

CHAPTER 18 CANDIA TO AGIA VARVARA

The province of Malevisi is scored by four parallel valleys, the streams in which all debouch on the sea to the west of Candia, having flowed down from the watershed of the island. The present road to the Mesara plain, constructed as far as Agia Varvara, a village just on the north side of the watershed,¹ goes up one of these narrow and deep valleys, passing through Venerato, then Avgeniki, then ascending to the higher ground leaving Prinias to the west on the opposite side of the valley, and so to Agia Varvara, which is very close to the point where Malevisi ends and the two Mesara provinces begin, Kainourgio to the west and Monophatsi to the east.²

Nunnery of Baliani [Ιερά Μονή Παναγία η Παλιανή]³



* PALJANÌ (TEMENE) — LA CHIESA ED IL CONVENTO. (680).

Gerola II 392

This new road being along a valley commands no views at all, and there passes nothing of much interest until we reach Venerato. A little way from the road here on the left is the nunnery of Baliani in a very pretty situation. The church has some architectural fragments from Venetian times, but is as a whole disappointing. Outside the court is a guesthouse for, I think, both sexes, but I was only there for an hour in the daytime. The history of the place I do not know. The earliest date I saw was on an *eikon* of the Annunciation in the church with four scenes from the life of the virgin. It

bore the date AX Ϟ Θ, 1698, and the inscription: *Μνήσθητι κε του δούλου ... Μαζίμου του Περακάκη* (“Lord, remember thy servant Maximos Perakakis”). Of the name I am in some doubt, especially as at that time the ending –akis was not in use

for men's names; they then ended as many inscriptions show us in –opoulos, an ending now preserved in Crete only for the surnames of women.⁴

I was received with great kindness by the very dignified abbess. The place is, in contrast to the usual monasteries, spotlessly clean. There are forty nuns, and it looks as if they were all great hands at sweeping, whitewashing and weeding.⁵ Of the history it is recorded that in 1821 the Turks came from Candia and massacred the people. The church in its present state, with only fragments of antiquity, may date from a reconstruction after this disaster. There can be no doubt that Crete, and especially the monasteries, suffered terribly from the Turks in the nineteenth century, especially in the eighteen twenties, the time of the Greek revolution, and in the great insurrection of 1866. Before these troubles most of the monasteries built in the later Venetian times must have presented most of their original buildings. Now it seems to me that, of the magnificent monasteries, Tsangarolo is the best preserved and, of the little rustic houses, the small monastery at Bali.

As for nunneries, it is known that at present in Greece there are far fewer nuns than monks. In Crete, Baliani is the only nunnery with which I am acquainted. There are other nuns, but these are old women who live in cottages or special quarters in many of the men's monasteries and do housework of various kinds. At Toplou, for instance, there are several old women in black, with their heads muffled up in black kerchiefs so that little appears except their nose, who, as I learned after several years, are nuns. They stand at the church services in a little annexe of the church. But few of these have been nuns all their lives. They are widows who have retired from their villages, where they have nothing further to do. Some nuns, again, live at home under some sort of regulations as to church services. At Magasa Yannis Katsarakis has an aunt who lately became a nun. She never married, largely because she has a bad squint. Now she still lives at home and looks after her mother. The only sign of her profession is that she wears black, has changed her name from Elizabeth to the monastic name Eusebia – Evsevia – and has acquired a certain dignity and position which an unmarried woman of middle years would not otherwise have. Her profession, too, enables her to live a single life in a village entirely without scandal. When her mother dies it is likely that she will retire to some monastery where there is room for nuns, I suppose to Toplou, as all monasteries in Crete tend to recruit locally.

After leaving Venerato and the neighbouring village of Avgeniki, the road ascends to the watershed. As well as the newly made carriage road there is the old cobble-paved road along which the mules often go.⁶ These are the old roads of Crete, called generally by the Turkish name *kalderimi*, which means pavement. Most of the *kalderimi* roads of Crete are made fairly simply: there is a centre line and if the road is on a slope there are at intervals cross ridges which at once throw off the water and prevent the pavement from being washed away or slipping down. But this particular piece of *kalderimi* is much more skilfully made than usual, and has at each side a cut gutter, which I have seen nowhere else in Crete. These paved roads date, I believe, to Venetian times like many of the now ruined water-conduits to be seen in the island. The Turks no doubt repaired them, but the system is as a whole pre-Turkish. In the matter of roads, as of water and other conveniences of life, Crete has always had ups and downs. The end of the Venetian occupation was a good time: good roads, plenty of water-conduits, much building of monasteries and good Venetian houses. Then came the Turks and a general set-back. But even under the Turks things improved till the troubles of the nineteenth century. Then massacres and burnings did their work and there was a general decline. From this Crete is again recovering, but with the

