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ΔΕΛΤΙΟΝ ΤΗΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΙΚΗΣ
ΑΡΧΑΙΟΛΟΓΙΚΗΣ ΕΤΑΙΡΕΙΑΣ

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Kythera in 1537

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SKLERE: A PLACE OF REFUGE AFTER THE OTTOMAN SACK OF KYTHERA IN 1537¹

The medieval history of the island of Kythera is, like that of many parts of Greece, unclear in most aspects, mainly due to a lack of sources that provide local detail. Most historians have been content to trace the broad outlines of the history of the island and have seen that largely in terms of alternating phases of population collapses and slow recoveries². Not surprisingly, the standard historians of Byzantium make little or no reference to Kythera³ and the main sources are the near contemporary *Life of Osios Theodoros of Kythera*⁴, and a series of chronicles that survive in post-Byzantine recensions but that seem to preserve some reliable information⁵. As a result, any attempt to understand local conditions on the island must rely on these narrative sources, other brief mentions, and, increasingly, archaeology. The present paper is an attempt to shed some light on one of the more important events in the history of medieval Kythera, the destruction of the capital city (Ayios Demetrios) by the Ottoman

admiral, Kayer ad-Din (Barbarossa), in the course of the Turkish-Venetian war of 1537.

First, let us provide a little in the way of background. Early in the Byzantine period Kythera apparently underwent a catastrophic decline. It seems that Kastri and its hinterland remained well-populated through the sixth century, but it suffered a precipitous decline thereafter and was apparently abandoned in the seventh century⁶. The same appears to be the case with other sites on the island. This turn of events was reflected elsewhere in southern Greece during this period, as a result of the Arab control of the sea and their attack on the islands and the Aegean littoral.

The resurgence of the Byzantine empire in the tenth century, culminating in the recapture of Crete in 961, created the conditions for the repopulation of Kythera and its re-integration into the Byzantine Empire⁷. The initial resettlement was begun by one man. According to his biography, Osios

¹ This work was carried out as part of the Australian Paliochora-Kythera Archaeological Survey (APKAS), which is a project of the Australian Archaeological Institute in Athens. I would like to thank Professor Alexander Cambitoglou, Director of the Institute, and Dr. Stavros Paspalas, Director of APKAS. The work was carried out with the permission and cooperation of the 26th Eforeia of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities and the 2nd Eforeia of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Antiquities, whose officials have cooperated with us in every way. I would like to thank Richard MacNeill of Bush Heritage Australia, who organized the architectural fieldwork at Sklere in 2003 and provided the images shown here as Figs 1-4. I would also like to thank my colleague Robert Davis, who very kindly made the English translation of the Venetian text below. Without their collaboration, and the hard work of many participants in the Australian Paliochora-Kythera Archaeological Survey, this brief contribution would not have been possible.

² J. Herrin, "Byzantine Kythera," in J.N. Coldstream and G.L. Huxley, *Kythera: Excavations and Studies conducted by the University of Pennsylvania Museum and the British School at Athens*, London 1972, 41-51 (hereafter: Herrin). P.K. Tsitsilias, *Η ιστορία των Κυθήρων*, Athens 1993-94, vol. 1, 190-358, vol. 2, 69-170.

³ Not even those that focus specifically on islands in the Byzantine period say much about Kythera; see, for example, E. Malamut, *Les îles de l'empire byzantine; VIIIe-XIIIe siècles*, Byzantina Sorbonensia 8, 2 vols,

Paris 1988; also the comments of Herrin, op.cit.

⁴ N. Oikonomidis, Ο βίος του Αγίου Θεοδώρου Κυθήρων (10ος αι.) (12 Μαΐου-BHG³, no. 2430), *Proceedings of the Third Panionian Congress 1*, Athens 1967, 264-91 (hereafter: Oikonomidis).

⁵ The most important of these seems to date, in its present form, to the end of the sixteenth or the beginning of the seventeenth century: *L'antique memorie dell'isola di Cerigo*, in C.N. Sathas, *Documents ineditis de l'histoire de la Grèce au Moyen Âge*, 6, Paris 1884, 299-311 (hereafter: Sathas); another is *Chilas Chronicon monasterii S. Theodori in Cythera insula siti*, in Ch. Hopf, *Chroniques gréco-romanes inédites ou peu connues*, Berlin 1873, 346-58. Ch. Maltezos, "Τό Χρονικό του Χειλά. Κοινωνικά και ιδεολογικά προβλήματα στα Κύθηρα τόν 15ο αι.," *Σύμμεικτα* 8, 1989, 15-21 (*Βενετική παρουσία στα Κύθηρα. Αρχαιακές μαρτυρίες*, Αθήνα 1991, IB) (hereafter: *Βενετική παρουσία στα Κύθηρα*).

⁶ Herrin, op.cit., 43-4.

⁷ On the Byzantine monuments of Kythera, see G. A. Sotiriou, «Μεσαιωνικά Μνημεία Κυθήρων», *Κυθηραϊκή Επιθεώρησης* 1 (1932), 313-32, M. Chatzidakis - I. Bitha, *Ευρητήριο βυζαντινών τοιχογραφιών Ελλάδος*, 1. *Κύθηρα*. Αθήνα 1997; and the many reports of the 1st Eforeia of Byzantine Monuments in *ADelt* (cf. E. Gini-Tsophopoulou, Η συμβολή της Αρχαιολογικής Υπηρεσίας στη συντήρηση των βυζαντινών και μεταβυζαντινών μνημείων των Κυθήρων, in Chatzidakis - Bitha, op.cit., 315-8.

Theodoros arrived on the abandoned island in the middle of the tenth century, where he chose to live the rest of his hermitic life amongst the ruins of the church of Sts Sergios and Vakkhos near Logothetianika⁸.

