

**Part of the abandoned
settlement of Onithé.
Right, head of a Kore
from the Herakleion
Archaeological
Museum.**



ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

CRETE

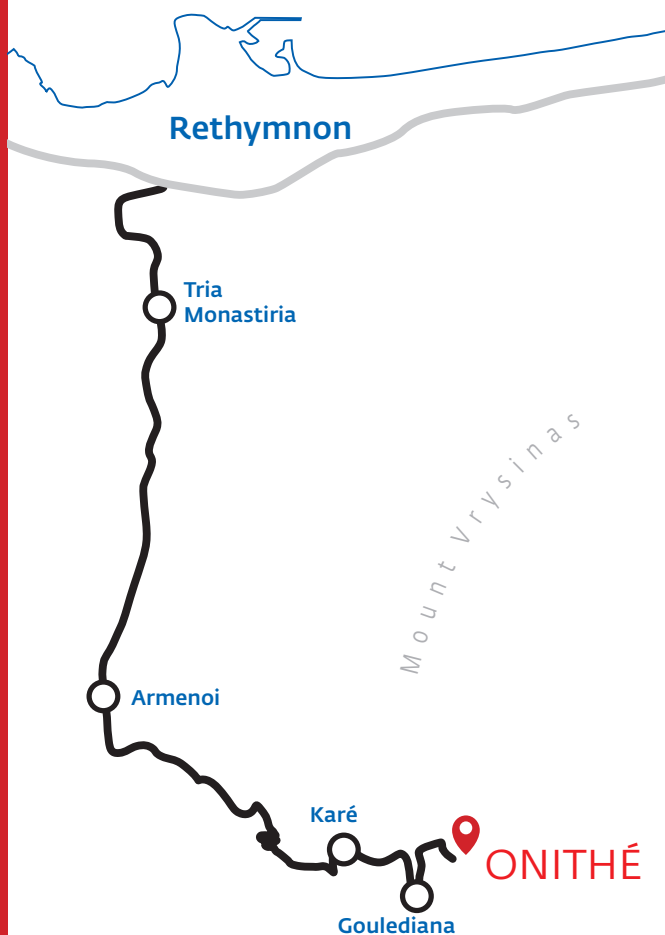
ONITHÉ GOULEDIANA

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→ **The village of Goulediana is about a thirty-minute drive from Rethymnon. From there, heading S-SE, an uphill rural road of 0.6 miles, covered with concrete in its biggest part, leads to the Onithé Plateau.**



Above: The route from Rethymnon to the village of Goulediana and the Onithé Plateau.

INTRODUCTION

The publication of the Archaeological-Travel Guidebook to 'Onithé, Goulediana' is tantamount to presenting the biography of the area. Though brief in its narration and paying due attention to the ancient monuments, this biography attempts to move away from the traditional confines of the archaeological site and to encompass the cultural landscape overall.

What is particularly striking at Onithé is that traces of human presence span a period of over 6,000 years, with the earliest evidence dating back to the Neolithic Age, to the fourth millennium BC. The material remains of human activity, which bear witness to this long course through time, form today's palimpsest of monuments.

Of seminal importance in the historical narrative is the natural landscape, in which the monuments are incorporated and with which they converse. In essence, natural landscape, ancient monuments and modern constructions participate in a culture which links the past and the present in a single orbit. The peaks of Mount Vrysinas, the range of the White Mountains and the massif of Psiloreitis, to west and east respectively, constitute the physical setting and play a role in the cultural narrative of the place.

Men too helped to shape the social and the monumental landscape, through their action within the archaeological site and on its margins. Their narrative on the cultural landscape does not necessarily coincide with the official, the scientific one. Nonetheless, this narrative condenses the oral tradition, thus enlivening and complementing the silent material remains.

Primary aim of this Guidebook is to be a useful aid for those wishing to visit the site and to experience its uniqueness with the mind and the senses. Its narrative does not follow the chronological sequence of the monuments but the sequence in which visitors to the site encounter them. This is not a diversion from the conventional course of the historical sequence, as the mixing of periods, through the coexistence of their representative monuments in present time, is one of the distinctive features of Onithé.

The place name

The place name 'Onithé' sounds enigmatic in meaning. Not long ago, this conceptual vagueness almost led to the disappearance of the toponym, when a Civil Service bureau asked the then Community of Goulediana to delete it as a foreign word!

However, it is considered possible that the name is actually of prehellenic origin (like Kissamos, Silamos, Nimbros, etc.). Its etymology could derive from the ancient Greek noun *ónthos* (ὄνθος), meaning animal droppings. Odd as it may



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01 John Pendlebury (1904-1941).

02 Nikolaos Platon (1909-1992).

seem, this particular meaning is not without precedent in Cretan toponyms (cf. Koprana near Chania), while it befits a city with an economy apparently based on stock-raising. Moreover, the rendering and transfer of a word from ancient Greek into Modern Greek is frequently characterized by voids, since the spectrum of its notional nuances and its multiple semasiological levels over the centuries eludes us.

The possibility that the place name Onithé is a corrupted form of some other word is slight, even though the first references, such as by the British archaeologist John Pendlebury, refer to it as Ornithe. There is no testimony of an ancient city named Ornithe (*ornis*, *-thos*?) or of a later toponym in either literary sources or local lore, and the transmission of the name as such is probably due to erroneous copying.

Travellers – the first investigations

There is no special reference to the area of Onithé by the travellers who visited and described the island of Crete, from Renaissance times (such as Buondelmonte) to the Modern Age.

The first 'eponymous' visit to the area was made in 1936 by John Pendlebury, a legendary figure in Cretan Archaeology, dubbed 'Lawrence of Crete' because of his formidable activity in the island's resistance movement during the Second World War.

Pendlebury walked over Crete from end to end, following routes and paths that were considered ancient, in order to include his impressions and his research in his unsurpassed work *The Archaeology of Crete* (London 1939).

In the course of his peregrinations, he reached Onithé, taking the main route from South to North and after having passed via the Preveli monastery, Gerakari, Patsos and Veni.

A few years later, in 1942, Onithé was visited by Ernst Kirsten, one of the archaeologists who had remained at the German Archaeological Institute in Athens during the German Occupation. He describes his ascent to Onithé, along cart tracks and paths, and his impressions of the ancient city in an article included in F. Matz's publication *Forschungen auf Kreta* (Berlin 1951, esp. p. 134).

The first investigations at Onithé were carried out by Nikolaos Platon, General Ephor of Antiquities of Crete and one of the most distinguished scholars in Cretan Archaeology. His researches were occasioned by the handing in to the Ephorate of sherds from relief pithoi with splendid decoration. So, in September 1954 a team of local workmen and specialist technicians of the Ephorate of Antiquities, under Platon's guidance, explored various points in the area. The short excavation, which lasted three summer seasons, was funded by the Archaeological Society at Athens.

However, the aura surrounding the discoveries made in these early excavations put Onithé on the map. Its name was

given to a street in Herakleion, the Archaeological Museum of which still houses a small part of the finds from these first excavations.

From the ancient polis to the modern hamlet (metochi)

It is not known when exactly the yarn of Onithé's history began to be woven, since no systematic survey of the site has been carried out. Nevertheless, the earliest indications of human presence (a stone axe and a grindstone) are dated to the Neolithic Age (4th millennium BC). Surface finds from the locality of 'Pyrgos' (= Tower), such as Early Minoan (EM I) and Late Minoan (LM I) pottery, a bronze zoomorphic figurine and a stone vase of the same period, denote that the site was inhabited also during the Minoan Age (3rd-1st millennium BC). Indirect evidence suggests an analogous situation for the transitional period from the demise of the Minoan palaces to the rise of the first *poleis* (12th-8th c. BC).

