

# BRITAIN'S GREEK ISLANDS

Kythera and the Ionian Islands 1809 to 1864



Peter Prineas

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## A NOTE ON NAMES

Readers may wonder why the names of Greeks living on Greek islands are given in Italian, for example *Giovanni* rather than *Ioannes*. It is because Italian was the language of the upper classes and the administration in the Ionian Islands during the centuries of Venetian rule. This continued for much of the 55 years the British controlled the Ionian Islands and is reflected in the archives of the British Protectorate.

Greek and English replaced Italian as joint official languages in the 1830s but the signori and the administration persisted with Italian up to 1864 when the islands were ceded to Greece. The Greek masses of the islands never abandoned Greek, although they knew it as *Romaica*, the language of the Eastern Roman Empire.

The place names used in the book are also those which appear in the archives of the British Protectorate, for example Maina and the Mainotes rather than Mani and the Maniates. The Italian names for the islands and other places were used by the British. They included Corfu (Kerkyra), Paxo (Paxi), Santa Maura (Lefkada), Cephalonia (Kefalonia), Zante (Zakynthos), Cerigo (Kythera), Cervi (Elafonisos) Cerigotto (Anti Kythera), Candia (Crete) and Napoli Di Romania (Nauplia).

By the middle of the nineteenth century Greek place names were coming into favour and George Bowen commented in his book 'Ithaca in 1850' that he had 'called the Greek localities by their real Greek names, not by the designations which the Italians have been pleased to fix upon them, and which are, in many cases, utterly unknown to the Greeks themselves'.

## Slay all the klephts

In the early nineteenth century a Greek artist known as Zographos painted scenes from Greek history in a naive style. In one of his works, the conquering Turks are shown at Constantinople, but in the distance the figures of Greek fighting men can be seen making their retreat into the mountains. Zographos' painting reflected a tradition that the Greeks had never surrendered to the Turks and that there had never been a time when they did not carry on the fight. A leader of the Greek Revolution, Theodore Colocotronis, once declared, 'Our royal garrison is with the bands called klephts; the fortresses are Mani, Souli and the hills'.<sup>1</sup>

The klephts were free Greeks in an age when Greece was not free. They were the stuff of song and story and some of the capitani were raised up as heroes, admired for their bravery, for their expert use of gun and yataghan and for their lightning traverses of the mountain fastnesses. A less romantic view was that the klephts were outlaws who robbed Turks and Greeks indiscriminately. The Ottoman Empire, like the Byzantine Empire before it, relied on paid local militias, known as *armatoles*, to pursue the klephts and maintain order in the remote countryside. It was not uncommon for a local bey to solve his problems with a troublesome band of klephts by recruiting them as *armatoles* and Theodore Colocotronis was one of the capitani who led both bands of klephts, and *armatoles*, at different times in his early career.<sup>2</sup>

In the days when Morosini governed the Morea for the Venetians a man named Botsikas fathered a son, Ioannes, and it was remarked that the boy's backside was dark like the *cotron*, the crow. Among the irreverent Greek peasantry the description stuck, and Ioannes and his line became known as Colocotronis or, literally, Crow-arse. Theodore Colocotronis was born in the spring of 1770 'under a tree on the hill called Ramvouni in old Messenia'. His father, Constantes, had served as a captain of the

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armatoles in Corinth, afterwards changing sides to join with the Mainotes in their wars against the Turks. A dark and sinewy figure, quick on his feet and with black and unforgiving eyes, Constantes Colocotronis put fear into the hearts of his enemies. It was a perilous life and it came to an early end, leaving young Theodore to be raised by his remaining family in and around Maina.<sup>3</sup>

