

CHAPTER 19

CANDIA TO MESARA BY EPANO SIPHI

The route from Candia to the Mesara plain by Agia Varvara brings one to the eastern [western] part of the plain, to Agioi Deka and so naturally on to Moires and Dibaki. The way to the centre of the plain is by the monastery of St George called Epano Siphi, then through the undulating open country to the south of the monastery and so to the plain and across it to Pyrgos at the foot of the southern hills and the principal place in the central Mesara.

Further, there are two routes from Candia to Epano Siphi: one goes to the west of Yuktas and passes through Kanli Kastelli, the other is to the east of Yuktas and goes through Arkhanes and Khoudetsi.

We may begin with the Kanli Kastelli route, which is a little longer than the way by Arkhanes. A carriage road is being made to Kanli Kastelli and has already got some way. The village lies at the northern foot of a hill which was fortified in Venetian times and still has the old name of Rocca. The actual remains are of no great interest, though there are some longish pieces of wall left and the traces of towers.¹ What makes it worth while to ascend the Rocca is the good and instructive view. North is the sea, Agios Myron being very conspicuous, west is Ida, south is the watershed of the island² – Epano Siphi is just on the other side of the ridge – and to the east [north-east] is Yuktas. [ms addition: From Kanli SE to Epanosiphi.] It is, I think, the best place for a general view of the northern slope of the island between Ida and Yuktas, that is, of the whole of the two provinces of Malevisi to the west and Temenos to the east.³

The name Kanli means Bloody in Turkish, but I know of no story connected with it.⁴

The other road from Candia to Epano Siphi passes, as I have said, by Arkhanes at the eastern foot of Yuktas. An hour or rather more from Arkhanes on the way to Khoudetsi is the rock-cut church of Agios Pandleimon, and between here and Spiliotissa⁵ the rock is soft and there are not a few small rock-cut churches. Agios Pandleimon is a small cave which originally had a large opening facing west. This has now been walled up, and in the so-produced façade there is a square door and above it a plain square window. On the lintel is the usual cross with the initials IC XC NI KA, and on one side the date 1853, on the other the day of the month, July 24th.

Inside there is a rock-cut altar-shelf and to the north a similar shelf for the prothesis. The screen has disappeared, but there are the holes in the floor by which it was fixed.⁶ From this spot the end of Dia is just visible, and the church can be seen from some distance.



IMG_5234 Ag. Panteleimon near Choudetsi (exterior)

IMG_5234 Ag. Panteleimon near Choudetsi (interior, showing screen and shelves)



IMG_5238 View from Agios Panteleimon showing the Rocca and Kanli Kastelli

From this road from Arkhanes to Khoudetsi the Rocca of Kanli Kastelli is conspicuous to the west, a big hill with a flattish top. On the east is the province of Pediada with Dikti in the background. As its name Pediada, the Plain, implies, all this region is much flatter than Malevisi, scored by its long valleys.

By the wayside as one goes down into Khoudetsi is another of these numerous rock-cut churches, Agia Paraskevi.⁷ The village itself is at the top of a beautiful little wooded valley. A little way down the valley is the cave church of Spiliotissa, the Virgin of the Cave.⁸ An open cave forms one half of the church and the other outer half is built. Outside the church is a sort of loggia and buildings which form a court.



(left) IMG_5242 Front entrance to Spiliotissa Monastery

(right) IMG_5243 The inscription (dated 1864 [?] and now cleared of ivy and cleaned) and the relief

Over the gate of this court is an inscription which was almost entirely covered with ivy and above it a relief, apparently quite modern, of the Virgin holding the child and being crowned by angels.