The early historical settlement at Onithé began to acquire the features of a *polis* or city (in the settlement and sociological sense of the term) from the end of the eighth century BC onwards. This city seems to have enjoyed its heyday in Archaic times (7th-6th c. BC), becoming one of the most powerful urban centres in the area, as is borne out by the large and 'affluent' residences which have been uncovered,



03 View of the fortified acropolis from the southeast.



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the fortifications, as well as the few but choice artefacts in metalworking and sculpture, which have come to light. All these sketch the picture of a robust and well-organized city, with thriving outward-looking workshops, receptive to external influences. Furthermore, the monuments and moveable finds, which are dated to the sixth century BC, are considered particularly illuminating for our understanding of a period regarded as obscure – a ‘dark age’ – in Cretan research.

Life in the city continued during Classical (5th–4th c. BC) and Hellenistic times (3rd–2nd c. BC). Due to the piecemeal nature of research, testimonies on these periods are limited, without this reflecting the true picture of the city. The renowned ‘House A’ seems to have continued in use during the Classical period, as did other earlier constructions. Moreover, the (re)construction of the acropolis in the Hellenistic period reinforced the military might of the city and established its presence in the civil strife rife in these times.

The city, albeit weakened, endured in the Roman period too (1st c. BC–4th c. AD), which is known mainly from coins and surface pottery. During the final years of Roman rule and the Early Byzantine period (5th–6th c. AD) the monuments become more ‘expressive’. The existence of a large basilica with superb mosaic floors, although it cannot be considered indicative of population size, attests a relatively flourishing city. This picture is filled in by the evidence of the funerary monuments dated to the same period. The building of a small Medieval chapel upon the basilica confirms that habitation continued into the eighth century. Henceforth, next to nothing is known about the city, which seems to have been abandoned or to have degenerated into an insignificant village.

The area was inhabited once again in the period of Venetian rule, as attested by settlement remains, as well as by various small churches built in those years. The settlement was rather small and does not seem to have been permanent. In all probability it was linked with the cultivation of the fertile fields of Onithé by individual landowners. On the other hand, the small churches of provincial construction stand on the margins of the Onithé Plateau, essentially forming a sacral zone, with diverse ramifications beyond the symbolic-metaphysical. Characteristic is the proximity of these chapels to water sources, which hints at the existence of a land-management network.

Onithé continued to be inhabited in Ottoman times, during which the initial settlement was expanded and its productive space was highly developed. Quite the opposite of this is the present picture of the plateau, in which desertion and abandonment reign.

The name of the ancient city

The identification of the ancient city is particularly difficult,

On the right:

Satellite image with the points of interest at the Onithé archaeological site.

- 1 St Elessa (Eleousa)
- 2 The small fountain
- 3 The abandoned settlement (metochi)
- 4 The country house
- 5 'Plakes'
- 6 The fountain (locality 'Plakes')
- 7 The fountain sanctuary
- 8 Chapel of St Antony (locality 'Skouro')
- 9 The 'gymnasium'
- 10 House A: Residence or Andreion?
- 11 'Tou Vasili o spilios' (the cave of Vasilis)
- 12 The fortified enceinte (locality 'Pyrgos')
- 13 The acropolis ('Pyrgos')
- 14 Parts of a column
- 15 Vineyards (locality 'Pezoulos')
- 16 Ancient cemetery (locality 'Pezoulos')
- 17 Grape-pressing installation (lenos) (locality 'Leivadia')
- 18 The Early Christian basilica (locality 'Kera')
- 19 The han (locality 'Kera')
- 20 Venetian church of the Life-giving Source (locality 'Kera')
- 21 Burial chambers (locality 'Sykidi')





as all tangible testimonies are absent: no ancient inscriptions have been found, while the coin finds (collected from the surface) date from Roman times onwards and therefore are not inscribed with the name of the ancient city. Thus, efforts to elicit the name rely on information gleaned from literary and epigraphic sources, which in fact are not directly linked with Onithé itself.

Outcome of one such attempt was the identification of the city at Onithé as ancient Osmida, which is known from only one ancient source, the *Periplus*. This identification was supported initially by Pendlebury and later by Paul Faure. However, more recent research does not bear out a secure identification of Osmida with the site of Onithé. Some scholars seek ancient Osmida elsewhere, such as in the area of Potamoi and of Stavromenos. Others doubt the existence of an ancient city named Osmida and maintain that the hapax mention of it is due to a linguistic corruption.

The second ancient city with which the ruins at Onithé have been correlated – both by Kirsten and Platon – is Phalanna. Phalanna is attested in both literary and epigraphic sources, while it seems to have issued its own coinage. The literary reference to the city is made by Stephanos of Byzantion, while epigraphically it is mentioned in the famous 'list of *thearodokoi*', that is, of the cities which were visited by the official emissaries of the Delphic sanctuary (*thearoi* or *theoroi*), announcing the imminent festival and the games there (SEG 26, 624). In the list that the *thearoi* compiled of the cities they visited, Phalannai is mentioned after Rithymna and before Sybritos.

However, this entry does not prove the identification of Onithé as Phalanna, since there were also other cities between Rithymna and Sybritos, such as the ancient city at Veni. Moreover, the possibility that the *thearoi* had not visited the ancient city at Onithé, as it may not have appointed *thearodokoi*, cannot be ruled out. In this case, there will have been no need to include the city at Onithé in the said list.

Since it is not possible to identify the present ruins at Onithé with a city attested in the literary and epigraphical sources, we turn our interest to other sources, such as the geomorphological characteristics of the area.

On the basis of these, it is ascertained that the area of Onithé constitutes the southeast semi-mountainous part of the territory (*chora*) of the ancient city of Rithymna, the political geographical boundaries of which coincided with the natural ones (even today the site falls within the ambit of the Municipality of Rethymnon). Given that ancient Rithymna was established on the site of today's Rethymnon only in Hellenistic times, it is quite possible that the city at Onithé had been its early urban centre.

A settlement model of this kind is not unknown, as other

ancient cities had their strong settlement nucleus at high-altitude locations (Eleutherna, Lappa, etc.) and a secondary centre in a lowland or a coastal location, around a harbour. At the end of the Minoan Age, when the previous peace was succeeded by times of turbulence and insecurity, populations turned to more isolated and mountainous sites, where they established the so-called 'defensive settlements'.

Regardless of the name that the city at Onithé had in early historical times, there is no doubt that it was the most powerful centre in the territory. From its vantage point, the ancient city controlled the vital passes, which coincided with the plateau's natural boundaries to south and east, while at the same time it was protected against threats from the sea. The relatively restricted productive space did not prevent it becoming strong, by exploiting its crucial location and possibly its early (in Minoan times) habitation.

The Onithé Plateau

The Onithé Plateau, cradle of life and creation for several millennia, is a discrete territorial unit. A spur of the southern foothills of Mount Vrysinas, at an elevation of over 600 m asl, it is roughly triangular in shape, with the apex to the south, where the walled acropolis stands. This extensive terrace, with upward-sloping terrain, ends in sheer scarps to the south, east and west, forming a naturally fortified position. This nodal point secured control of the valley linking the area of Potamoi with the wider region south of Vrysinas, and of the main route of communication between the north and south parts of the Prefecture of Rethymnon.