Others followed after the death of Osios Theodoros, including an insolent governor who was stoned by the citizens⁹, followed by the shadowy figure of Georgios Pachys¹⁰. Of Monemvasian origin and supported by the Despot of Sparta, Pachys appears to have encouraged the colonisation of the island with Lakonian immigrants¹¹. For reasons that are unclear Pachys handed over his interests to the powerful Monemvasian family of the Eudaimonioiannis and retired to Mitata. The first Eudaimonioiannis governor meanwhile immediately established himself in the Potamos area, where he built a tower¹².

Paliochora, or Ayios Demetrios, was established at about this time¹³. Throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries the town developed into the administrative capital of the island. The strategic position of Kythera was never made more apparent than in the division of the Byzantine empire amongst the victors of the Fourth Crusade, when the island was awarded to the Venetians¹⁴. Kythera was of critical importance to the Venetian sea empire, serving as a staging post between Venice and its possessions in the Levant.

Throughout the thirteenth century the political status of Kythera fluctuated, as the Venieri family (the appointed Venetian overlords of the island) and Eudaimonioiannis clan struggled for control¹⁵. A semblance of stability was achieved when the Venetian government took direct control

of the island in 1302¹⁶. The Venetians established their power base on the island in the south, at Avlemonas and Chora. This was a logical choice, as both these locations had immediate access to fertile land, strong natural defences and excellent harbours nearby, three critical characteristics that Ayios Demetrios appears to lack¹⁷.

With this shift in the political and economic geography within the island it could be expected that Ayios Demetrios would fade away. In fact the opposite happened. Ayios Demetrios retained its role as the focus for Greek culture on the island and the obvious wealth of the settlement is displayed in the number of private churches located within its walls¹⁸. During the fifteenth century the Byzantine Empire was crumbling under the onslaught of the Ottomans. Some refugees would have found their way to Kythera, especially after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the Despotate of Mistra in 1458. Many family names on the island may be derived from the titles of Byzantine officials who found refuge on Kythera from the fifteenth century onward: families such as those of Komenos, Megalokonomos, and Strategos, although many of these names may well have arisen independently in Kythera¹⁹.

Ayios Demetrios (Paliochora) appears to have been first fortified in the twelfth or thirteenth century by the Eudaimonioiannis family, with later additions made by the Venetians²⁰. Meanwhile, in 1519 the first Ottoman attack against Kythera took place²¹. In 1537 the Ottomans mounted a serious naval attack on Venetian territories in the Aegean and Ionian Seas. This was part of the larger struggle between the

⁸ Oikonomidis, 264-91. *L'antique memorie*, 300-1. *Chilas* (n. 5), 347. Herrin, 45.

⁹ *L'antique memorie* in Sathas, 301.

¹⁰ *Op.cit.*, 301-2.

¹¹ *Op.cit.*, 301. Herrin, 46-7.

¹² *L'antique memorie* in Sathas, 301. Herrin 46-7. Ch. Maltezu, "Le famiglie degli Eudaimonioiannis et Venier a Cerigo dal XII al XVI secolo. Problemi di cronologia e prosopografia", *RSBS* 2 (1982) (*Miscellanea Agostino Pertusi* 2, 205-17 (*Βενετική παρουσία στα Κύθηρα*, Η); see also ead., "Από τα βυζαντινά στα βενετικά Κύθηρα", in Chatzidakis - Bitha, *op.cit.*, 305-14, espec. 308.

¹³ D.K. Zaglanikis, *Παλιόχωρα. Φρουριακή αρχιτεκτονική*, Ζάκυνθος 1962. G.E. Ince, Th. Koukoulis, and D. Smyth, "Paliochora: Survey of a Byzantine City on the Island of Kythera. Preliminary Report", *BSA* 82 (1987), 95-106. Th. G. Koukoulis, Gillian E. Ince, A. N. Ballantyne, and David Smyth, "Paliochora: Survey of a Byzantine City on the Island of Kythera. Second Report", *BSA* 84 (1989), 407-16.

¹⁴ Maltezu, *Βενετική παρουσία στα Κύθηρα*.

¹⁵ Maltezu, "Le famiglie degli Eudaimonioiannis", *op.cit.* Ead., "Από τα βυζαντινά στα βενετικά Κύθηρα", *op.cit.*, 309-10.

¹⁶ Maltezu, "Από τα βυζαντινά στα βενετικά Κύθηρα", *op.cit.*, 310.

Ead., "Cythère. Société et économie pendant la période de la domination vénitienne", *BalkSt* 21 (1980), 33-43 (*Βενετική παρουσία στα Κύθηρα*, ΙΑ). Ead., "A Contribution to the Historical Geography of the Island of Kythera During the Venetian Occupation", in A. Laiou, ed., *Charanis Studies*, New Brunswick, N.J., 1980, 151-75 (*Βενετική παρουσία στα Κύθηρα*, Θ). Ead., "Ειδήσεις για ναούς και μονές στα Κύθηρα από αρχαιακές πηγές", *Πρακτικά του Ε' Διεθνούς Πανιόνιου Συνεδρίου*, vol. 1, Αργουσόλι 1989, 260-88 (*Βενετική παρουσία στα Κύθηρα*, Ι). Ead., "Μονεμβασία και Κύθηρα", *Βενετική παρουσία στα Κύθηρα*, ΙΓ.

¹⁷ Maltezu, "Από τα βυζαντινά στα βενετικά Κύθηρα", *op.cit.* (n. 12), 311.