difference that the new is quite different from the old: the old roads get daily worse and worse, the *kalderim* more and more broken, but this is only because the newer world does not want *kalderim* at all. It must be replaced by carriage roads, which we shall soon be seeing all over Crete.⁷

[Patela tou Prinia/Πατέλα του Πρινιά]⁸



IMG_3186 View south from Patela tou Prinia

Before reaching Agia Varvara we can look east over the valley and see opposite us the flat-topped hills called Prinia Patelli [Πατέλα του Πρινιά], where the Italians excavated and found fine archaic Greek sculptures and terracottas.⁹ There is not much to be seen in the way of antiquities, but the view from Patelli is fine. It is sufficiently high for us to see south over the watershed, and where the mountains to the south of the Mesara are visible.¹⁰ Then, turning to the east we see Dikte and in front of it and to the north is the ridge of Yuktas. To the north is the sea and the island of Dia. To the west are the foothills of Ida with, in March, a little snow on them.¹¹ They rise directly above the monastery of Gorgolaini. A little to the east of north is the view over the north and south running valleys of Malevisi with big villages mostly on the ridges, and among them Agios Myron is conspicuous. We now see why the new road passes through no villages all the way from Candia to Venerato: all the villages are on the hills. The stones on the slopes below Prinia I mentioned elsewhere when I speak of the traces of the Digenis legend in Crete.¹²



IMG_3187 Propheetis Ilias, Agia Varvara, referred to by Dawkins immediately below

Just at the entrance to the straggling village of Agia Varvara, which has in fact grown up largely since the new road was built, there is on the right of the road a large boulder and perched on it a tiny church. This is regarded as the exact centre of Crete. Between the north and south it is very nearly half way, but as to the east and west it is a little too far east.¹³

But if instead of going by the new carriage road to Agia Varvara we follow the old track to the Mesara, instead of through a dullish valley we pass along a ridge and through the big village of Agios Myron. Up to this point the old track has now been converted into a bad driving road. After Agios Myron I do not know what it now is, nor do I remember where the old track to the Mesara and Agios Dekka crossed the watershed, though I passed along it several times in 1903 and the years immediately after that. It must have crossed either at or near Agia Varvara.

From **Agios Myron** on its ridge there is an excellent view of the whole province.¹⁴ For the most part it is all planted with olives and vines, for Malevisi has always been famous for its wine,¹⁵ and in the upper ground to the south is a certain amount of corn land. In Crete the vine flourishes I think everywhere, but the corn from the high country yields a notably better bread than that grown lower down, whilst the olive will only do well in lower regions. It is for this reason that in the Siteia peninsula, for instance, the people have many of them two villages: up on the plateau at Magasa and Karydi the corn is grown, and the same people have their olives in the low ground round Palaikastro.

The old church at Agios Myron is figured by Gerola.¹⁶ It has unfortunately been plastered over inside and out and fitted with a bad new screen, so that not much is left but the plan. But the new plaster is so bad that it is already dropping from the outside of the chancel.

From Agios Myron it is convenient to visit the monastery of Gorgolaini, which lies only a few minutes from the village of Asites.¹⁷

Gorgolaini Monastery. 16 March 1918 [Ιερά Μονή Αγ. Γεωργίου του Γοργολαΐνη]¹⁸

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GORGOLAINI monastery - 16. March ^{XVIII} 1918 6



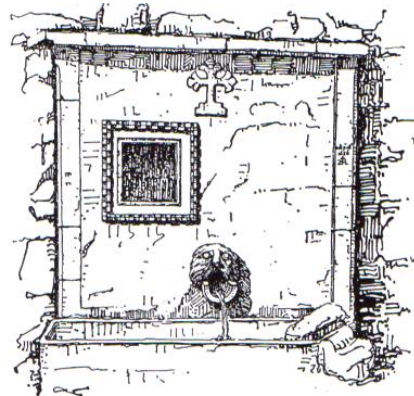
Gorgolaini as approached from village Kato Asites - few minutes distant

Gorgolaini as approached from village Kato Asites, from which it is only a few minutes distant.