The site of Onithé is accessible only from the north, where the gradients of the ground permit. North of it is the village of Goulediana, to the district of which it is subject. Goulediana is a settlement in the Municipality of Rethymnon, some 17 km. from the city of Rethymnon, capital of the Municipality and the Prefecture. The route from Rethymnon to Goulediana is short (30') and smooth, along the provincial road network (see map, p. 110). From Goulediana, a rural road one kilometre long (with concrete surface for most of its length) runs upwards in a south-southeast direction to the Onithé Plateau.

MONUMENTS - LOCALITIES

1 St Elessa (Eleousa)

The first building visitors come across on the road from the village of Goulediana to Onithé is the chapel of the Virgin Eleousa (the Merciful). It stands on the west side of the road, on the ridge of the plateau, sanctifying and demarcating with its presence the territory of Onithé. The downward slope that follows and covers the rocky scarp of its plateau is densely-wooded and virtually impenetrable.

04 The chapel of St Eleousa.





05 Small fountain.



06 Part of the settlement with houses on either side of the cobbled street.

The church is small, single-aisle and vaulted, with pitched roof and a spacious courtyard that fills with people on 15 August, when the feast of the Dormition of the Virgin is celebrated.

The entrance to the church is on the west side and has a semicircular lintel decorated with ribs and two incised bands. Above the lintel is a fanlight. In the interior of the church are two strainer arches with plain braces at their base, while on the long sides of the wall runs a horizontal decorative cornice which emphasizes the point of transition to the vaulted ceiling. The sanctuary conch is cut in the bedrock. The founding of the church has been dated to as early as the fifteenth century.

2 The small fountain

Exactly opposite the church, on the east side of the road, is a built fountain. The date incised on its front records that it was constructed in 1945. It is a simple square building of dressed-stone blocks, literally nestled in the rocky embrace of the slope. Inside the fountain house is a water-abstraction tank and at the foot of the front is a stone water-collecting basin. Exactly above the fountain-house passes a cobbled street, today ruined, which led to the adjacent settlement.

3 The abandoned settlement (*metochi*)

After walking up a few metres on the verge of the plateau, visitors encounter the first houses of the most recent settlement of Onithé. The hamlet (*metochi*) comprises scattered stone-built houses in the northwest part of the plateau, which were used seasonally until the mid-twentieth century. Today, the buildings are badly dilapidated or in ruins, although some have been repaired and serve as storehouses.

The stone-built houses are examples of vernacular architecture, with distinctive architectural elements of the Venetian and Ottoman periods. Most have outbuildings and threshing floors cut in the bedrock.

It is difficult to date the hamlet, in the absence of chronologically reliable evidence and given the conservatism in the development of buildings, without essential changes in the long term. Nevertheless, it is speculated that it was established in the Late Middle Ages (16th-17th c.), when there was settlement development in the wider area.

Curious, of course, is the lack of reference to the settlement in registers and lists from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. However, some researchers have proposed that it should be identified with the



- 07 The country house.
- 08 The modern arrangement of the fountain (from the north).
- 09 The ancient fountain, with innovative interventions.

toponym Christochori, mentioned by Barozzi and recorded in notarial documents of the mid-seventeenth century (such as those of the notary Marinos Arkoleos).

4 The country house

Shortly before reaching the locality 'Plakes' and the spring of that name, just above the main street, visitors see a rectangular building with entrance in the first storey and relatively luxurious building features. In its upper storey is a rectangular doorway which led onto a balcony. Preserved inside it are stone brackets. In all probability this is a country house ('*villa rustica*') of Venetian times, which continued in use during the period of Ottoman rule.



- 10 Rock-cut conduits and collecting basins.
 11 The possible site of the Fountain Sanctuary.

5 'Plakes'

'Plakes' is one of the most typical points on the Onithé Plateau. It is a spacious rocky terrace with an unimpeded view and a gushing water source, a cool place to halt and rest. Situated at the entrance to the plateau, 'Plakes' could be described as the 'reception hall' of Onithé, since it not only welcomes visitors but also prepares them before they penetrate further inside.

6 The fountain (locality 'Plakes')

A copse of plane trees and a ruined Late Ottoman house form the west border of the rocky terrace and flank a fountain that is still in use. In 1954, Professor N. Platon excavated here and the modern interventions were completed.

Today the fountain is in the form of a rectangular basin, open on the north side and without shelter. The east face of the trench is cut in the bedrock, while the other two sides are built. On the south face, a conduit cut in the bedrock channels water to a small cistern.

The ancient fountain is on the west side of the trench, on the rock-cut face of which there are three small mouths. According to Platon, metal lion-head water spouts were affixed to these. In other words, this was a *kallirrhoe* (fair-flowing) fountain from which issued the *chalkopylon hydor* (water from bronze gates). The surmised sculptural decoration of the spouts with lion-heads is not unusual, as from the sixth century BC onwards the lion as *krenophylax* (guardian of the fountain) was selected almost exclusively to decorate the waterspouts of fountain houses. Today, water no longer flows through the spouts of the ancient fountain because the spring now supplies the later spout on the modern front of the south side.

The façade of the ancient fountain may well have been completed with basins for collecting water (that is, as it was laid out in the modernist version along its south front) and possibly had some kind of shelter, like those depicted in a host of ancient vase-paintings.

The ancient fountain at Onithé is considered rare – indeed unique for the Archaic period – as such buildings were not popular in ancient Cretan cities. We do not know of such buildings in Minoan times, while in historical times they are few and far between.

Recent rescue interventions by the Ephorate of Antiquities of Rethymnon, on the outside of the south front of the fountain, brought to light rock-cut conduits and walls of basins, likewise rock-cut. The cuttings seem to have been made in various periods (Antiquity,

Byzantium, Venetian rule), bearing witness to the diachronic use of the fountain.

7 The fountain sanctuary

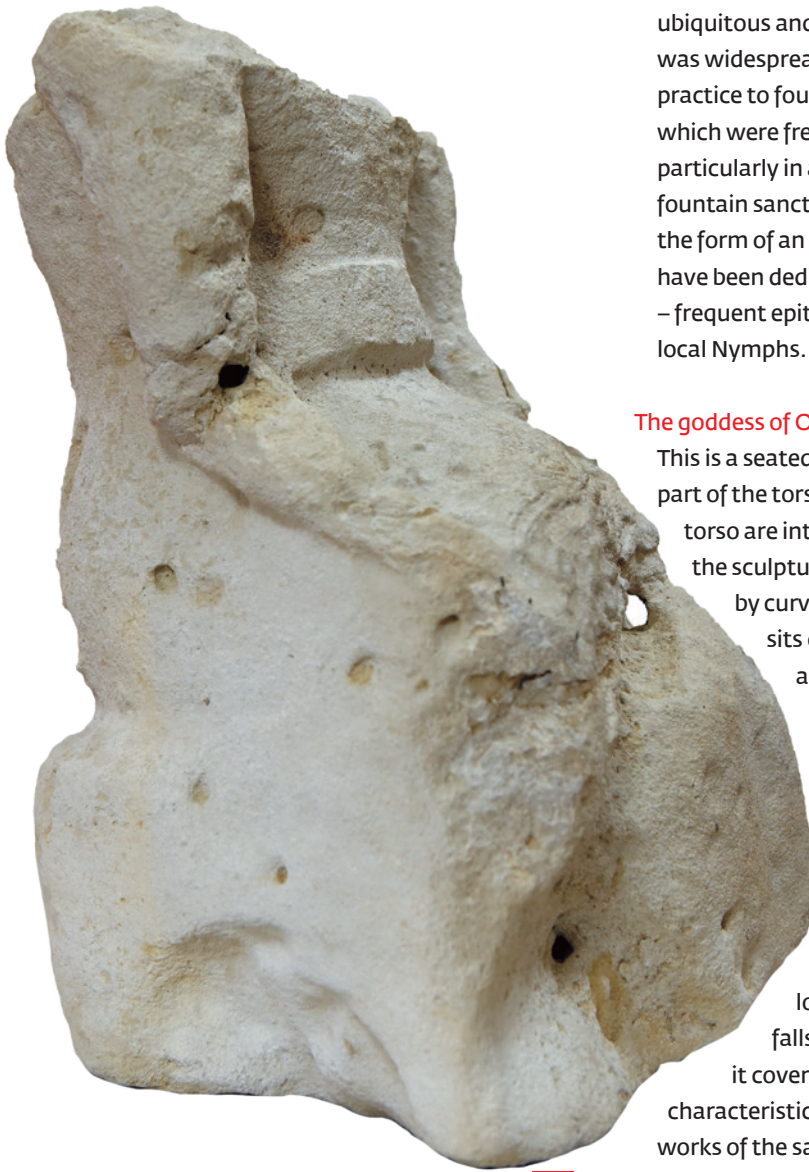
The fountain acquired its present aspect in 1938, with the formation on the south side of a built front with spout and water troughs. In the same year, in the angle formed between the ancient fountain and its westernmost terrace, a poros statue of a seated female figure was revealed. The fact that the sculpture, obviously of a goddess, was found turned towards the fountain reinforces the hypothesis that a sanctuary existed on this spot.