IMG_5244 Spilotissa Monastery seen from the road between Choudetsi and Agios Vasilis

At the mouth of the valley is the big village of Agios Vasilis, and beyond this undulating land and a view of Dikti. The whole valley is very well watered. There are streams and mills, and an abundance of plane trees and walnut, and everywhere abundant ivy as generally in wet places in Crete, but only in wet places. To judge from the number of ruined houses, the village had many Turkish inhabitants. We are in fact here at the edge of the north-east corner of the province of Monofatsi, which was the most Turkish part of Crete.⁹ Here there are still Turkish burial grounds to be seen: there is a large one outside the village of Kako Khorio, the Bad Village, and the villages are for the most part deserted and ruined.¹⁰ The country is apparently fertile and that is probably why the Turks settled there. The ground is undulating and for the most part uncultivated and produces a sad feeling of desolation in its present condition. It may be said to extend from Epano Siphì in the west, and even west of this, to Arkalokhori in the east, and from Alagni in the north to the edge of the plain in the south. When I passed through this region more than once during the war there were a few Christians about and a few Turks. After the fall of the Turkish government the Turks all fled to the towns. As time went on they, some of them at least, lost their fears and had come back to cultivate their lands and it was these few that I saw. Now they are, of course, all gone for good.¹¹

At Kako Khorio is a ruined church of St Nicholas with the remains of frescoes.

Beyond Epano Siphì we can go due south across the Mesara plain to Pyrgos. On this road about four miles north of Pyrgos we pass through the village of Pretoria.¹² It contains the old church of Stratigos with an unusual plan. About a mile SW of the village are the ruins of an old church called the Monastery of the Priest, *του Παπά το Μοναστήρι*. Of this only the west wall is standing. In front of this is a Byzantine capital with egg and dart ornament and volutes, two grey marble columns, upright but not *in situ*, and a window shaft of the familiar oblong section rounded at each end, made to support the oblong capital between the two narrow lights in a thick wall.

Monastery of Agios Georgios Epano Sippi¹³

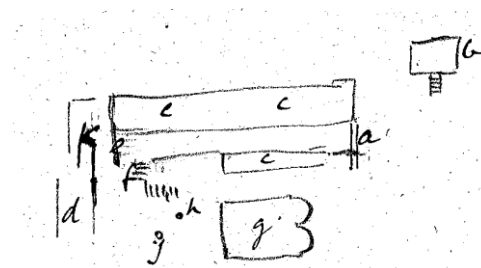
The monastery lies just to the south of the watershed of the island on a southern-facing slope looking out over undulating land and in the distance to the hill of Kophinas. All about in front of it are fine cypresses. Being on a slope, the southern side of the court is mostly open¹⁴ and where it is not the buildings are at a lower level, and those on the north have a clear view outwards. This is general in monasteries built on slopes, e.g. Preveli, Vrontisi, Gorgolaini.

It is an *idiorrhythmon*¹⁵ with 29 monks, probably the largest in Crete.¹⁶ But it was burned down in 1821 and now the buildings have very little of interest. Outside the gate is a large two-storied guesthouse visible from a great distance, and more comfortable than beautiful. The large church is of the date 1861-1865 and is dull and ugly both within and without. Inside the gate, on the right, is a row of *kellia* [cells] and the church is on a lower level, for which arrangement see the plan.

In the Library is an oldish gospel and a big but late MS of the lives of the hermits of the kind read out at meals, a custom which Yanni tells me survived at Toplou in the time of the late abbot Jacob.

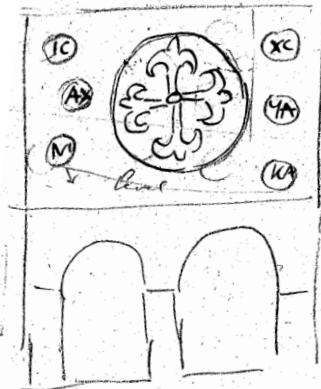
The reason for the name of the monastery is said to be this. There was a Venetian *archon* called Langouvardos, who had two shepherds, each called Joseph. One ranged about where the monastery now is, and the other on the low ground to the south of it. They were called therefore ο πάνω Σήφης [Upper Joe] and ο κάτω Σήφης [Lower Joe] (Σήφης is short for Ιωσήφ), and when the monastery was founded it took the name of the Upper Joseph.