The buildings are on two terraces, the *kellia* on the upper one, all in a row and facing east towards Agios Myron on its ridge and behind that Yuktas and a bit of Dikte. The church is on the lower terrace; plain and dull. Below the buildings is the garden with a huge stone pine, olives and walnuts; also 4 or 5 splendid cypresses, male and female. On the upper terrace before one gets to the *kellia* is a very fine female cypress and by it a plane.

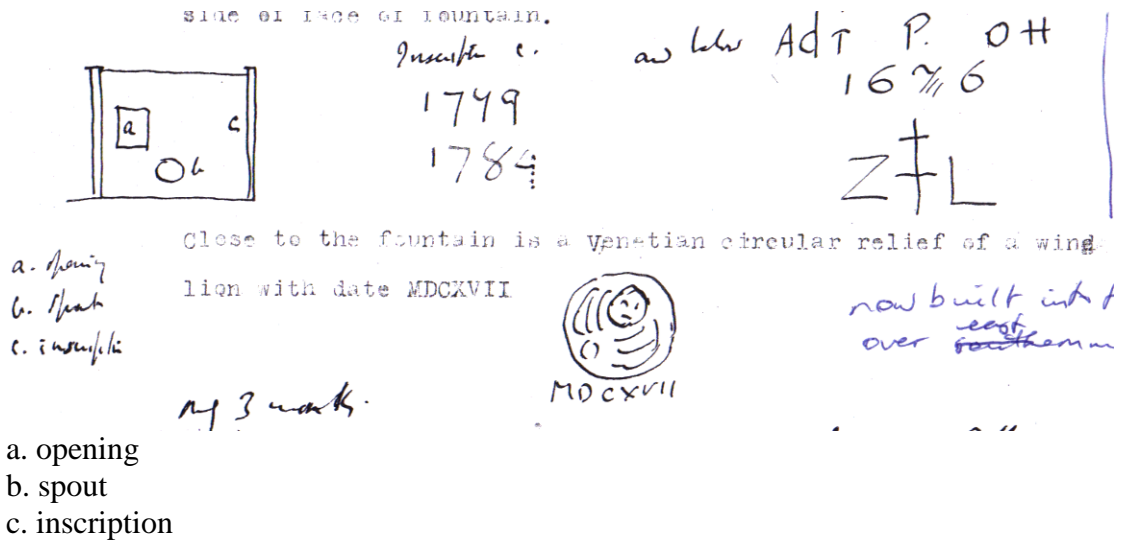


IMG_2714 The same cypress?



The fountain (Gerola IV 68)

The gate is at the south end and the church at the north. Near the gate is the big cypress and on the lower terrace the fountain, the usual wall forming the front of the water chamber.



The spout (b) is an ancient lion's head in white marble. The opening (a) into the water chamber is square with a Venetian billet moulding round it. There is also an inscription (c) and above the lion's mouth spout a date, 1853, made with fragments of pottery set in the plaster. The 8 is not very sure, but hard to see what else it can be. A flat pilaster on each side of face of fountain.

Close to the fountain is a Venetian circular relief of a winged lion with date MDCXVII.

Only three monks. All buildings newish, the place having suffered much from Turks. It has the air of a high mountain place.¹⁹

Village T' Axedi between Agia Varvara and Agios Thomas

A short distance to the east of Agia Varvara, on the way to Agios Thomas, is the now ruined and abandoned Turkish village of Axedi.²⁰ Although the people were latterly all Turks, it must at one time have been Christian because of the great number of churches in the village and scatted about the immediate neighbourhood. There are so many that a pun has been made on the name Axedi with *exinda* the word for sixty, and it is said that there are in the village sixty-one churches but no one can find more than sixty, or perhaps sixty and no one can find more than fifty-nine.¹ This is an idea which crops up often in Crete and the Levant, A pl [JP writes: ?à propos] of a round number of any object. When it is to be understood that anything exists in great numbers it is said that the total is some round number of which no one can however find more than the full number minus one. A village may have forty cisterns, a building a hundred windows and a village like Axedi sixty churches, but no one can ever find more than thirty-nine, ninety-nine or fifty-nine. God, says the Moslem, has a hundred attributes, but man knows only ninety-nine of them – it is the camel who knows the hundredth and has therefore his well-known look of pride – and a Moslem rosary has therefore only ninety-nine beads, in three sets of thirty-three each. The minus one manner is another way of conveying the idea of plenty, sometimes conveyed by a round number plus one, like the site in Asia Minor which has so many ruined churches that it is called Bin Bir Kilise, the Thousand and One Churches.²¹

¹ For pun on name and 60 churches see Xanth.