¹⁸ Ince *et al.*, *op.cit.* Koukoulis *et al.*, *op.cit.*

¹⁹ E. M. Kalligeros, *Κυθηραϊκά επώνυμα*, Athens 2002: Komenos 321-28; Logothetis 424-30; Megalokonomos 476-81; Strategos 642-50; but see 559-61, where Kalligeros argues that names such as Patrikios did not derive from the names of Byzantine officials, but developed independently on Kythera.

²⁰ Tsitsilias, *op.cit.* (n. 2), vol. 1, 237, who suggests that it was built by Pavlos Eudaimonyiannis. Cf. Zaglanikis, *Παλιόχωρα* (n. 13).

²¹ Tsitsilias, *op.cit.* (n. 2), vol. 1, 239.

Ottomans and the Christian powers that characterized much of the sixteenth century. When the Sultan Suleiman I attacked Vienna (in 1529), the Habsburg emperor instructed the Genoese admiral Andrea Doria, then in his service, to strike at Ottoman strongholds in the Mediterranean and to recover some of the great port cities of Greece (Patras, Lepanto [Nafpaktos], and Korone). The Sultan thus recognized the importance of maintaining an aggressive naval presence in the central Mediterranean and he appointed the former Yakupoğlu Hızır, son of an Ottoman military adventurer and a Christian woman from Lesbos, as commander of the Ottoman fleet. The admiral, generally known as Barbarossa Hayreddin Pasha, set off from Istanbul in 1534 and raided various parts of the Mediterranean, ultimately establishing Ottoman naval supremacy with a decisive defeat of Andrea Doria at the Battle of Preveza in 1538. One year earlier (1537) Barbarossa attacked Venetian possessions in the Aegean and Ionian Seas, beginning with Kerkyra, which he took after a terrible siege, carrying off 20,000 captives. He then ravaged Parga and the other Ionian islands and set his sights on Kythera, which he took with remarkable ease²². In the same year Barbarossa destroyed Venetian and Frankish settlements on Amorgos, Astypalaia, Ios, Anaphe, Seriphos, Antiparos, Paros, Skyros, Skiathos and Skopelos, after which he took Aigina and Korinth²³.

The sack of Paliochora was a catastrophe for Kythera. The Venetians claimed that 7,000 people were killed or enslaved²⁴. The magnitude of these events is evident when the first Venetian census taken on Kythera records the population at 1,850²⁵. The figure of 7,000 taken in the raid cannot possibly all have come from Ayios Demetrios since the site could only have housed a tenth of that number. More likely Barbarossa's captives came from the satellite settlements around Paliochora, or – just as likely – the number of victims has been seriously exaggerated by later tradition.

The sack had a significant effect on the development of the island for the next few hundred years. The remaining population contracted to the southern half of the island where the forts at Mylopotamos, Avlemonas and Chora afforded some measure of security. The population of the island may not have reached its pre-1537 levels until the start of the nin-

teenth century²⁶. This, coupled with the neglect effected by the decaying Venetian government throughout the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries led to another Dark Age for Kythera.

Key for our understanding of the critical period after 1537 is a series of reports and communications among Venetian officials in the East, individuals in Kythera, and the Venetian Senate. In 1543 there was an official petition of the inhabitants of Kythera, seeking support and defence from Venice²⁷. This specifically requested, among other things, repair of the fortress of Ayios Demetrios, and the remission of taxation. This petition was forwarded to Venice, along with comments and recommendations, by the Proveditore of Kythera Zuanne Soranzo (1542-44). The Senate replied, agreeing to most of the demands but promising financial contributions less than those sought by the Kytherians. In 1545 Soranzo wrote another report in which he went over many of the same issues, providing detailed information about the size of the various fortifications and their garrisons²⁸. He described and characterized the fortifications at Kapsali and Mylopotamos and then discussed Ayios Demetrios in the north. He, in fact, recommended against reconstruction of the fortifications there, citing the excessive cost and the “mountain that lies above it”. He was aware that the defenses of Ayios Demetrios (like those of many other fortifications) had been rendered obsolete by the arrival of cannon and he recommended the fortification of “a mountain top that is found there”, a spot that has yet to be identified but that could, in fact, be the site of Sklere to be discussed below. Soranzo concluded his report, mentioning that only 360 families remained on the island, representing a total population of only 1850 souls!

Little apparently resulted from these reports and even from the agreement of the Senate. Conditions on Kythera continued to deteriorate, and an otherwise unknown adviser to the Venetian government in Crete was dispatched in 1563 to examine the situation on the island²⁹. As most reports from the island, this text begins by emphasizing the geographical location of Kythera and its ability to gather information about the activities of the Ottoman fleet. It continues by pointing out that the contemporary low population of the island (3,000 in-

²² Op.cit., 245-6.

²³ Op.cit., 245-6. N. Chatham, *Medieval Greece*, New Haven 1981, 253.

²⁴ See discussion in Tsitsilias, op.cit., vol. 1, 246, n. 58.

²⁵ Ch. Maltezou, “A Contribution”, op.cit. (n. 16), 156.

²⁶ *Απογραφές πληθυσμού Κυθήρων*, vol. 3, Athens 1997. Maltezou, “A Contribution”, op.cit. (n. 16).

²⁷ Demands of all in Cerigo with the response of Zuanne Soranzo, Sathas, 5, 53-8, translated by Tsitsilias, op.cit. (n. 2), vol. 1, 248-52.

²⁸ Report of Zuanne Soranzo (1545), in Sathas, 6, 286-9, translated by Tsitsilias, op.cit. (n. 2), vol. 1, 262-6.