In antiquity, the belief that divine forces were ubiquitous and could appear through springs or trees was widespread. For this reason, it was common practice to found sanctuaries near water sources, which were frequently considered numinous, particularly in areas susceptible to drought. The fountain sanctuary at Onithé, which was possibly in the form of an open-air sacred precinct (*temenos*), may have been dedicated to Hera or Artemis (as Britomartis – frequent epithet of the goddess in Crete), or some local Nymphs.

The goddess of Onithé (A)

This is a seated female figure (h. 48.5 cm), the upper part of the torso of which is missing. The seat and the torso are integral in a solid part. Dominant trait of the sculpture is its volume, which is characterized by curves, unusual for its period. The figure sits on a low cuboid throne without back and armrests. This simple throne is considered the typical seat of Cretan goddesses (and of women). Here there are particular details, such as the arch-shaped fenesters on the narrow sides.

The female figure is of the statue type of the 'enthroned goddess', known from elsewhere in Crete. She wears a narrow, tight-fitting long garment (*peplos* or *chiton*), which falls from the shoulders to the feet, which it covers. It is cinched at the waist by the characteristic wide Cretan girdle. In contrast to other works of the same series, the figure does not wear an *epiblema* (kind of shawl), which usually covered the shoulders and the back of Cretan *Korai* statues. The missing head was most probably adorned with a roofed wig, the typical hairstyle of sculptures of this



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12 The statue of the seated goddess.
Rethymnon Archaeological Museum.



13 The church of St Antony.

14 Ground plan of House A (after N. Platon).

period. The goddess's hands are placed on the knees, while the arms correspondingly rest on the thighs. The disproportionately short calves in relation to the length of the thighs point to a late date for the statue.

The stylistic traits of the work, the material from which it is made (poros limestone) and its technical singularities indicate that it is the product of a local workshop of the Late Daedalic period (late 7th c. BC), incorporating influences from the East (mainly Egypt) and from other Greek centres.

8 Chapel of St Antony (locality 'Skouro')

From 'Plakes' visitors take the modern pathway leading westwards, 200 m along which is the chapel of St Antony. It projects from within a cavernous hollow in the east bank of the long and narrow gorge that begins at this point and ends to the north in the village of Goulediana.

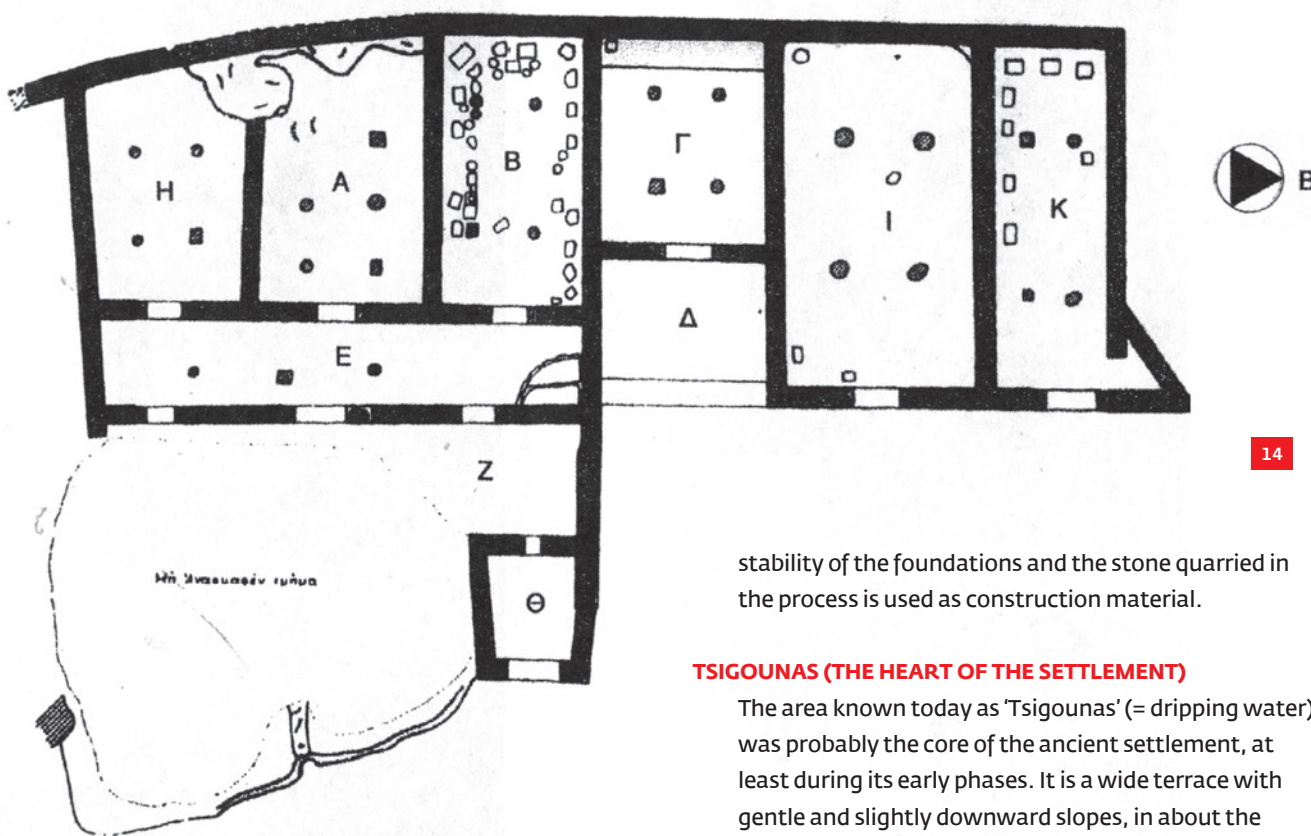
The church is partially cut in the rock, at the foot of which was trickling water (*hagiasma*). It is not known whether this space was a locus of pagan cult, prior to the advent of Christianity. However, worship in caves and rock shelters in antiquity was not unknown, and, by the same token, the founding of churches in ancient sacred places.

The church is difficult to date exactly. From analogous cave chapels, an early dating in late Medieval times is possible, but a much later date, in the nineteenth century, cannot be ruled out.

