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AN ENGLISH CHURCH ON KYTHERA

Paul Watkins explores the relics of Britain's Greek Empire on Kythera

**'I have been asked where the Ionians were?
And what England could have to do with the people of Persia?'**

*Lord Kirkwall, former official of the Lord High Commissioner
during the British rule of the Ionian islands, 1815–1864*

One of the unsung joys of travel is the moment when you open the shutters of a darkened hotel room to the wakening view. A late arrival in Chora, capital of the Greek island of Kythera, provided me with such a pleasure. With the need for a good night's sleep paramount, the shutters had remained closed until morning.

Framed by the open window was the revelation of a shallow, verdant valley, with only one man-made feature. At first I could not clearly identify the tumbled mass of stone, glowing warmly in the early morning light, as a building. All I knew was that at some time in the island's early Venetian period (13th century) the site had been chosen for the

construction of a small domed church in the Byzantine style, dedicated to the Orthodox St Martin (Ayios Minas) and later on, in the 16th century, transferred to the Catholic faith as part of a Franciscan monastery.

Later still, in the early 19th century, Ayios Minas became the 'English Church', converting to the Protestant faith during the British occupation of the Ionian islands (1815–1864). In its brief life as an Anglican place of worship for the handful of British soldiers and administrators and their families, the church played an important if minor role in maintaining the idiosyncrasy of a British Greek Empire, formed of Kythera and the other Ionian islands dominated by Corfu.

Sadly the church's landmark dome had recently collapsed and I realized that the building I was contemplating was now no more than a ruinous memorial to a short-lived but intriguing period in the island's history.

'King Tom' and his 'Viceroys'

British occupation of the seven Ionian islands was the result of the withering of French power in the Mediterranean during the Napoleonic Wars. Napoleon had seized them from the Venetians in 1797 prior to his campaign in Egypt, but his subsequent defeat at the Battle of the Nile in 1798 brought their surrender to the forces of Russia and Turkey – two of the powers allied against the French. A

The *Mentor* shipwreck

On 12 September 1802 a British ship, the *Mentor*, was sailing from Athens to Malta with a precious cargo: 17 crates of marble sculptures newly removed from the Parthenon by Lord Elgin. The route of the voyage, via the southern coastline of the Peloponnese, was diverted by strong northwesterlies to the southern tip of Kythera, where it took on water. In desperation, the crew made for the island's nearest port, Avlemonas, on the east coast. Unfortunately the heavily weighted ship struck the shore just outside the harbour and quickly sank.

Happily all on board were saved. Among them was Lord Elgin's private secretary, William Hamilton, who had been involved in a similar mission – the removal of the Rosetta Stone from Egypt – the previous year. (This was the same Hamilton who later became Britain's Envoy to Naples and protector and husband of Nelson's Emma.) His companion on the voyage, another great philhellene, was Colonel William Martin Leake, renowned for his geographical surveys of Greece and, like Hamilton, a dedicated collector of antiquities.

It was essential that the marbles – along with Lord Elgin's reputation – were recovered. Sponge divers from Symi and Kalymnos were recruited to explore the wreck and retrieve its priceless cargo, which was subsequently shipped to England in two Royal Navy vessels.* Sold to the British Museum by Lord Elgin, the marbles remain there as a major attraction for visitors despite the efforts of Greece to repatriate them.

Under the supervision of the Greek Archaeological Committee, excavations of the shipwreck have continued into the 21st century. Some of the other antiquities stowed on the *Mentor* along with the marbles have been recovered, and much has been learnt about ship design and equipment of the period.

*Although the British were not in control of the Ionians at the time of the shipwreck, it has been suggested by the historian G.N. Leontsinis, author of a doctoral thesis on the social history of Kythera, that the islanders were strongly pro-British (following the expulsion of the French and the setting up of the short-lived Septinsular Republic), and thus happy to permit the export of their Greek heritage.



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Derelict interior of the 'English Church'.

period of independence created a 'Septinsular Republic' but this only lasted until 1807, when the French briefly returned, then to be finally evicted by the British after a long blockade (1809–1814). The British protectorate imposed on the islands lasted until 1864 when they were united with Greece.

The first overlord of Britain's Greek possessions, commanding his insular domain from a splendid palace on Corfu, was Lord High Commissioner Sir Thomas Maitland. Something of a maverick in the great tradition of British colonial governors, 'King Tom' was the guardian and executor of a constitution which ensured control of the Islands' Assembly, and which could enact legislation without the authority of a British parliament. He was effectively an independent sovereign with complete power over his subjects. His view of their political rights was best summed up by his confident assertion that 'colonial assemblies are injurious to the people and disadvantageous to good government'.