²⁹ Tsitsilias, op.cit. (n. 2), vol. 1, 271-5.

dividuals) was due to the recent Turkish raids and the resulting lack of security. The report then says as follows:

[p. 666] “E perchè l’isola di Cerigo è divisa in tre parti, l’una chiamata Milopotamo, l’altra borgo di Capsali, et l’altra San Dimitri, castello famosissimo sopra quell’isola, dal quale per Giaurali Rais corsaro furono in una sola volta menate via sette mille anime per la viltà di quelle genti, che non havevano alcuna esperienza delle cose di guerra, nè havevano mai manizzato, nè pur visto arme, onde da XXXVIII fuste che haveva seco fu menato via tutto il sopradetto numero, senza solpo di spada, e senza essersi pur veduto sangue; è occorso da allora in qua che quelli, che sono restati in quella parte, non havendo più ridotto, dove potessero habitar sicuramente, se sono ridutti ad habitar nelle campagne, l’una così discosta dall’altra quattro o cinque miglia; et per paura di corsari la maggior parte di quelli abitanti dorme l’estade nelli boschi, temendo che siando alle cose loro non venisse una notte una quantità de fuste, e li depredasse tutte, come è avvenuto delle altre volte; e convengono lasciar le loro robe con pochissima sicurtà, e star anche essi nei boschi con grandissimo pericolo e sospetto, conoscendo che staria in arbitrio di un corsaro, che fosse guidato da qualche pratico dell’isola, se mettere in terra anche con pochissimi homini, e trovarli, e prederli tutti; però saria gradissimo consolation, et beneficio di quel popolo, e cosa conveniente alla pietà di questo Illustrissimo Dominio di proveder che si facesse da novo un castello, o ridotto, dove potessero unirsi i predetti isolani, che possono esser di quel distretto di circa mille, i quali quando si perdessero, quell’isola resterebbe dal tutto disabitata. E questo si faria con pochissima spesa della Serenità Vostra, perchè i medesimi abitanti, oltre l’angaria delle lor persone, contribuirebano bona parte del dinaro per questo effeto, com più volte si sono offerti. Fu già del 1545 deliberato per questo Eccellentissimo Consiglio di rifar il detto castello di San Dimitri ned medesimo luogo, et fu presso appresso di dar ducati cento per questa opera, et cento ne offerfero quelli magnifici gentihomini da cà Venier, che sono comparticipi di questa isola; il che non si è però fatto fin hora; et in effeto essendo quel sito di San Dimitri dominato da due monte, dalli quali può errer battuto facilmente, et havendo molte altre oppositioni i magnifici Provveditori, che hanno conosciuto che il ridursi in quel medesimo luogo saria con pochissima sigurtà di quelli, che vi si ridises [p. 667] sero, non si hanno curato mai, nè hanno giudicato utile il rifarlo, e tanto meno, perchè il detto luogo, oltre che è vicino al mare, et comodo alli corsari, è poi tanto lontano dalli campi, e semenason di quelli abitanti, che con grandissimo incommodo portriano attender ai fatti loro; onde trovandosi nell’isola un altro luongo, chiamato Selerì, lontano dal mare più di sette miglia, e diviso per strade cativissime, et inaccessibili alli corsari, com-

modissimo alli abitanti per esser nel mezzo di quel distretto, et appresso patron di quel sito, et cavaliere dell’isola, che scopre da lunge tutto il mar cicconvicino, si potria far in questo luongo un ridotto molto sicuro, et comodo a tutto quel populo; et si potria far facilmente, et con grande vantaggio, et in breve tempo, essendovi comodità di acque, di sabioni, et di pietre, le qual tutte cose non sono un quarto di miglio lontano; per la qual cosa mi par di ricordarle riverentemente che ella potria in questo luongo di Selerì spender quelli dinari, che per parte di questo Eccellentissimo Senato si havevano da spender nel luongo di San Dimitri, aggiungendo però qualche cosa che nel vero li cento ducati no basterebbono, dando cargo, se cosi le paresse, al medesimo signor Giulio Savorgnano, o ad altri di riveder l’un et l’altro sito; et è da credere che li magnifici Venieri comparticipi per la rifation di questo ridotto contribuiranno, secondo la loro offerta, per la medesima portion che vi contribuirà la Serenità Vostra, appresso la satisfaction, et beneficii che ne riceverà quel povero populo, che hora vi habita. Siano certe l’Eccellentissime Signorie Vostre che molte famiglie di Cerigo, le quali, vedendosi star ivi con pochissima sicurtà, si sono disperse, et passate alla Vatica nella Morea, al braccio della Maina, et in altri luoghi turcheschi, et hanno abbandonato i loro terreni, volendo lasciar, et perder piuttosto i loro beni che habitar in quel luogo, con pericolo delle lor vite, facendosi questo castello, o ridotto a Selerì, torneriano senza dubbio alla patria loro; et non par questi da Cerigo, ma ancora molti altgri christiani circonvicini, che habitano al presente nella Morea, si riduriano volentiera sotto l’ombra dell’Illustrissimo Dominio, se havessero qualche luogo vicino al lor paese, dove potessero habitar sicuramente, come saria questo; et rifarano questa isola, già così ben habitata, et al presente così desolata, e deserta; e con questo notabile beneficio di questi abitanti si accrescerebbe anche utile grande alla Serenità Vostra, perchè consistendo tutta l’intrada che traze di questa isola nelle terzarie, che sono, comme ella sa, una parte di quel che produce il terreno con la moltitudine delli abitanti, s’accrescerebbe l’industria per il laboro loro, et col loro lavoro i frutti et l’intrade dell’isola, e con quelle parimente l’intrada della Serenità Vostra, siccome si può molto ben veder per l’esperienza del tempo passato, che quando quella era habitata, Vostra Serenità ne cavava de terzarie ogni anno più di sei mille misure di formento, dove ora non ne cava a gran penna mille e cinquecento”³⁰.

