

Orthodox Christianity



Region of Crete
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Since the early Christian years, Crete became a cradle of Orthodox Christianity. This is reflected on the hundreds of religious monuments on the island. Even the struggles for liberation, in most cases, started from the monastic communities.



Religious tradition is very intense in all areas of Crete and is present in everyday life of the Cretans. Crete has an autonomous Archbishopric, separate from the rest of Greece. With thousands of places of worship and dozens of monasteries that have played a special role in the consolidation of Christianity and the struggle against the invaders, Crete is an ideal religious and historic destination.

Since the early Christian times, when Paul the Apostle visited Crete and preached the new religion for two years, the Christian tradition developed through the centuries. Remote places of monastic self-exile, traces of early Christian basilicas, caveous chapels and painted Byzantine churches are found everywhere on Crete.

Many monasteries played an important historical role during the struggles of the Cretans for liberation. Moreover, Cretan iconography flourished especially in the Venetian Era, with El Greco and Michael Damascenus being the most important representatives.



Early Years

Before continuing his journey to Rome, Paul the Apostle, stayed two years in Crete to preach Christianity. This was the starting point for a century-long ascetic tradition, which is still vivid and alive.

Before leaving to Rome, his follower Titus, was announced the first bishop of Crete.

The new forbidden religion started spreading slowly around the island. Especially after the issuance of the Edict of Milan in 313 AD, which permanently established religious tolerance for Christianity within the Roman Empire, the first monumental temples were constructed.

Tip

According to tradition, Paul the Apostle lived for two years in a small cave at Kali Limenes, which is open to visitors.



Early Christian Monuments

The first basilicas, temples of a specific architectural type, were founded in the 4th century AD. Their remnants are still awe-inspiring due to their size and imposing appearance.

In Crete about 80 basilicas have been identified. This number indicates economic well-being, since the construction of such large monuments was very expensive. Gortys, Crete's capital till the Arab rule, hosted the largest of those, dedicated to Saint Titus. Its re-

mains are located near the village Mitropoli, while there is a smaller basilica within the archaeological site of Gortys, also dedicated to Saint Titus.

Apart from the basilicas of Gortys, the visitors can see ruins of similar religious monuments at Hersonissos, Fragokastelo, Elounda, Almyrida, Panormos, Goulediana, Sougia, Eleftheria and other parts of Crete.



Land of Saints

Paul the Apostle left a great legacy for the future preachers of the Christian faith. His replacement, Saint Titus, soon became widely known for his prominent personality. Today his skull is stored in the imposing church of Saint Titus in Heraklion.

Another important religious figure, who is considered the founder of asceticism on the island, was Saint John the Hermit. John arrived in Crete with 98 other hermits from Egypt and lived in caves, at the site where Azogyres Monastery is located today. Later, he lived alone in caves of Marathokefala and Akrotiri Cape, where a rich ascetic tradition was developed.

Another bishop of Crete, Saint Myron from Rafkos, is celebrated with a splendor in the village Agios Mironas. Holy water gushes in the cave where he lived. Last, during the empire of Decius, ten Christians were beheaded for their faith in Christ. Today, the village Agii Deki ("Ten Saints" in Greek) is built on the site where the martyrs lost their lives.

Tip
Pope Alexander V (1409-1410), given name Peter Philagris, came from Crete.



Ascetic Tradition

The arrival of St. John the Hermit in Crete was the beginning of a great ascetic tradition that continues to the present day. Hundreds of hermits secluded in the most remote parts of the island, forming ascetic communities that later evolved to thriving monasteries.

A special sample of hermitage is the Monastery Katholiko at Akrotiri Cape in the caves of which hermits lived their monastic life away from worldly pleasures. Equally important were the religious sites of the secluded peninsulas Gramvousa and Rodopos, where several small monasteries developed.

The greatest hermitage of all was the naturally isolated and impassable range of Asterousia in southern Heraklion. Hundreds of caves from Saint Nikitas to Cape Lithino still host hermits. The relations between them were so limited that in Agiofarago and Martsalo they gathered only once a year; in cave Goumenospilio and counted how many of them survived each year.

In eastern Crete, the north province of Mirabello is the largest field of asceticism with dozens of small monastic establishments. Here hermits built small monasteries, where they usually lived alone.



Monastic Tradition

After the liberation of Crete by Nicephorus Phocas from the Arabs in 961 AD, followed a period of cultural renaissance, which is reflected on the monuments of the period and which continued during the Venetian rule.