9 The 'gymnasium'

South of the ancient fountain, a short distance from and in visual contact with 'Plakes', is a rock face, cut vertically to great depth and over a wide extent. The configuration of the rock, in combination with remnants of masonry on one side of it suggest the presence of a building. Bearing in mind the robust construction and privileged position of the building, between important houses and the fountain, it must have served a special function, such as a temple or a public edifice. The modern name of the space, 'gymnasium', is conventional and does not imply the identification in the architectural remains of a use corresponding to ancient gymnasium complexes. Obviously it is due to the strong impression the monument creates even today.

The vertical cutting encountered here, as well as the horizontal cutting and quarrying found all over Onithé confirm the rule applicable not only to Crete but also to Greece as a whole in areas with rocky terrain: the bedding surface is cut horizontally to ensure the



stability of the foundations and the stone quarried in the process is used as construction material.

TSIGOUNAS (THE HEART OF THE SETTLEMENT)

The area known today as 'Tsigounas' (= dripping water) was probably the core of the ancient settlement, at least during its early phases. It is a wide terrace with gentle and slightly downward slopes, in about the middle of the south triangular finial of the plateau, between the fountain and the acropolis. This location, easily accessible, sheltered from the strong winds and with a magnificent view, seems to include within its boundaries some of the most important buildings in the settlement. Remains of walls, cuttings in the bedrock and abundant pottery, which is dispersed over the entire area, reflect the original extent and might of the city.

At about the midpoint of the terrace, Platon identified two residential complexes, which were named conventionally 'House A' and 'House B'. These are considered by scholarship to be among the largest Archaic houses in Crete.

It is not easy to reach the site today, as the old pathway has been destroyed and is completely overgrown. Access is via a makeshift pathway, which starts from the dirt road leading eastwards from Plakes, just beyond a modern sheepfold.

10 House A: Residence or Andreion?

'House A', measuring 21 x 36 m and 400 sq. m. in area, comprises eight rooms. Its façade faces east, while its back is founded in the bedrock. A cross-wall that divides the complex into two parts, the south and the



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- 15 House A from the southwest. Present condition.
- 16 Marble basin from House A (Room A). Rethymnon Archaeological Museum.

north, may well define two residential units. Inside the rooms were several stone bases of wooden columns and pillars (now perished), which upheld the ceiling.

The building complex is entered from the east, through a small trapezoidal porch (Θ). This leads into a spacious precinct (Ζ), just before the long corridor (Ε), to which there are three entrances. On the west side of the corridor are three new entrances, leading respectively to three contiguous parallelogram rooms (Η, Α, Β).

In the north part of the house, the successive arrangement of rooms is repeated, with front and entrance on the east side. The southernmost room (Γ) is smaller and rectangular. Its arrangement is interesting because with the four columns in its interior and the existence of an antechamber (Δ), it brings to mind the type of the Mycenaean megaron. The middle room (Ι) is the largest in the north part, while the room even further north (Κ) is oblong with a triangular extension in the northwest corner.

All the rooms, including the corridor (Ε), contained vases of various sizes, as well as storage jars (*pithoi*). The vases were placed carefully along the length of the walls and were set upon stone slabs or blocks. The greatest concentration of vases and *pithoi* was observed in Room Β, which yielded also two fragments of bronze vases (spout and handle, figs 17-19). Some *pithoi* had outstanding decoration. From Room Α, correspondingly, an impressive marble basin with lion-head waterspout was brought to light (see fig. 16).

Both the large size of the building complex and its content are unusual for a conventional house-residence. The quantity of vases and storage jars exceeds the needs of a household, while the construction emanates a sense of prosperity which is at variance with the dismal economic circumstances believed to have been prevailing in sixth-century BC Crete. Unusually luxurious for an ordinary house are the fragments of bronze vases found, as well as the marble basin (vessels that could have had also a ritual use). Interesting too is the lack of objects for everyday use.

When all this evidence is taken into account, it seems more likely that House Α was a public building, even though its architectural layout does not conform to any of the known types of public buildings, such as the *andreia* or the *prytaneia* ('council chambers').

The truth is that although buildings such as the *andreia* are documented philologically, they are extremely difficult to identify archaeologically. The



17 Arch-shaped handle of a bronze vase from House A. Rethymnon Archaeological Museum.

fourth-century BC Cretan poet Dosias gives the most informative description of them, as complexes which included halls for meals and quarters in which guests were accommodated. House A at Onithé could be identified as a building of this kind, such as those dispersed throughout Crete.

The dating of House A in the Archaic period (late 7th-early 6th c. BC) was based mainly on the dating of the pithoi found inside it. However, such storage jars remained in use for a long time after their production. The pottery that could be considered a more reliable chronological pointer has not been studied systematically. Moreover, there are persuasive indications that the building continued in use in Classical times. This is advocated by the dating of objects, such as the bronze handle (fig. 17), which is placed in the fifth century BC, of some architectural elements, such as the large number of wedge-shaped stones found in one room, which refer to later times, as well as by the architecturally advanced conception of the building.

Arched handle of a bronze vase (B)

The bronze handle (inv. no. M169, fig. 17), of which one end is missing, was found in Room B of House A during the 1953 excavation season. It is 15.5 cm. long and the diameter of each rosette is 2.8 cm. The handle is arched and will have been affixed horizontally to the body of the vessel. Its bar, of square cross-section, is decorated with two protruding ten-petalled rosettes, one at the surviving end and one in the middle. Two rectangular bosses near the end rosettes were used to attach the handle to the vase.

The handle (and by association the vase) was fashioned in the early fifth century BC, as shown by analogous handles from the Acropolis of Athens.

Bronze spout of a vase (Γ)

The bronze spout (inv. no. M168, figs 18-19) was also found in Room B of House A. It is 8 cm. long and the diameter of the base is 4.5 cm.

The body of the spout is tubular, ending in a finial in the form of lioness head with open muzzle. The eyes are denoted by a circular curved pupil and projecting eyelids, while the mane is indicated by fine hatching surrounding the head. The open muzzle is sizeable, to facilitate the pouring of the liquid content.

The tubular body of the spout ends behind in a sheet-metal disc which was affixed to the body of the vase with tiny rivets.



18



19

The lion seems to have had some symbolic association with the watery element generally and with water specifically, which justifies the frequent choice of this animal not only for the spout of vases (see also the spout of the marble basin in fig. 16), but also as waterspout in fountains (cf. the fountain at 'Plakes'). The vessel is dated to the Archaic period (6th c. BC).

House B

An even larger house, named conventionally House B, was uncovered 50 m. northeast of House A and parallel to it. It has not been excavated thoroughly but the outline of its rooms has been exposed. Investigation has shown that the complex was over 50 m. long and consisted of two parallel rows of rooms. Because no plan or drawing is given in the original publication, it is not possible to estimate whether the rooms it encloses correspond to one or more houses.

TERRACES AND HEAPS OF STONES

Terraces and boulders, combinative result of both the

- 18 Mouth of a bronze spout from House A. Rethymnon Archaeological Museum.

- 19 The bronze spout.



- 20 Terraces and piles of stones at Tsigounas.
- 21 Cavernous hollow in the rock ('*tou Vasili o spilios*').
- 22 Cuttings in the ceiling of the rock shelter.

natural and the man-made environment, compose the landscape not only at 'Tsigouna' but also of the greater part of the Onithé Plateau.

Terraces are among the most distinctive feature of the Cretan countryside. At Onithé, depending on the lie of the ground, their stepped arrangement forms sometimes straight and sometimes curved sides. As a rule, the terraces are accessed by makeshift steps in the buttress-retaining wall or via a small transverse path that intersects them.