³⁰ V. Lamansky, *Secrets d’etat de Venise*, St. Petersburg, 1884 (photographic reprint, New York 1968), 666-7. Cf. Maltezos, “Από τα βυζαντινά στα βενετικά Κύθηρα”, op.cit. (n. 7), 314.

[p. 666] “And wherefore the island of Cerigo is divided into three parts, one called Milopatamo, another [the] village of Capsali, and another San Dimitri – which was in past times more inhabited than the other two, [but] in the time of the last Turkish war the castle on this side of San Dimitri was destroyed; [it was] the most famous castle on that island, [and] from it were carried off at a single time by the corsair Giaurali ra’s seven thousand souls, thanks to the cowardice of those people, who did not have any experience in matters of war, having neither wielded nor even seen weapons; hence with the 38 skiffs that he had he took away all the above mentioned number, with a blow of the sword and indeed without any blood seen. It has happened that from then until now that those who remained in that place, no longer having a redoubt where they could live securely, have been reduced to living out in the countryside, one of them four or five miles away from another; and for fear of the corsairs, during the summer the greater part of these inhabitants sleep in the woods, fearing that if they stay with their houses some night there might come a number of skiffs to plunder them all, like happened other times. And it behooves them to leave their things with little protection and to also stay in the woods with great danger and suspicion, knowing that they will be at the mercy of any corsair who might be guided by someone knowledgeable of the island, if he embarks [on the island] with only a few men, and finding them, capture all of them.

Therefore it will be of very great comfort and benefit, and a thing behooving to the mercy of this Most Illustrious Realm to see to it that a castle or redoubt is made again, where there could unite all the above mentioned islanders, who in that district might number around a thousand [and who], when they are lost, will leave the island completely uninhabited. And this can be done at very little expense to Your Serenity, because these same inhabitants, in addition to the head tax on their persons will contribute a good part of the money for this end, as they have [already] offered [to do] many times. It was already decided in 1545 by this Most Excellent Council to remake the said castle of San Dimitri, in the same place, and it was decided later on to give one hundred ducats for this work, and those magnificent gentlemen of the Ca’ Venier, who are sharers of this island, offered [to give] a hundred for it, which has not however been done until now. And the site of San Dimitri in effect being dominated by two hills, from which it can be easily hit [by cannon] and having many other objections, the magnificent Provveditori, who have recognized that finding refuge in that same place will grant very scarce security to those who would repair thence, [p. 667] have never deigned nor judged it useful to remake it, even more because the said place, besides being close to the sea and convenient to the corsairs, is consequently

far from the fields and seedbeds of those inhabitants, who [only] with greatest difficulty would be able to take care of their business. Hence, finding on the island another location, called Seleri, more than seven miles away from the sea separated from the corsairs by very bad and inaccessible roads, most convenient to the inhabitants – for being in the middle of that district, both near the master of that site and astride the island that reveals from a distance all the surrounding sea – one could make in this place a redoubt [that would be] very secure and convenient to those people, and it could be easily done, with great benefit and in a short time, there being nearby water, sand, and stone, all of which things are [available] only a quarter of a mile away. For this thing I would respectfully remind You that You could in this locale of Seleri spend that money that by edict of this Most Excellent Senate had been [assigned] to be spent in the locale of San Dimitri, adding something, however, in the likelihood that the one hundred ducats would not be enough; give the task, if so it seems to You, to Mister Giulio Savorgnan, or to others, to re-examine both sites. And it is credible that the Magnificent Venier, co-participants in the remaking of this redoubt, [upon] learning of the satisfaction and the benefits that those poor people who now live there will receive, will contribute, according to their offer, to the same portion that will contribute Your Serenity. Your Most Excellent Signors will be certain that [there are] many families of Cerigo, who, seeing themselves there with very little security, have dispersed and gone to the Vatica in the Morea, to the arm of the Maina, and to other Turkish places, and have abandoned their lands, wanting rather to leave and to lose their goods than to live in that place, in danger of their lives, [and that], the castle and redoubt at Seleri once built, they would return without question to their homeland. And not only those of Cerigo, but also many nearby Christians, who at present live in the Morea, would willingly return under the shadow of this Most Illustrious Dominion, if they might have some place – as this will be – near their home where they could live securely. And they will remake this island, once so well inhabited and at present so desolate and deserted. And with this notable benefit of these inhabitants there will also increase a great profit to Your Serenity, because, all the income that You draw from this island consisting in the sharecropping [contracts] that are, as You know, a portion of that which the land produces with its crowd of inhabitants, the output would grow through their labor, and with their labor the fruits and the income of the island, and equally with those the income of Your Serenity, since one can very well see from the experience of past times that when that [island] was inhabited, Your Serenity took every year out of the share-cropping [contracts] more than six thousand measures of grain, whereas now You get from it with great difficulty fifteen hundred”.



Fig. 1. Kythera, showing major places in the fifteenth century and location of Sklere.

This text provides significant and detailed information about the situation in the northern part of Kythera (Cerigo) in the quarter century between Barbarossa's raid and the date of the report. Firstly, this is one of the earliest specific references to the Ottoman attack in 1537 and the informant says, pointedly, that the city of Ayios Demetrios fell without a battle because the inhabitants offered no resistance. It is also arguably the earliest reference that Barbarossa carried off 7,000 prisoners (in his 38 ships), a number that has (as mentioned) reasonably been questioned by all modern historians³¹.