Epáno Sippi 29 Nov 1917



Sketch plan of monastery

- A Gate
- B New guesthouse of two stories
- C C Cells
- D Ruined buildings
- E East end of little church with window and date 1694 sketched below
- F Steps leading down to level of church
- G Church
- H Well (agiasmos) descended to be steps
- J Sour orange tree
- K Little church with 1694 window



Sketch of east window and plaque above it with date 1694 of little church K in plan, which faces one as one enters the court. It [the plaque] is said not to be in its original position but to have been built in there by the Bishop of Arkadia when he lived at the monastery (when?).

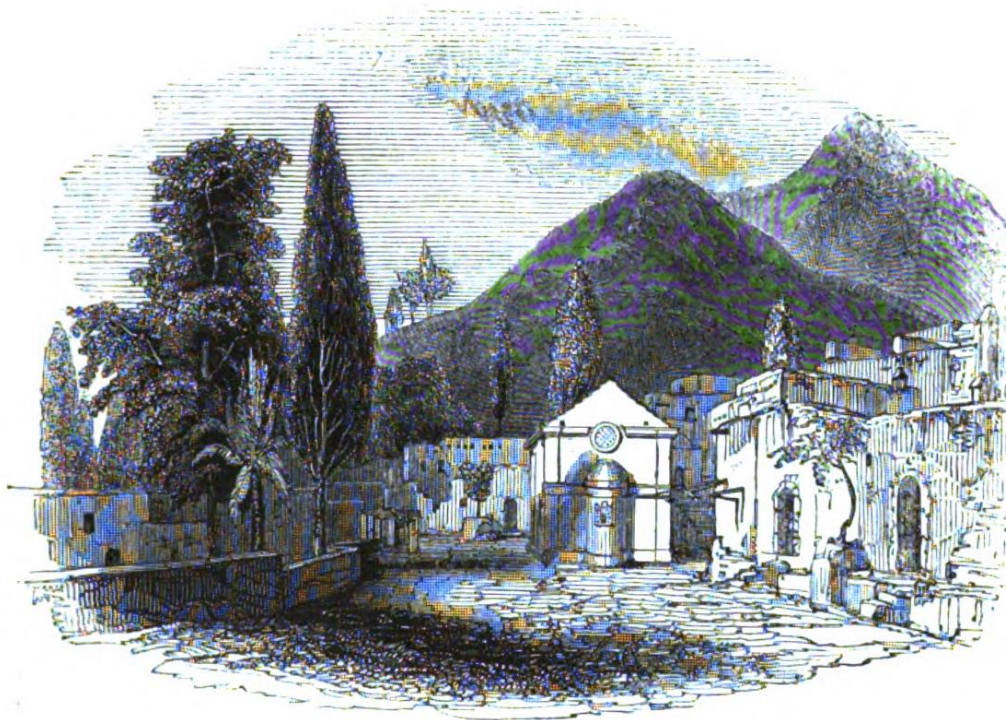
The [main] church is large and new and calls for no remark. On the east wall is the inscription Θεμέλιον 1861 Μαρτίου 5, and on the west front Τέλος 1865 Απριλίου 22. It was thus a building from 1861 to 1865.



IMG_2721 Epanosiphi Monastery: part of row of cells on north side of court



IMG_2724 The two west doors of the main church. The one on the right has a cryptographic inscription (not mentioned by Dawkins). A bitter orange tree is visible on the left of the picture.



MONASTERY OF ST GEORGE.

Epanosiphi in Pashley I 229

St George the Drunkard

29 Dec 1917 at Epano Siphi monastery

The chief feast of St George is in spring, and this is the great feast at Epanosiphi. On November 3rd there is the feast of the ανακομιδή και κατάθεσις [removal and transfer] of the relics of St George (της Ευρέσεως των λειψάνων του Αγ. Γ. [the finding of the relics of St George]) and because it is the custom to taste the newly made wine then it

is for this reason called the feast of Άγιος Γ. ο Μεθυστής [St George the Drunkard]. This is celebrated at Epano Siphi, at Palaikastro and I understand pretty generally in Crete.

Mesara. Road from Epano Siphi to Gangales and Agioi Deka

The road from Epano Siphi passes through undulating, uncultivated country with here and there the ruins of a Turkish village. In one of these, I think Damania,¹⁷ I saw the ruins of the mosque, the plan being [not reproduced here].