Many terraces have buttress or retaining walls of dry-stone masonry. These walls are constructed with regular masonry but only have an outside. They served as fences to keep out animals, as they were topped by thorny bushes, just as in Homer's day.

These terraces were probably created in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century but are not documented in written sources. In recent times, when the ancient city had been covered over by fill, the areas became arable. Due to the rocky subsoil and the downward slope of the ground, the terraces retained the thin topsoil that escaped the force of the rainwater, ensuring sufficient cover for cultivation.

Annual fodder crops, cereals and pulses are grown on the terraces of Tsigouna, while on the periphery of the fields grow holm oaks, wild pear, almond and wild apple trees. Today, most of the terraces are in a state of dereliction.

The second characteristic feature of the area are the heaps of stones. Commonest on the terraces with good soil cover, these piles of stones, large or small, removed from the surface over many years of cultivation, represent the expended strength of the ancient city and its erstwhile power.

11 '*Tou Vasili o spilios*' (the cave of Vasilis)

In the southernmost part of a wide terrace, just a few hundred metres southeast of Houses A and B at 'Tsigouna', the remains of a building have come to light. The building, at a higher level, covered a cavernous hollow in the rock ('*tou Vasili o spilios*', fig. 21). On the flanks of the rock-shelter are holes or sockets for inserting beams, at different levels. At the lowest point of the rocky flank is an outcrop in the form of an acute-angled triangle. Immediately south of the building, above the rock-shelter, another complex of buildings existed, the spaces of the lower part of which are rock-cut.

The complex of buildings, which stands out by virtue



23a

of its extent and sturdy construction, must have served a public function, with cultic use equally possible, particularly of the cave.

Bronze head of a Kore (Δ)

The small bronze female head in fig. 23 a, b was found near the 'cave of Vasilis' and is presently housed in the Herakleion Archaeological Museum (inv. no. X2442). The face is oval with fleshy cheeks, while the eyes and lips impart a frowning expression. Crowning the countenance are the beaded curls of the hairstyle, which ends on the back of the head in an elaborate knot tied by a double ribbon. On the lower surface of the neck is a hammered rim and concavity, probably for affixing to a vessel, possibly a lid. Such a function is advocated by the long neck and the two relief rings converging to the fore, to form a bedding surface.

Initially, the small head had been dated to the seventh century BC, on the basis of the decorative treatment of the hairstyle, which is considered a stylistic trait of the Archaic period. However, this assessment overlooks the conservatism of Cretan art and the obvious Severe-Style features of the head, which are encountered in other works of the early fifth century BC and which class the head from Onithé in this timeframe.

12 The fortified enceinte (locality 'Pyrgos')

Just below the foot of the east slopes of Onithé spreads the fertile vale of Geni. At the far end of the panoramic horizon stands Mount Kedros, to the northeast the fortified height of Veni and even further north the manmade lake of Potamoi (fig. 39).

A winding and largely untrodden path on the edge of the precipitous slopes of the Onithé Plateau brings visitors to the fortification of the ancient city. A stone 'arm' cuts off the highest part of the slope with the triangular finial. Its function as an enceinte is obvious, while its fortified character emerges from the form, the extent and the robustness of the construction, as well as its complementary role in relation to the other fortress features of the location.

The enceinte is almost triangular in plan, with its sides ending at the precipitous and unscalable scarps of the plateau. It is built of rubble masonry with fieldstones, very few of which have traces of working or of the use of mortar. The thickness of the enceinte ranges from 1.10 to 1.30 m, and the average height is 1.30 m. The uppermost courses of stones have been filled in in recent times. The space enclosed by the

23a, b Bronze head of a Kore, found near 'the cave of Vasilis' (front and back view). Herakleion Archaeological Museum.



enceinte is arranged on two slightly-sloping levels. The marked concentration of stones inside it indicates the existence of buildings, probably of administrative function.

The way in which the enceinte is built refers to early constructions, the beginning of which can be dated to the Post-Palatial period (c. 1400 BC). Given the presence of Early Minoan and Late Minoan pottery in the wider area of 'Pyrgos', the existence of a prehistoric settlement cannot be ruled out. In the years following the collapse of the Minoan palaces, a host of external threats, in combination with internecine conflicts, pushed the population into the mountains. During this period of instability, sites such as Onithé, with natural fortification and other advantages, such as potable water, proved to be attractive destinations.

13 The acropolis ('Pyrgos')

The acropolis, which evidently was constructed in various phases, occupies the summit of the triangular slope (638 m. asl). Its present aspect is probably due to a reconstruction in Hellenistic times, a period when many Cretan cities completed or rebuilt their fortifications.

The acropolis is delimited to the south by the sheer scarp, which is why there are no fortifications on this side (see fig. 3). On its other two other sides is a fortification wall of pseudo-isodomic masonry, 12 m. long in each case, which form a right angle.

On the west side there was a gate, which was protected by a tower – now difficult to discern. Further west, the rock has been cut to form a long channel with split-level floor and a rock-cut parapet towards the precipice. Its function was related to the defensive needs, perhaps a lookout post for the guard.

The high altitude and the naturally fortified position of the acropolis ensured its unimpeded surveillance of both the road axis to and from Agios Vasileios, which links the south to the north area of the Prefecture of Rethymnon, and of the valley linking the district of Agios Vasileios with the district of Amari (fig. 24).

Due to its strategic and nodal location, 'Pyrgos' must often have been a theatre of war and battles. Onithé played an important role in the Cretan uprisings of recent times (1821, 1878 and 1897), which fact is recorded in folk poetry. Its blood tribute in the struggle for freedom is referred to by an anonymous bard:

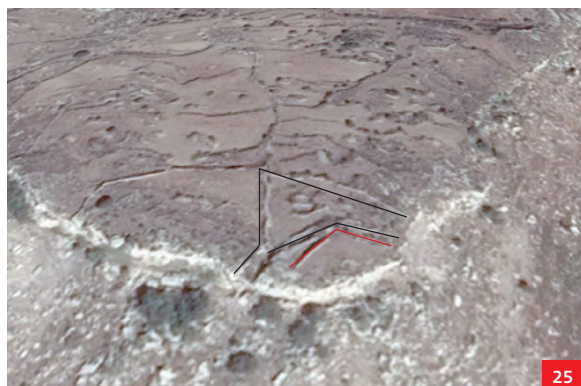
Ah wretched Onithé, which has devoured strapping lads and produces nothing but broadbeans and fish.

Even your stones are soaked in blood and no man can say



24 View to the west, from the acropolis. In the foreground Papoures and in the background the area of Agios Vasileios.





25



26



27

25 The fortified acropolis at Onithé: the early enceintes (black line). The 'Tower' (later repair – red line).

26 Part of the fortification wall.

27 Part of the fortified enceinte.

how many have been killed...

The modern toponym 'Dabia', given to the area around the acropolis, also echoes its fortress role, as it derives from the Turkish word *dabya*, which means bastion.

Bronze zoomorphic figurines (E, Z)

The bronze zoomorphic figurine in fig. 29 is most probably of a dog, with a characteristically elongated cylindrical body and head, while the ends of its legs are pointed. The figurine is chipped on the tail and the top of the head. It was found by chance in 1953 and handed in the Rethymnon Archaeological Museum (inv. no. M170, height 1.7 cm., length 4 cm.).

The bronze figurine group in fig. 28 most probably represents an animal suckling its young (the initial identification speaks of a sow and piglet). It was found by chance in 1928 and handed in to the Rethymnon Archaeological Museum (inv. no. M167, height 3 cm., length 4.7 cm.).