Perhaps more interesting, the text reports that approximately 1,000 survivors (out of a total population on the island of 3,000) were still living somewhere in the broader vicinity of Ayios Demetrios but who abandoned their homes in the summer and lived in the woods in fear of a pirate raid because they had no protection³². The text refers to the earlier attempt, in 1545, to rebuild the fortress of Ayios Demetrios and that the Venetian Senate and the Venier family had agreed to contribute 100 ducats each for that project, but that the task had never been undertaken, leaving the inhabitants undefended; the result was that many of them had left the island and settled

³¹ The same number is mentioned by *L'antique memorie dell'isola di Cerigo* (n. 5), 307, but it is difficult to know when to date the composition of this part of the text ("sette mille anime, come è publica voce, furno fatte captive al castello di San Dimitri").

in the area of Vatika immediately opposite Kythera on Cape Malea or in the Mani. This information, in fact, reflects and was already anticipated by the report of Zuanne Soranzo, made in 1545 and mentioned above³³.

The report of 1563 then requests that Venice now undertake the necessary reconstruction at Ayios Demetrios or, preferably, at another site, called Selerì. It points out that Ayios Demetrios is, in fact, susceptible to cannon attack from two nearby higher mountains and that it is relatively close to the sea, making it easy prey for the pirates, as had previously happened in 1537. Selerì, by contrast, has several advantages: it is seven miles from the sea and the roads that would be used by the pirates (presumably from the sea) were difficult for them to pass, while the site is easy of access by the inhabitants and it is located in the midst of the territory where they are living. In addition, the material necessary for the construction, namely water, sand, and stone, are all only a quarter of a mile away. The site also provides a view of practically the whole of the island. The report concludes that the construction of a fortress at Selerì could be done relatively cheaply, with the inhabitants contributing funds (and presumably labor) of their own, and the Venetian Senate spending the 100 ducats that had previously agreed to spend at Ayios Demetrios; the author adds his hope that the Venier, when they see the benefit from construction of a new fortress, will also want to contribute the 100 ducats they had originally agreed to provide.

Needless to say, neither the rebuilding of Ayios Demetrios nor the fortification of Selerì was accomplished, simply because the money from these sources was not forthcoming. It is, however, worth asking where Selerì was and whether there are any archaeological remains that may help to inform our understanding of the situation in Kythera in the second half of the sixteenth century. The report of the Venetian inspector makes it clear that Selerì must have been in the broader area of Ayios Demetrios (Paliochora), i.e., in the northern part of the island. It must, in addition, have been located on a significant free-standing eminence, both because such was necessary for a fortification of the period and particularly because it presumably did not have higher mountains nearby, as was the case at Ayios Demetrios. The mention that the site was seven miles from the sea is not immediately helpful, simply because there is virtually no place in Kythera that is less than this dis-

³² If the figures given in the reports of 1545 and 1563 are correct, then the population of Kythera had increased by over 60% in less than twenty years.

³³ Report of Zuanne Soranzo (1545), in Sathas, 6, 286-9. Cf. Maltezou, "Historical Geography", op.cit. (n. 16), 152.

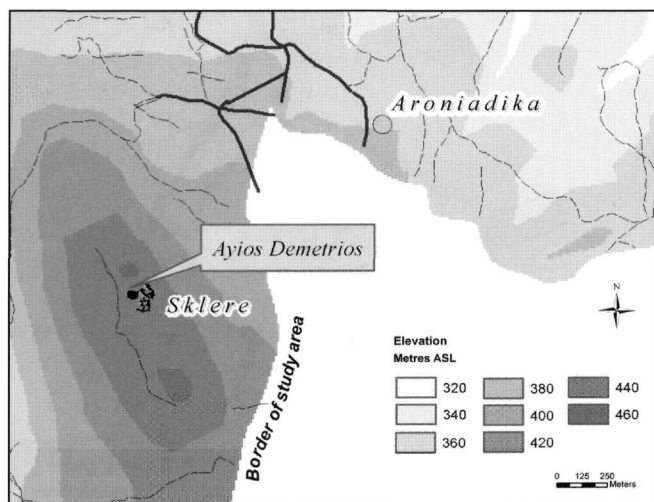


Fig. 2. The ridge of Sklere and its surroundings.

tance from the sea; presumably the author of the report recorded that distance, not in a straight line but along the poor and rugged roads from the coast, and at present we have not been able to use that information to help identify the site. The fact that Selerì was, however, located at a place that was difficult of access from the sea, but easy to reach from the fields of the inhabitants, while providing a view over virtually the whole of the island, suggests that it must have been somewhere around the edges of the Paliochora plain, and presumably on the western side.

One site that meets all of these requirements is the north-west-southeast-running ridge of Sklere (Σκληρή, immediately to the west of Aroniadika, Figs 1-2). Only a first-hand examination of the manuscript of 1563 can demonstrate this with certainty, but it is likely that Lamansky simply mis-copied the word “Scleri” as “Seleri.”

The Sklere ridge has a panoramic view over most of the island and across the sea to Cape Malea (to the east) and the Mani (to the west). It dominates the whole of the plain between Potamos and Aroniadika and looks down toward Mylopotamos and south across the center of the island toward Chora, the other two main fortresses of the island. Access to the site would be extremely difficult from the western side of the island, both because there are few harbours there and because access from them would be blocked by the fortress at Mylopotamos and because (as the report says) the roads there were difficult or nearly impassable. On the other hand, access to the site from Aroniadika and the villages around the Palaiochora plain (villages which presumably existed there at the time) would have been relatively easy. This ridge is today known as Sklere (and is shown as that on the 1:5000 Greek

Army maps), and, as mentioned above, it is not at all impossible that the names Sklere and Seleri refer to the same place³⁴. It is certain that no fully-developed fortification was, in fact, built at Sklere, and this is in keeping with what the sources tell us. On the other hand, survey carried out on the top of the ridge in 1999 and 2003 by the Australian Paliochora-Kythera Archaeological Survey revealed a significant concentration of sixteenth-century pottery, both in the immediate vicinity of the single-aisled church of Ayios Demetrios, but also more broadly along the central part of the ridge. In addition, there are well-preserved walls and huge piles of stones in this same vicinity. These seem to suggest significant activity in the period after the fall of Ayios Demetrios (Paliochora) and one might suggest that the walls and dry-stone features are the remains of a temporary refuge by the survivors of the sack of the city and perhaps the first attempts by the inhabitants to provide a proper defensive structure for themselves.

