

The Hidden Mysteries of Kefalonia; Crusaders, Byzantium and Venetians

By
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Kefalonia is a beautiful Greek island; the largest of the Ionian Islands, it lies just to the west of mainland Greece. The island was the center of the Byzantine theme of Cephallenia until 1185, and it was during this period that the island was raided by Normans and Crusaders on their way to the Holy Land. Wild horses still roam the Kefalonian countryside, said to be descended from horses set free during the Crusades. After the Byzantine rule, the island became part of the County Palatine of Cephallonia and Zakynthos, ruled under the Kingdom of Naples. This came to an end in 1479 when it fell under the sway of the Ottoman Empire, though their rule did not last long, as the Venetians captured the island in 1500. They went on to reconstruct



The view from outside the church.

the vast hill-top Castle of St. George, which became the capital and the center of the island and ruled for nearly three hundred years. The island formed part of a frontier against the Ottomans.

The castle, which was originally Byzantine, reminds one at first glance of the Crusader castles of the Holy Land, in particular



On the road to the castle.



The entrance to St. George's Castle, Skala, Kefalonia.

Margat Castle in Syria, built by the Knights Hospitallers. With its large buttresses and tall outer walls, it clings to the rocky hill-top and dominates the landscape, the cone-like hill visible for miles around.¹ The mighty military structure can be reached by a winding road that hugs the hill precariously, but once at the top, one is greeted by the small village of Kastro, with a small number of taverns and villas which occupy a road that leads up to the castle entrance. The cult of St. George reached its peak during the Crusades, the Saint becoming popular with Crusaders and influencing the Venetians, with churches in Venice dedicated to St. George who also became the patron saint of England due to the influence of the Crusades, the red cross of St. George becoming England's national flag.²

Driving through the winding roads of the island, you continually come across small villages, hidden gems of Greek culture. There are supposedly three hundred sixty-five villages, one for every



The church of St. Nicholas.

day of the year. Most of the villages seem to have their own olive groves, and one particular village, Svoronata, has an orchard of lemon trees by an ancient Church. In the orchard, a holy well is nestled contentedly among the



A huge stone used in the wall of the gateway of the castle covered in graffiti from throughout the ages. Note the large cross at the bottom left.

lemon trees. It is covered with a canopy entwined with vines, bunches of red grapes hanging loosely. The place is quiet and peaceful like a sacred grove of contemplation.

The nearby Church, dedicated to St. Nicholas, is a beautiful Greek Orthodox Church. As I entered the candlelit interior, the Church was being cleaned by women from the village who were polishing the icons, large brass candlesticks, and other artifacts. There was a curious eighteenth century model sailing ship hanging from the ceiling, and one of the local women told me it was a gift from an old sea captain, St. Nicholas being the patron Saint of sailors.³ St. Nicholas himself is displayed on a beautiful eighteenth century icon, revealing the Byzantine double headed eagle above him.

Kefalonia is full of mysteries from a by-gone period; a period of Crusaders, castles, and lost villages. The island has, knight templar

like many of the Greek islands, a war torn violent history, fought over by Crusaders, Byzantines, and Ottomans. Today however, it is a peaceful place, and its hidden secrets are revealed to those who wish to discover them.

Notes

¹ See R.H.C. Davis, *A History of Medieval Europe*, (London: Longman, 1992), pp.267-281.

² C.P.S Clarke, *Everyman's Book of Saints*, (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1939), p.116.

³ *Ibid*, p.335.

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