Both zoomorphic figurines were found in the locality of 'Pyrgos'. The first is dated to Minoan times and the second to the Geometric period (8th c. BC). The dog is a rather rare animal in miniature sculpture and indeed in bronze. It is characteristic too that, as a rule, it is encountered as a single votive offering and not in numerous examples.

The figurine group of two animals is difficult to identify as a pig, as initially thought. The most characteristic feature of the lactating sow, which in fact makes her synonymous with fecundity, is that there are many piglets. However, even with this composition, our group is known from later periods. It is more likely that we have here a bitch suckling a puppy, which is not unknown in the iconography and indeed not infrequently suckling a human baby. The possibility that animals in combat are represented (e.g. boar hunt) is slim, given the small size of the second figure, its infantile characteristics and the point of contact between the two animals, which is the nipple.

Both zoomorphic figurines were votive offerings in a sanctuary or sanctuaries of the area. In the absence of further evidence, we can only speculate on these sanctuaries and the deities worshipped. However, the goddess Artemis has precedence over other deities.

At Onithé, Artemis must have taken on the characteristics of Diktyнна or the young virgin Britomartis, with whose qualities she was given hypostasis in West Crete. The mountainous landscape



28

28 Bronze zoomorphic figurine, most probably representing a dog. Rethymnon Archaeological Museum.

29 Bronze figurine group, most probably representing an animal suckling its young. Rethymnon Archaeological Museum.

of Onithé was a befitting environment for the cult of the highland goddess of the chase, of whom a sanctuary in West Crete (Diktyннаion) was guarded by hounds and decorated with hunting scenes. Indeed, the Cretan dog, famed for its stamina, was the goddess's characteristic companion.

The bronze helmet (H)

The greater part of the right half of a bronze helmet, presently in the Rethymnon Archaeological Museum (inv. no. M157), was found by chance in 1946 and alludes to the city's military aristocracy in Archaic times.

The helmet is a variation of the Corinthian type, as are all the known Cretan helmets of early historical times. Because of the loss of its greater part, we cannot know whether it had been made from a single metal sheet or from two pieces joined in the middle. The quality of the workmanship is excellent and the helmet is rightly considered one of the best examples of Cretan toreutic art in the Archaic period. The bowl of the helmet appears to be well adapted to the head, the cheek-pieces are well-formed, although not clearly separated, and the frontal opening for the eyes (visor) is fine and elegant. The lower margin of the helmet slopes slightly outwards with its edge formed by a torsion of the metal sheet. Due to its fragmentary



29



30

30 Part of a bronze helmet. Rethymnon Archaeological Museum.

condition, it is not clear whether the helmet had a nose-piece.

Excellent too is the representation on the surface of the bronze sheet. Executed in low relief is a martial scene with a two-horse chariot (*biga*). An analogous representation will have decorated the other side of the helmet. The horse discerned is in "flying gallop" with the front legs uplifted to the fore, while the hind legs beat the ground to thrust the chariot forward. The light chariot had four wheels (one of which is shown). This composition is known from other Cretan sites too (Dreros, Palaikastro) and is thought to be of Assyrian inspiration.

The chariot is driven by a charioteer, of which only the right hand is preserved, lightly holding one of the reins. It seems that in the other hand he will have held the taut rein. From comparable representations it is surmised that the charioteer was not alone in the chariot. There will have been a passenger beside him, not in the chariot but mounting it.

The helmet seems to have been fashioned in the late seventh-early sixth century BC, probably in a workshop in the ancient city.

In order to return to the dirt road from which we started, we cross Tsigounas in the opposite direction. Fifty metres to the east the road forks. The northwest branch leads to the locality 'Leivadia'.



31 Fragment of the shaft of a 'twisted' column.



32 Vineyards at the locality 'Pezoulos'.

14 Parts of a column

We walk up the dirt road in this direction and come across two fragments (possibly belonging together) from the shaft of a 'twisted' column, built into a modern dry-stone wall between the south kerb of the road and a vineyard.

The presence of the column, and indeed close to gigantic heaps of stones which in folklore tradition were said to conceal a golden loom, could point to the existence of an important building hereabouts, dating from Early Christian times. However, it is more likely that these *spolia* had been brought from the Early Christian basilica (see below), the columns of which had been plundered.

15 Vineyards (locality 'Pezoulos')

The gentle slope in the north part of the plateau, is known as 'Pezoulos', thus named after the stepped terraces. These terraces are planted with some of the oldest vines in the area.

The choice of this place for viticulture is not fortuitous. The slope is protected from the blustery winds and the limestone subsoil is favourable to the planting of vines. Furthermore, the area fulfils another essential precondition for vine-tending: good exposure to the sun and good ventilation.

16 Ancient cemetery (locality 'Pezoulos')

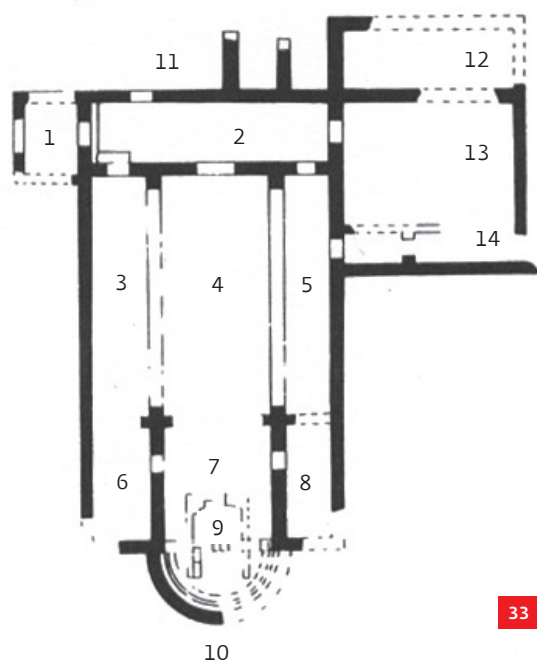
'Pezoulos', and specifically the rocky verge of its slope, must have been the site of one of the cemeteries of the settlement. Scant remains of rock-cut tombs have been identified here. A short distance southwards of this point other graves have been located, although it is not clear whether they date from the same period.

The development of the cemetery on a hillside and outside the boundaries of the settlement (extramural) is a quite common phenomenon in antiquity, not only for sanitary reasons but also to secure a symbolic distance between the living and the dead.

17 Grape-pressing installation (*lenos*) (locality 'Leivadia')

The rural road continues northwards, leading to the locality 'Leivadia', which lies outside the bounds of the ancient city and is now covered by cultivated fields. About 1,000 m. from the modern settlement, a grape-pressing installation (*lenos*) of rectangular plan has been found. It is dated to Venetian times or to the early Ottoman period.

We return along the dirt road to the point where it forks and this time take the main branch to the east. The route crosses the small Onithé plain, the depressions of which, together with the terraced fields



33 Ground plan of the basilica, after N. Platon.

- 1 Porch
- 2 Narthex
- 3 South aisle
- 4 Central aisle
- 5 North aisle
- 6 South pastophorium
- 7 Sanctuary
- 8 North pastophorium
- 9 Chapel
- 10 Apse - synthronon
- 11 Atrium (?)
- 12 Outbuilding a
- 13 Baptistry
- 14 Outbuilding b

of 'Tsigounas' and 'Pyrgos' were the area's main source of income.

18 The Early Christian basilica (locality 'Kera')

Just before we reach the end of the dirt road, to the east, we deviate from the main route and walk about 50 m. in order to reach the Early Christian basilica, which was brought to light by N. Platon. Its discovery has contributed to the better understanding of the Early Byzantine period in Crete.