The walls and stone features at Sklere are located to the east of the church of Ayios Demetrios, just below (i.e., just to the west of) the high-point of the ridge (Figs 3 and 4). Most dominant are two large stone features on the north, each of which is well over a meter in height, with the western one ca. 15 m. long and ca. 5 m. wide; both piles have clearly-defined walls running more or less east-west, ca. 1.5 m. wide and presently more than a meter high (Figs 5-6). The walls are broken by what seems clearly to be a passageway ca. 2.5 m. wide, mid-way between the two stone piles. Another similar stone pile is located on the south west, up to 1.5 m. high and



Fig. 3. The church of Ayios Demetrios, Sklere, from south.

³⁴ A. Miliarakis, *Γεωγραφία πολιτική νέα και αρχαία του Νομού Ἀργολίδος καὶ Κορινθίας*, Αθήνα 1886, 261, describing the land below Sklere as “πᾶσα ὁμαλή καὶ καλλιεργουμένη”. Cf. Tsitsilias, *op.cit.* (n. 2), vol. 2, 228.

ca. 12×5 m., with a distinct depression in the top. To the east of this stone pile is an elongated irregular feature running roughly southwest-northeast; it has a distinct circular depression in the eastern side. This irregular feature reaches the high-point of the ridge and turns in a northwest direction along the ridge until it meets the stone feature described above on the eastern end of the northern part of the site.

These stone piles stand out distinctly from the land around them, both because of their height and because they bear every trace of having been made in distinct shapes, rather than being random stone heaps from the clearing of agricultural land. They are also distinct from the lower and narrower field walls in the vicinity. The stone features have slumped down considerably over time, and their original shape cannot always be discerned. Furthermore, some of the stones may well have been taken away to build later agricultural walls in the vicinity. Despite these difficulties, it is possible to suggest that the stone features were once joined into a rudimentary defensive circuit, roughly 40 meters square, with the stone features serving as towers and strong points in the fortifications. Fig. 6 shows the stone features of the site as they are now and one possible reconstruction of the original fortifications or what the builders may have had in mind for a fortification that may never have been completed.

Certain facts show clearly that this cannot have been a proper castle of the period, first of all because the walls, stone features, and pottery are all located just below (to the west)



Fig. 4. Stone features and architectural recording.

of the ridge, and the high-point of the ridge is left outside anything that can be considered part of the fortifications. It is inconceivable that a proper Venetian fortification would have left the high ground of the ridge undefended since an attacker could simply secure that spot and fire directly down into the fortified area below. Furthermore, all the construc-

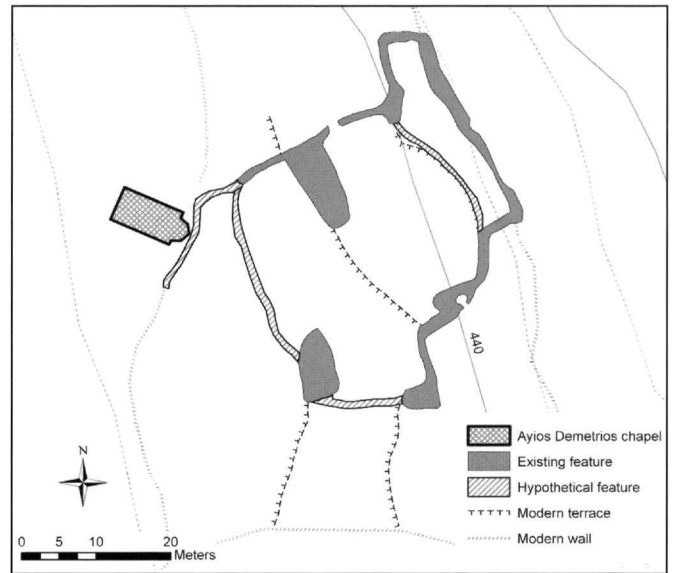


Fig. 5. Sklere, Actual state and hypothetical reconstruction.

tion here (with the exception of the church) is done in dry-stone technique, something unthinkable in a significant Venetian fortification³⁵. Nonetheless, one may reasonably argue that the walls and stone piles are the remains of a hurried attempt to fortify the height of Sklere, either in the immediate aftermath of the sack of Ayios Demetrios or at some point shortly thereafter when the inhabitants of the Paliochora plain sought safety at the top of this mountain. It is not impossible that the stones in the vicinity were piled up by agents of the Venetian government in preparation for construction of a more typical fortification, but given the lack of any evidence of this and the very low number of Venetian soldiers recorded for the island in the sixteenth century, it is more likely that these were made by the local inhabitants of the island, the same people who petitioned Venice for assistance in 1543 and who were, apparently, living in terror of other Turkish raids.

The site is essentially invisible from the east, where an attack by an enemy might have been expected, yet the stone features would have allowed the defenders just enough height so that they could have seen over the ridge into the plain below and off toward Paliochora and to the straits of Kythera

³⁵ Cf. Christine Hodgetts and Peter Lock, "Some Village Fortifications in the Venetian Peloponnese", in P. Lock and G.D.R. Sanders, eds, *The Archaeology of Medieval Greece*, Oxford 1996, 77-90, for some possible parallels of fortifications made in dry-stone construction.