Most large and small monasteries operating today were established in that period. Apart from serving religious needs, most of them played an important role during the struggles of Cretans for liberation, especially after the conquest of Crete by the Ottomans.



Monasteries were the only places where Christians could find shelter and organize their military operations. Suspicious of the supportive action of monks, the Ottomans destroyed several monasteries that functioned as revolutionary centers.

Even today, visitors admire the story of the Holocaust of Arkadi Monastery in 1866. Then, the besieged Christians decided to blow up the powder kegs in order not to surrender to the Ottomans. All the monasteries of that time have similar stories to narrate.





The monasteries Chania

Chania hosts some of the finest masterpieces of monastic architecture in Greece. The monasteries of the Holy Trinity and Tzagaroli at Akrotiri cape, Chrysoskalitissa and Gonia Odigitria are exquisite samples. Equally impressive are the restored monasteries of Saint George at Karydi, Chrysopigi, Kalogrades at Akrotiri and Santa Kyriaki. Significant former monasteries

are the monasteries of Katholiko, Saint Anthony and Saint John Pazinos at Akrotiri, Saint George Charodias, Saint Eleftherios at Moumies, the old monasteries of Saint John, Saint Paul and Saint George at Spatha, Azogyres and many others.





Rethymnon

Arkadi Monastery is the most famous monastery in Crete both due to its excellent fortified architecture and because it is a symbol for the liberation of Crete from the Ottomans after the holocaust of 1866. There are more important monasteries around Rethymnon, such as Preveli, Santa Irene, Prophet Elijah in Roustika, Katevati and Arsani. Milopotamos province

developed a very important monastic tradition and is home to the beautiful monasteries Vosakos, Chalepa, Diskouri and Attali. Some of the most famous abandoned monuments in Rethymno are the monasteries Halevi, Saint Peter in Gallos, Kaloidena by Ano Meros, Saint Anthony in Veni and the School of Asomati in Amari.



Heraklion

Heraklion is home to some of the oldest monasteries in Crete, including the important monasteries of Agarathos, Paliani by Venerato, Vrontissi by Vorizia, Saint George Epanosifis, Saint George Gorgolainis by Asites, Saint Panteleimon by Fodele, Panagia Odigitria by Sivas, Kallergis by Kastelli, Saint Anthony by Arvi, Santa Pelagia by Ahlada and Apezana by Antiskari. The area west of Heraklion is a thriving religious enclave with the monasteries of Savvatiana, Rogdia,

Santa Fotini, Pantanassa and Saint Theodore, all located nearby. The nunnery of Panagia Kera Kardiotissa dominates the foot of the Lassithi range, while Psiloritis hosts the monasteries of Santa Irene by Kroussonas and All Saints in Loutraki. The monastery of Agia Marina in Vonní is the largest pilgrimage in Crete. Lastly, the visitor could also visit the monasteries of Kalyviani by Mires, Saint John by Anopolis, Panagia Theogennitor by Mohos and many others.



Lassithi

The most famous monastery in Lassithi is Toplou by Itanos, which reminds of an impregnable fortress. Other monasteries that are open to visitors are the monasteries Kapsas by Goudouras, Faneromeni by Goumia, Faneromeni by Skopi, Exakousti by Malles and the monasteries of Lassithi Plateau, namely Vidiani and Kroustalenia. The area of Mirabello hosted the largest number of monasteries in Crete. Today

monasteries that still operate are Areti by Fourni, Kremasta and Koufi Petra by Neapolis and Saint George Selinaria. Ierapetra is home to the modern monasteries Axion Esti and Ayiasmenos.

Tip

Most monasteries in Crete are open to visitors. There are certain opening hours and visitors should be decently dressed.



Ecclesiastical Parks

In Crete there are more than 800 churches adorned with wonderful frescoes, which depict the evolution of ecclesiastical art from the early Byzantine times to the Cretan School of Painting during the Venetian Era. There are some specific areas with an impressive number of such temples.

Apart from the great religious center of Mirabello, the area of Avdou and Episkopi by Heraklion boasts a large number of monuments of outstanding artistic and religious significance. The region that can be characterized as the largest hagiographic park site in Crete includes the provinces Selino and Kissamos. It hosts dozens of chapels bearing frescoes, painted by prominent artists of their time.