Though forming part of the Ionian Assembly, the noble families who had governed the islands in the 400-year Venetian period were subverted by the offer of large salaries and titles,

and offered little opposition to Maitland's rule. But a colonial adventure that might have seemed little more than a move on the geopolitical chessboard had a positive outcome for the inhabitants of Corfu, Paxos, Levkas, Cephalonia, Zakynthos, Ithaca and Kythera, bringing about a degree of order, local justice and material advancement for the islands unknown in their history.

In this respect, Maitland's 'viceroys' had a major role to play. These men, colonial officials and army officers, were made Residents (governors) of the smaller islands, where their exploitation of the people and resources was to some extent balanced by their contribution to the general good. Kythera's best-known Resident, Captain John McPhail, is remembered for his public works, the product of his training as an architect and engineer. The island's road network, still in use today, was largely his creation (and that of the islanders' *corvée* labour) as were the splendid bridges, many still capable of carrying modern traffic. McPhail's most interesting architectural legacy, however, is the half-dozen or so school buildings whose English Gothic design stands out so strikingly against the Kytheran landscape (see panel on page 23).

These schools, serving a population swollen by refugees from the Greek War of Independence, were built for the purpose of educating a Greek civil service to provide future recruits for the British administration.

The 'English Church'

I followed the track to Ayios Minas along the valley floor to a small cemetery behind the church, where a path between the marble Orthodox tombs led to a square stone vault shaded by a pine tree. A carved inscription showed that this was an ossuary containing the bones of the British residents who had been disinterred from an earlier graveyard and from the interior of the church, transferred here in 1935. Inside the church a plaque from 1971 recorded this event in Greek and English.

Apart from a second plaque (1623) commemorating a Venetian burial within the church, the interior was bare, with crumbling plaster revealing the ragged stonework and an east end open to the sky. The sanctuary was buried by the rubble of the recently collapsed dome. Here was a sad glimpse of a misplaced and near-forgotten imperialism. The church, like so many similar relics on the island, is unlikely to be restored.

A memory of Kythera's British community survives, however, in the Archaeological Museum of Chora. Here the headstones from their former graves have been stored and archived. Sadly, the engraved epitaphs give little information on the burials, with no reference to the birthplace or place of death (i.e. Kythera) of the men, women and children who found themselves so far from their homeland. This speaks volumes about the attitude of the British expatriates towards their adopted home, which they saw as foreign and remote.

The most celebrated antiquity in the museum is undoubtedly the impressive Archaic 'Lion of Kythera' (sixth century BC) which stands proudly near the entrance. This cannot be mistaken for any other symbolic lion, either Venetian or British.

The British architectural legacy on Kythera



British School, Milapidia, exterior and interior (© Paul Watkins).

Schoolhouses

One of John McPhail's most inspired projects was the building of schools throughout Kythera to educate local children as potential administrators. The schools were based on the Lancastrian system, which owes its name to the pioneering work of Joseph Lancaster (1778–1838), in establishing schools in which more advanced students assumed the role of teachers, thus alleviating the burdens – and cost – of adult staff. The method was highly influential in the earlier part of the 19th century, which included the period of school construction on Kythera (1820s). McPhail's venture had the enthusiastic support of Frederick North, Fifth Earl of Guilford, who established the Ionian Academy on Corfu, the first university of modern Greece.

British schoolhouses, mainly built in the years around 1825, can be found at Potamos, Milopotamos (Kato Chora), Milapidia, Fratsia, Osios Theodoros and Aroniadika. They are notable for their derivative architectural styles, inspired by the contemporary fads of British academe (such as the neo-Gothic). As in the case of Chora's 'English Church', however, these buildings have lacked any substantial restoration and are in a sad state of disrepair.

Bridges and other structures

Their modern function has ensured that McPhail's bridges are better preserved than the schools. Most notable are those at Katouni, Kapsali, Potamos, Mitata and Karavas. Other British works include the lighthouse at Moudari (1854) at the northern end of the island, the market building at Chora (1834) and the Lazaretto (quarantine station) at Kapsali, an 1817 reconstruction of the original Venetian building. Also at Kapsali is a tall, stone-built reservoir (1825), once supplied by an aqueduct, used for watering the ships which came into the harbour.



Bridges at Kapsali (left) and Katouni (© Paul Watkins).

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