Fig. 6. Extant features and elevations.

beyond. In addition, it is not impossible that a tower or *vigla* was built just to the northwest of the fortifications, in the spot now occupied by the modern fire observation station. The remains suggest a rudimentary fortification that was not meant to attract or be defended against a concerted enemy attack. Rather, it was a place of concealment, but still a high point that could be defended and, in the worst of situations, might provide some protection against a frontal charge. Naturally, it is impossible to be certain, but I would like to suggest that the remains at Sklere are to be connected with the proposal to fortify a site at Selerì. The presence of the church of Ayios Demetrios is further evidence in this direction. The saint, after all, was the patron of the former fortified capital of the island, from which many of the inhabitants had arguably fled. It would be natural to name the church in honor of that saint. Further, Ayios Demetrios was one of the

best-known of the military saints, and he is frequently connected with places of defence throughout the Byzantine and post-Byzantine world, and the location of the church there is *a priori* evidence of a defensive character for the place, at one time or another.

One small problem remains to be discussed briefly: if indeed this was a fortification, why wasn't the church included inside it? This question is, of course, impossible to answer, since we cannot know if the church already existed or not when the site was used for refuge (*i.e.*, there is no clear evidence for the construction date of the church in its present form). Furthermore, as we have said, if plans were ever drawn up for the proper fortification of Sklere, they would certainly have enclosed both the top of the ridge (to the east) and, if the church already existed at this time, it certainly would also have been included within the fortified area. If,

by contrast, the church is later than the temporary fortification, then this question is moot, and the church may well have been built to commemorate this attempt to defend the heights of Sklere.

In conclusion, the juxtaposition of Venetian texts that discuss the situation in the northern part of Kythera in the years 1543-1563 and the archaeological remains on the ridge of Skere west of Aroniadika suggests that this site may have been the location of a military refuge for the inhabitants of northern Kythera in the aftermath of Barbarossa's sack of 1537. In our scenario these people, whose terror is graphically described by the documentary sources, sought protection on the heights of Sklere and they constructed for themselves a rudimentary defence in case of detection. Given the weakness of the position of Ayios Demetrios (Paliochora), the Cretan representative in 1563 followed the precedent of Soranzo in 1545 in looking around for alternate places to

provide protection for the inhabitants of this part of the island. In this search he presumably learned of the location of Sklere and recommended that it be fortified.

As events turned out, however, this project was never realized. The reason is in part the well-known unwillingness of the Venetian Senate to commit itself to expenditure in its eastern possessions. In addition, it seems clear that a decision had been made, probably for military reasons, to concentrate the Republic's interest at Kapsali (and therefore in the southern part of the island). This was reasonable, given the increasingly tenuous hold of Venice on its maritime empire, and the strength of Kapsali as a naval stronghold in this critical geographic location. But that decision meant the effective abandonment of the northern part of Kythera, not only to the attacks of pirates but also to the rapacity of the aristocratic landowners of the island, and as such it had far-reaching ramifications.

Timothy E. Gregory

ΣΚΛΗΡΗ: ΚΑΤΑΦΥΓΙΟ ΣΤΑ ΧΡΟΝΙΑ ΜΕΤΑ ΤΗΝ ΟΘΩΜΑΝΙΚΗ ΕΠΙΘΕΣΗ ΚΑΤΑ ΤΩΝ ΚΥΘΗΡΩΝ ΤΟ 1537

Μετά την καταστροφή της βυζαντινής πόλης του Αγίου Δημητρίου (σημερινή Παληόχωρα) το 1537 από τους Οθωμανούς, οι κάτοικοι του βόρειου τμήματος των Κυθήρων έμειναν στρατιωτικά ανυπεράσπιστοι. Ενετικές πηγές από τα χρόνια που ακολούθησαν, μαρτυρούν την ανάγκη προστασίας των κατοίκων της περιοχής αυτής. Επίσης, ερείπια κτισμάτων που αποκαλύφθηκαν από την Αυστραλιανή Αρχαιολογική Αποστολή στα Κύθηρα παρέχουν ενδείξεις για τον χώρο στον οποίο οι κάτοικοι κατέφυγαν για προστασία. Σε επίσημο έγγραφο ενετού αξιωματούχου το 1563 προτείνεται ο ίδιος χώρος ως θέση κατασκευής ισχυρού ενετικού φρουρίου. Η θέση αυτή βρίσκεται σε ύψωμα ονομαζόμενο Σκληρή, δυτικά του χωριού Αρωνιάδικα, στο κέντρο της νήσου (Εικ. 1 και 2). Στα ερείπια περι-

λαμβάνονται ο μεσαιωνικός ναός του Αγίου Δημητρίου (Εικ. 3), πέτρινοι τοίχοι και διάφορα άλλα κτίσματα απροσδιόριστου χαρακτήρα (Εικ. 4). Είναι φανερό ότι τα ερείπια που αποκαλύφθηκαν, δεν αποτελούν ένδειξη για την ύπαρξη ενός κανονικού ενετικού φρουρίου, εφόσον και οι γραπτές πηγές είναι σαφείς σχετικά με την αρνητική στάση της Βενετίας να χρηματοδοτήσει την κατασκευή ενός τέτοιου αμυντικού έργου. Απλώς, τα ερείπια μαρτυρούν για την κατασκευή ενός πρόχειρου καταφυγίου (βλ. Εικ. 5 και 6), σε μια προσπάθεια των κατοίκων να υπερασπιστούν μόνοι τους την περιοχή από τυχόν επιδρομές.

Η μελέτη των αρχαιολογικών ευρημάτων συμπληρώνει τις γραπτές πηγές και τις γνώσεις μας σχετικά με σημαντικά γεγονότα που συνέβησαν κατά τον 16ο αιώνα.