Magnificent samples of hagiography and ecclesiastical architecture are located in many other parts of Crete. One of the most famous monuments is Panagia Kera in Kritsa, while other important temples are Saint Nicolas in Kyriakosellia, Panagia in Meronas, Varsamonero, Panagia Kera Eleousa in Kitharida and more.



Influence from the past

During the transition from the worship of Roman deities to Christianity, many of the previous habits were incorporated into the new religion. Devotional caves and Minoan peak sanctuaries continued to serve the worship of Twelve Olympians and were later adapted to the Roman religion, before transforming to Christian temples.





Caves in steep cliffs and canyons are still used as places of worship. In canyons, temples are usually dedicated to Saint Anthony, such as in the gorges of Patsos, Agiofarago, Samaria, Platania, Gallos, Kotsifos. Other well-known cavernous chapels are Saint Anthony at Koudoumas, Hagia Sophia in Topolia, Agia Dynami in Argiroupoli, Saint John by Kapetaniana,

Panagia Kera Spiliotissa in Agios Thomas, Saint John the Hermit at Akrotiri and Marathokefala, Panagia Arkoudiotissa at Gouvemeto, Saint Andrew at Finokalias, Panagia Spiliotissa in Houdetsi, Santa Fotini in Avdou, and more.



Today, temples have been built on the site of former Minoan peak sanctuaries and serve Orthodox Christianity. Most of them are dedicated to the Holy Cross or the Prophet Elijah. The churches of Christ at the sacred mountain of the Minoans, Yuchtas, the Holy Cross on the highest peak of Crete and at Kofinas, Saint Panteleimon at the site of ancient Rizinia, All Saints at Vrisinas and more are very impressive.

Tip
During the feast of the Holy Cross at the top of Kofinas revives a dendrolatric custom. The fruits of three trees, which locals call apples of Kofinas are gathered, blessed by the priest and shared to the pilgrims that eat them.



Feasts and Customs

On the occasion of the feast of Saints of the Orthodox Christian calendar, many local feasts are organized in villages and towns of Crete, especially in August.

The feasts, along with religious and worship importance, contribute to the preservation of customs and traditions and to the social interaction of among the local communities. After the festivities in the temples, locals gather at the central squares of the villages and celebrate with music and dance till the early morning hours.

One of the most important religious traditions in Crete is the celebration of Christmas Mass in a real manger in the cave Mar-athokefala. Also during the festival of Saint John the Theologian at Mammaketo, on Lassithi plateau, the dried orchids of the epitaph bloom again. In Agios Thomas and on the Asterousia range ancient habits revive; temples and houses are surrounded with waxed ropes, to keep evil spirits away.

Ancient customs for curing patients are still alive. In Sfakia patients devote dough dolls to Saint Anthony to cure their illnesses and in Psiloritis they devote human shaped breads, lazaropsoma, during memorial services. During the celebration of Agia Pelagia, patients bury their painful aching legs or hands in the sand of the beach. In Achlade clothes are put on the sacred turpentine tree of Saint Fanourios.





Apart from the common Easter customs in Greece, Crete has some special local traditions to show. These include the auction of the Cross, the blessing of sheep under the epitaph, the burning of Judas, the transferring of the Holy Light at home while keeping silent and leaving red eggs on graves.





There are more customs, such as Klidonas, celebrated on the day of Saint John the Baptist in late June. During the feast of the Transfiguration of Christ, pilgrims devote the first grapes of the season to bless their vineyards, while on the same day at the top of the peak Afendis of range Dikti, participants try to find coins in the soil around the church. On 3rd November, on the feast day of Saint George "Methystis" (methystis, one who makes you drunk) barrels with wine are first opened.

Tip
The Villages Asi Gonia and Karoti at Rethymnon host the celebration of Saint George. Sheep are milked before the priest and milk is shared to the congregation.



Ecclesiastical Collections

Visitors of Crete have the opportunity to admire collections of ecclesiastical art in numerous museums and open exhibitions around the island. Very old icons, priestly vestments, manuscripts, seals and books are some common exhibits.

Well organized ecclesiastical collections are housed in the Byzantine Museum of Chania, the Ecclesiastical Museum of Rethymnon and the Byzantine Collection of Heraklion hosted in the Basilica of Saint Catherine of Sinai.



Important monasteries often house folklore or religious museums with very interesting exhibits. Such collections include the monasteries of Arkadi, Toplou, Tzagaroli, Gonia, Chrysopigi, Preveli, Kalyviani and the Ecclesiastical Museum of Roustika.