Built at the foot of a hillside, the basilica is three-aisled and measures approximately 36 x 17 m. It is entered through a small porch (1) on the south side of the naos. From there three steps lead into the narthex (2). West of the narthex there was probably the atrium, into which the doorway at its south end led.

From the narthex we enter the three-aisled naos. The aisles are developed at three different levels, following the slope of the ground. The central aisle (4) is the widest, while the north aisle (5) is slightly narrower than the south one (3). The three aisles will have been separated from each other by stylobates, on which the columns stood.

In a later period and after the basilica had fallen into disuse, a small chapel (9) destroyed part of the sanctuary and the apse. At its entrance a hole 34 x 45 cm. deep was revealed, which contained a few potsherds and a small bowl. This may have been the *enkainion* or foundation deposit of the basilica, a phenomenon that has been observed elsewhere.

To the east the basilica ends in a semicircular apse which is provided with a three-stepped *synthronon* or sedile, where the bishops sat behind the altar table when attending the Liturgy.

Interesting is the arrangement of the spaces on either side of the holy bema. It has been suggested that these were pastophoria, the north one functioning as the prothesis, the space where the Sacraments were placed before the celebration of the Divine Eucharist, and the south as the diakonikon, where the vestments and church plate were kept. The pastophoria communicate with the sanctuary proper through two small double doors and with the lateral aisles through large openings.

In the northern extension of the narthex there are also apartments of indeterminate use. The large room (13) communicated with the narthex through a doorway and was perhaps the baptistry. The last room to the east (14) is a narrow corridor giving access to the north aisle.



34



35

34 Aerial photograph of the Early Christian basilica.

35 The sanctuary apse (from the south).

The floors of the basilica in the sanctuary, the north pastophorium, the central aisle and the narthex were covered with mosaics. In contrast, the floors of the side aisles were of bricks and flagstones.

The basilica is now bereft of its main architectural members and columns, as well as its sculptural decoration. Only some parts of the poros openwork closure panels, of provincial workmanship, have survived. The rest of the finds included very little pottery and fragments of glass hanging lamps. The basilica is dated to the end of the fifth and the beginning of the sixth century.

The mosaic floors

The floors in the narthex, the central aisle, the sanctuary and the north pastophorium were covered with impressive mosaics. All these tessellated pavements have purely decorative compositions and there are no figural representations. There are variations of geometric patterns framed by zones of ivy motifs, executed in small tesserae in five different colours (red, blue, white, grey and black).

The narthex is covered by a richly-decorated "carpet" consisting of four panels. In the panel in front of the



36a, b Mosaic floors.

main entrance (south) is a wonderful concatenated and imbricated pattern. The other three panels have central medallions, around which lozenges are formed. The mosaic as a whole is framed by a guilloche and a zone of creeping ivy leaves.

The mosaic in the middle aisle is divided into three zones. Impressive is the development of the middle zone, which unfolds like an opulent carpet from the Royal Door (middle doorway) to the Sanctuary Door (central portal of the templon-screen). Its decoration consists of *rotae* alternating with squares, which are interconnected by lozenges. The side zones are decorated with squares forming crosses in a continuous mesh, inside which are lozenges. The mosaic as a whole is surrounded by guilloches.

The mosaic pavement of the sanctuary consists of a rather complicated ornament formed from systems of crosses amidst lozenges and squares. This composition too is surrounded by guilloche and a band of lovely ivy leaves.

Last, the floor of the north pastophorium is decorated with a mesh of *rotae* enclosing quadruple guilloche, squares and lozenges. This whole pattern is framed by guilloches and ivy leaves.



37 The han (hostelry) from the southeast. Visible behind is the massif of Mouth Vrysinas.

38 The han (hostelry), aerial photograph.



19 The han (locality 'Kera')

As we continue our way along the dirt road, about 200 m. east of the basilica we come to an interesting but puzzling – in terms of use – building complex.

This is a stone-built vaulted building with flat roof, constructed of material taken from the adjacent basilica. Its entrance is on the wide east front, with a second entrance immediately next to it, perhaps opened when the first entrance was blocked up. The interior of the building is a single hall with plastered walls. On the tympanum of the north narrow side is a window opening. Around both the north narrow side and the long west one runs a low bench.

The date of the building is far from clear. Vaulted spaces in Crete are known already from Late Byzantine times, are characteristic of the years of Venetian rule and continue in use into the Early Ottoman period. The edifice appears as if it could have been built in the sixteenth or seventeenth century.

Enigmatic too is its use. Although it could have been the country house or farmstead of a local landowner, it seems more likely that it was a hostelry or *han*. Its nodal position on the pass leading northwards towards the provincial road axis, through the 'Skourochlada' ravine, its proximity to an abundant water source, from which the adjacent fields were irrigated until recently, the existence of a cistern in its north part and the presence of a series of rock-cut basins at a level below this reinforce the above proposal.

- 39 View to the northeast from the slopes of Onithé. In the distance is the Potamoi valley with the manmade Lake Potamoi.





- 40 The church of the Life-giving Source.
- 41 Rock-cut arcosolium in the interior of the tomb.
- 42 The entrance to the tomb (from the east).



40

In recent times the building, also known as '*metochi*', was lived in during the summer months, which use has left many traces. West of the building and close to it is a threshing floor.

20 Venetian church of the Life-giving Source (locality 'Kera')

Just below the *han*, a stream marks the eastern limit of the area of Onithé. Within the deeply-shadowed ravine through which it flows, 200 m. northeast of the *han*, is the church of the Life-giving Source (*Zoodochos Pege*). This is a small single-aisle vaulted church with pitched tiled roof. Its entrance has a rectangular frame and an archivolt in the shape of a pointed arch. Above this is a cruciform fanlight. There are fanlights of semicircular shape also on the long sides, while in the sanctuary conch there is a fenestella.

In the interior of the church are two strainer arches with plain braces at their springing, while a cornice runs around the sanctuary at the point where the curvature of its conch begins.

The church has been dated to the late fourteenth or the early fifteenth century and is still used for worship.

21 Burial chambers (locality 'Sykidi')

We come back to the road towards 'Plakes' and follow the dirt road westwards, which brings us to the diametrically opposite edge of the plateau, the area of 'Sykidi'. In this locality, clearly outside the speculated limits of the ancient city, two burial chambers have been found inside a modern sheepfold. The first chamber is cut in the limestone bedrock and is almost square in shape. Its entrance is a square doorway on the east side. Inside the chamber on the three sides are blind arcades in the form of arcosolia, that is, arched apses starting from the ground (*arcus* = arch and *sol* = earth), inside which the coffin of the dead (*solium*) was placed. Carved in the tympanum of each arch is a small niche, perhaps for placing offerings.

The tomb must have been created in Early Christian times, if not in the Late Roman period, as the last resting place of a distinguished person, perhaps a local dignitary or official, and possibly members of his family.

In a later period the tomb may have been converted into a Christian chapel. Oral tradition has it that the chamber was used as a secret school in Ottoman times, but this does not seem to be verified by historical sources and conceptions.

A short distance from the burial chamber is a second similar rock-cut tomb, but in a poor state of preservation.



This travel guide has narrated the 'biography' of Onithé through a route that has taken in the most characteristic spaces and monuments brought to light there. During the tour of the area – as well as after its completion – a sense of the unexplored is uppermost, due to the fact that investigations are incomplete and that the erosive forces of nature compete with the works of man.

However, this sense of the unexplored is by no means off-putting. In the course of the tour there have been much food for our thoughts and stimuli for our imagination, enabling us to fill in the picture of the cultural landscape in our mind's eye.

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TIMELINE