But of the Axedi churches not many are notable, and they are far fewer than sixty. The two dates I could find go back, 1568 and 1615, into Venetian times.

Details are:

June 1916

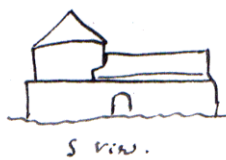


The slab copied is high up on the S side of the SW corner of a church now shut up and disused which is said to have been used as a mosque. The slab is edged with a floriated border which I omit. A very fine mulberry tree at the edge of the village towards Ag. Thomas where I have eaten several times.

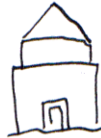
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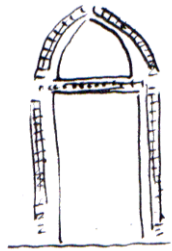
- 1) Arms and date on church of Άγιον Πνεύμα [Holy Spirit].²²
- 2) Close to a mill and ten minutes from the village is a little church with an inscription on a block over the lintel of the west door AXIE MZC (= 1615). On the lintel itself is a defaced cross and the remains of IC XC NI KA.
- 3) Church of St George. This is a church with a dome over the west end and three doors. The south side is largely earthed up but the north has a fine door with billet moulding. The interior has three blind arches in the side walls. These are pointed and so is the arch between the domed space and the rest of the church. There are tombs on the floor and a place in the apse marked by a slab where the altar stood. The screen is put across the middle of the east bay and is clearly an addition for which the church was not built, so it must have been RC and not Greek.²³



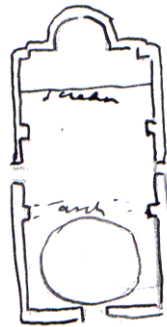
S view.



W end.



N. door with
billet moulding of
round.



Plan
of St George.
Axedi

Peter Mackridge's notes

¹ The important transport hub of Agia Varvara is one of the highest settlements in Crete (580 m.). As Dawkins implies, the watershed is just south of Agia Varvara (probably near the turning to Ano Moulia); you descend to Agia Varvara when travelling from south to north.

² Malevizi is the north-west part of today's Herakleio province. In his article "Folk-memory in Crete", *Folklore* 41 (1930), p. 26, Dawkins refers to the etymology of the name (Malvisin 'bad neighbour' in Venetian or Genoese) and to the derivation of the name Monofatsi from Bonifacio; each of the names was originally given to a fortress built by Pescatore in 1206. The name Kainourgio (New) originates in the name of Pescatore's Nuovo fortress, which was probably so called because it was built from scratch rather than on the ruins of an existing castle (Ananiadis 76). Very little of this castle is preserved today. The third Mesara province is Pyrgiotissa.

³ This is said to be the oldest monastery in Crete. We visited on 18 Oct. 2010.

⁴ See ch. 25 for more details.

⁵ In our experience too, a century later, Cretan nuns keep their convents very clean and neat.

⁶ *Kalderimia* are also mentioned in ch. 8 & 29; see also my Preface.

⁷ A century on, the destruction and disappearance of the *kalderimia* that Dawkins was already witnessing has continued apace, to the extent that they are now a threatened species.

⁸ The word *πατέλα* is presumably from Lat. *patella* 'plate; kneecap'. We visited the place on 18 May 2011.

⁹ It was on this long, flat-topped mound in 1906-8 that the Italian Archaeological School discovered the remains of the major ancient city of Rhizenia.

¹⁰ All of this is visible from the chapel (684m.): see our photo. Agia Varvara just this side (north) of watershed ridge; the mountains to the south of the Mesara are just visible, peeping over where the ridge forms a saddle just beyond Agia Varvara.

¹¹ Some of them were obscured by cloud when we were there in May; no snow was visible.