This and the region east of it was the most Turkish part of Crete and there are still some Turks there, notably at Damania. The country is too bare to be pretty and singularly difficult to find one's way in as it is too undulating for one to see far and so deserted that there are not many people about from whom to ask the way.

Peter Mackridge's notes

¹ Information from Ananiadis 74-5: After he had expelled the Saracens from Chandax [a feat that entailed considerable destruction in the town], the Byzantine general Nikephoros Phokas built the fortress in 961 with the aim of transferring the island's capital to a site that was protected from pirates. [However, according to Tsougarakis 1988: 210, the Byzantines eventually endorsed the Arabs' choice of Chandax as the island's capital.] Pescatore captured the fortress, and the Venetians took it from him in 1211. The fortress was badly damaged in the earthquake of 1303, rebuilt by Venetians, but then neglected, and repaired in parts only in view of the Turkish invasion. Only ruins of the fortress remain, plus five churches perhaps dating from Phokas' time. The Roka is believed to be the sight of ancient Lykastos.

² The watershed is to the north-west, near Agia Varvara.

³ Temenos was the name Nikephoros Phokas gave to the fortress he built there, and the Venetians named the whole province after it. The province of that name was abolished in 2006.

⁴ The Turks captured the area in 1647 but the Venetians slaughtered a huge number of Turks trying to defend the fortress; the Turks therefore called it Kanlı Kasteli [Bloody Castle]. The village of Kanli Kastelli had its name officially changed to Profitis Ilias in 1955, but at the time we visited the area on 20 Oct. 2012 the inhabitants were discussing changing it back. The route between Kanli Kastelli and Choudetsi is very beautiful and affords lovely views of vineyards and olive orchards.

⁵ Dawkins has written Khrysospilotissa throughout. I have corrected it to Spilotissa. There are several churches dedicated to the Panagia Chrysospilotissa [The Golden Virgin of the Cave, as opposed to simply The Virgin of the Cave], including one in central Athens and another in Cyprus.

⁶ A new screen has since been fitted. The route to the church is well signed from Choudetsi.

⁷ We didn't find this.

⁸ The monastery can be reached by a path from Choudetsi and by road from Agios Vasileios. We visited on 20 Oct. 2012, but it was closed; opening hours 10-12 and 4-6. The deep, narrow, tree-filled valley in which the monastery stands is very beautiful, with a stream flowing through it. I can't find a good photo of the church in the cave.

⁹ According to Pashley's figures (II 317), Monofatsi was the only province of Crete where the Muslim inhabitants (585 families) outnumbered the Christian (238). He adds that five villages "have not had a single inhabitant in them since they were destroyed by the Christians during the war".

¹⁰ Kako Chorio ('Bad Village'), situated SW of Choudetsi and immediately south of Epanosiphi, has been renamed Metaxochori ('Silk Village') because of the mulberry trees. Eighteen monks at Epanosiphi monastery were apparently murdered by Muslims from Kako Chorio in 1821.

¹¹ This passage was clearly written after the population exchange of 1923.

¹² Now Protoria.

¹³ Epanosiphi monastery is by the roadside, next to a junction. We visited on 17 October 2010 and were entertained by brother Efraim in the Abbot's quarters (built in 1920).

¹⁴ More buildings had been built on the south side between our first visit in 2010 and a brief visit on 28 May 2017.

¹⁵ In idiorrhymic monasteries each monk lives independently.

¹⁶ We were told that the monastery now numbers 37 monks.

¹⁷ To the west of Epanosiphi, not on either of the approach roads. These villages (formerly Muslim) were settled by Christian refugees from Selefke (ancient Seleucia) in Turkey, and the oldest of these speak Turkish. [Other former inhabitants of Selefke were settled in Nea Selefkeia, on the coast of mainland Greece NW of Igoumenitsa, where they too still speak Turkish.] Other formerly Muslim villages are Melidochori (S of Damania) and Arkadi (W of Damania).