a job to unbuild it. The great art of building these beehive huts is to lay the stones so that the rain is carried off outside and not into the interior of the hut. The builders come from Anogia. Zaros is to the south of Ida in the Gergeri valley and I got there this time from Malles.²³

Peter Mackridge's notes

¹ Nida, like Lasithi and Omalos, is one of the mountain plateaus of Crete. The Idaean cave is reputed to have been the birthplace of Zeus.

² Dawkins' first visit to the Kamares cave took place in early July 1904: see R.M. Dawkins and M.L.W. Laistner, "The Excavation of the Kamares cave in Crete", *Annual of the British School at Athens* 19 (1912/13), p. 3. Iosif Hatzidakis had discovered some vases and figurines there in the early 1890s, but the cave was not fully excavated until the dig directed by Dawkins in 1913. The distinctive kind of finely painted vase named "Kamares ware", with black ground and white or polychrome ornamentation, had previously been unknown. Dawkins and Laistner describe the location of the Kamares cave as follows (pp. 3-4):

For a mountain sanctuary which should impress the inhabitants of Phaistos and the plain of Messará, it would be impossible to find a more fitting position than that of the Kamares cave. From all the western part of the plain the actual summit of Ida is not visible ; this only comes into sight at the greater distance east of Gortyn, or as the ground rises to the Káto Ríza mountains which fringe the coast to the south of the plain. Everywhere else the summit is hidden by the great two-peaked mountain above the village of Kamares, the third and westernmost of a row of lower hills of the Ida range, which from Gortyn westwards form the northern boundary of the Messará plain.

Some 500 feet below the eastern peak of this mountain is the cave, and from Phaistos and for many miles over the plain its great arched mouth is visible in the clear air. The height of the cave above the sea seems to be about 5500 feet, a little higher than the Nida plain and the Idaean cave, which are about 5260 feet. The mountain as seen from near

³ The Italian archaeologist Federico Halbherr (1857-1930). As far as Crete is concerned, Halbherr is known especially for his discovery of the legal code inscription at Gortyn and his excavation of Phaistos and Agia Triada.

⁴ Both villages suffered the same fate during the German occupation, when they were razed to the ground. Anoyeia was destroyed on 31 August 1944 as a reprisal against a partisan attack on a German unit which marched into the village demanding labourers. Kamares had already been destroyed, along with the nearby villages of Lochria and Margarikari, on 4 May 1944.

⁵ Added at end of paragraph in pencil: "Just below the summit we saw *chionodoxa* and a little lower down dwarf cherry. Pendlebury, June 1936."

⁶ The species *Origanum dictamnus* is endemic to Crete.

⁷ See ch. 4.

⁸ Conformation of Dawkins' information about *παπαδόχορτο* is provided by the fact that if one searches for this word on Google, the only site that is suggested is one that is operated by the inhabitants of Meseleroi:

<https://sites.google.com/site/meseleroi/Home/glossari/pp>.

⁹ In Cypriot folksongs, as also in the written medieval romance about him, the hero is called as Digenis Akritis. The word ακρίτης denotes one who guarded the frontiers of the Byzantine empire. In Crete the hero is known simply as Digenis.

¹⁰ See also the Meronas section in ch. 10. With these legends we can compare, for instance, the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland (built, according to legend, by the giant Finn McCool as stepping stones to Scotland) and Fingal's Cave (named after the same hero), the Devil's Punchbowl and Offa's Dyke (though this last is clearly man-made), and the various cylindrical depressions in river beds in France.

¹¹ N.G. Politis, *Εκλογαί από τα τραγούδια του ελληνικού λαού* (Athens 1914).

¹² We visited on 17/10/2010.

¹³ Confusingly, apart from Roufas, there is also the Rouvas forest, which comes down from Ida towards Zaros.

¹⁴ Soon after Gergeri on the right of the road going east there is a sign pointing to "Λίμνη στου Διγενή το μνήμα" (Lake at Digenis' Tomb). The road still goes through the narrow gap between the "tomb" and the mountain. The "tomb" has a deep natural

lake at the top, and an artificial one. According to tradition, the natural lake, known as Βρομολίμνη, was formed when a threshing floor collapsed after the thresher swore. Dawkins doesn't mention this lake.

¹⁵ *Amada* is a flat stone used in a game in which players compete by throwing the stones at targets.

¹⁶ More correctly, I think, του Πρινιά τα χαράκια, since Priniás is masculine. But Vlastos (see below) and others write τα πρινιανά χαράκια, using the adjective: 'the Prinian boulders'.

¹⁷ Actually Patela tou Prinia (ancient Rhizenia, Ριζηνία); see ch. 18.

¹⁸ Vlastos' article is in the magazine *Ο Κρητικός λαός*, year 1, issue 1 (May 1909), pp. 12-16. The largest of the *amades* that he describes was 14 ft in diameter and 4 ft thick.

¹⁹ We visited the Monastery of St Antony on 17 Oct. 2010 while a wedding party was there.

²⁰ As can be seen by comparing Gerola's photo with ours, significant changes have been made to the fountain's façade in the course of recent heavy restorations. In particular, the haloed figure with outstretched arms to the right of the two other figures has disappeared, possibly because of the Orthodox prohibition on three-dimensional depictions of saintly figures. (To judge by a photo taken by the Greek photographer Nelly's in 1939, the haloed figure had already mysteriously disappeared by that time.) However, both of the spouts that were operating in Gerola's day were still operating at the time of our visit. Some of the spout-heads are violently baroque, and their arms are likewise carved in deep relief.

²¹ The sundial was no longer there when we visited.

²² There is more on this topic in the report of the 1913 Kamares excavation, p. 6. Dawkins wrote about the hut near Kamares in a letter to Patrick Leigh Fermor (9 Jan. 1952): "the dome was a sort of inner house and the outer room was square and used to [sic] living in. The great idea was to pile up the stones on the dome as thick and high as possible to prevent thieves from coming at night and unbuilding it and getting in to see the cheese; I believe there are a lot of them on Ida but I have only seen this one. [...] The walls and dome were just dry stones with no mortar and they did look most prehistoric."

²³ Dawkins probably means Moires rather than Malles. His log recording his "War journeys" shows that he travelled from Moires to Zaros on 30 November 1917 – a considerably shorter journey than if he had come from Malles!