¹² See ch. 16.

¹³ We visited on 18 May 2011. There's a sign facing the road (see photo) saying this is the centre of Crete. There's a legend that two priests set off to divide Crete in half, one from Hania and the other from Siteia, and they met at this spot: see <http://eirinizk1970.wordpress.com/category/κρητη-ταξιδιπαραδοση-και-ιστορια/>. The church, which must have been isolated from the village when Dawkins visited, is now surrounded by buildings. According to a sign the church was rebuilt by Alexandros Saklambanis in 1933.

¹⁴ The village of Agios Myron, which we visited on 18 May 2011, stands in a prominent position near the site of ancient Raucia. It took its present name from the archbishop of Crete who was born there about AD 250. The present name of the village is first attested in 1248: Tsougarakis 1988: 322.

¹⁵ In Greece there is disagreement as to whether the sweet white wine known in English as Malmsey and in French as Malvoisie, widely drunk in western Europe during the Middle Ages, originated from Monemvasia in the Peloponnese or from Malevizi in Crete. The proponents of each alternative tend to be natives of the respective region. In his article "The place-names of later Greece", *Transactions of*

the Philological Society 32.1 (Nov. 1933), pp. 13-14, Dawkins writes that it is Monemvasia (known as Malvasia by the Venetians) that originally gave its name to this variety of wine, but that once the Turks had captured the town in 1540 and discouraged the export of wine, a similar wine began to be supplied under the same name from Malevizi in Crete.

¹⁶ Gerola II 285 (“S. Maria”, but surely not the church in the village centre, which is Agios Myron). We visited the heavily restored church of Agios Myron 18 May 2011, but it was closed.

¹⁷ At Ano [Upper] Asites we twice stayed the night at the delightful Prinós Village, then run by Michalis Kopidakis, first cousin and namesake of the emeritus professor of Classics at the University of Athens.

¹⁸ We visited on 18 Oct. 2010.

¹⁹ The monastery is now approachable by road, though the old path still exists. The fine female cypress is still there (the novice Christos told us it is possibly the largest in Crete), but if the plane tree next to it in our photo is the one Dawkins saw, it must be a shadow of its former self.

The fountain is now completely different from what it was until only a few years ago. In 1991 the lion’s head containing the spout was stolen and replaced by a new one, while the facing of the fountain is quite different, and the billet moulding and pilasters have disappeared. The old lion used to be known as “ο Αρχοντάρης της μονής”, the Archondaris of the monastery, the Archondaris being the monk whose job is to welcome visitors to the monastery. The water chamber has now become a tiny shrine. The inscriptions recorded by Dawkins are no longer *in situ*, although the roundel with the winged lion and the date 1617 (photo in Gerola IV 187 & 375) is now built into the tympanum over the easternmost of the two south doors of the chapel.

There was only one monk living at the monastery when we visited.

²⁰ According to G.M. Sifakis, “Τουρκικό έγγραφο του 1671”, *Κρητικά χρονικά* 10 (1956), p. 275, the village was destroyed during the revolution of 1897. I assume he means it was destroyed by Christians, the possible reason being that the village was apparently the haunt of renowned Muslim warriors.

²¹ In Lycaonia, near Konya. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Binbirkilise>. The name Axendi most probably derives from a founder named Afxentios (Spanakis I 114). Spanakis describes the former inhabitants as “the bloodthirstiest Turks of Mesara”. Axendi is on a dirt road between Agios Thomas and Pirouniana. We didn’t see any of what is described in the main text, because of pouring rain when we passed through on 18 Oct. 2010. I only went into Ag. Triada, on right of road. The church of Agion Pnevma can be viewed on YouTube. According to Xanthoudidis, it was used as a mosque until the Muslims left in 1898.

²² Gerola (IV 270) illustrates from the belfry of Agion Pnevma the coat of arms of the Venier family with the initials RV and the date 1568. Dawkins has RV and 1570 on one slab on the same church, while he found a different coat of arms and the date 1568, apparently on a different church, though he doesn’t name it. It is possible that he confused the arms and initials on one slab with the date on the other.

²³ For a description and plans of St George at Axendi see Klaus Gallas, Klaus Wessel & Manolis Borboudakis, *Byzantinisches Kreta* (Munich 1983), p. 359 and plate 318.