When the British came to Zante, Theodore Colocotronis had been there for several years. In 1802, the Turkish Voivode at Patras had condemned him to death along with other 'wild men' of the Morea for their klephtic and revolutionary activities. In 1805 the pressure increased when Sultan Selim issued a firman to 'slay all the kephths' and compelled the Greek Patriarch in Constantinople to excommunicate them from the Greek Church. Soon after, while staying at a monastery near Calamata, Colocotronis and his party were attacked by a Turkish force but managed to escape under cover of darkness. He took refuge in the mountains of Maina and from there he made his way to the port of Marathonisi where he obtained a boat with the intention of sailing across to Cerigo. The crossing took several days due to contrary winds that drove the boat onto Cervi Island. He at last reached the shores of Cerigo in a violent storm, and made his way to the village of Potamos where he and his companions thought it better not to reveal who they were. From there, Colocotronis and his party went on to see the Governor of Cerigo, whose name was Albanitaki. The Governor scolded them for going about armed. While they were there, Colocotronis was recognized by a boy from Pyrgos, a village in Maina. He then went to the Russian military commandant and told him the whole truth, 'who we were and to what we were reduced'. The Russian ensured that Colocotronis and his party were well cared for.

It was not Colocotronis' first visit to Cerigo. He had previously attended a feast at the island's monastery of Aghia Moni. The monastery is set high on a mountain above the coast at Diacofti and from there the Capitanos would have taken in at a glance the blue sweep of the Cervi Channel and, beyond it, Cape Malea and Vatica and the great amphitheatre made by the mountains of the Morea. 'This monastery had been a large one', Colocotronis said, suggesting that it been destroyed by

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the Turks in a former war. 'When I again saw it – the ruined and desolated church turned into a stable, and roofed with branches of trees – I made this vow: "Panaghia, help us to deliver our country from the tyrant, and I will build thee up as thou wast before." She did help me, and in the second year of the rising, I fulfilled my vow'.<sup>4</sup>

From Cerigo, Colocotronis went to Zante where he tried to continue his attacks on the Turks in the Morea, but he was limited in what he could do there as the Zantiotes complained that his activities were harmful to the island's trade. The French garrison in the Ionian Islands ensured a good market for beef, so Colocotronis made his living in Zante by importing and butchering cattle from the Morea.

In 1807, with the departure from the islands of the Russians and the coming of the French, Colocotronis tried to engage General Donzelot, the French commander at Corfu, in his schemes to attack the Turks. But the arrival of the British in 1809 interrupted these activities. Colocotronis was at the time at Santa Maura and later expressed his misgivings about the British invasion because of their intrigues with Ali Pasha of Joannina, a man feared and hated in the Ionian Islands. He nevertheless went across to Zante and met General Oswald and Spiridon Forresti. He also met Major Richard Church who was then recruiting Greeks to serve in an Ionian national corps. Greeks who had served the French at Zante, Cephalonia and Cerigo were being recruited into Church's regiment and it was hoped that this body of local fighting men would help the British to dislodge the French at Santa Maura. Perhaps Colocotronis saw something agreeable in the character of Richard Church, or perhaps he hoped to turn this new power in the Ionian Islands to the advantage of the Greeks; whatever his reasons, he agreed to enter the British service with the rank of Captain. Soon Church had a force of 500 Greek light infantry under his command.

The French military forces at Santa Maura included many Greeks and it was hoped that Colocotronis would help to bring them across to the British side. He went first to Calamos, one of the islands off Santa Maura, where he assembled a force and then crossed to the island of Meganisi to attack the



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French garrison there. Early in 1810 Oswald decided, without reference to General Stuart in Sicily, to make a major attack on Santa Maura and dispatched a force of some 2,500 men, comprising Britons, Corsicans, Sicilians and Greeks. The key to the mountainous island was its narrow, sandy isthmus on which stood a strong fortress defended by field works. The troops landed and with the support of naval gunfire drove the enemy from their batteries, forcing the French General Camus, to withdraw his troops into the fortress. A siege followed and the British soon realised that Santa Maura was a stronger position than they had anticipated. Oswald was forced to send to Stuart in Sicily for reinforcements. However, before they could arrive General Camus surrendered when most of the Greek soldiers in his garrison went over to the British. For his service in this small but bloody battle, Colocotronis was promoted to the rank of Major. <sup>5</sup>

Soon after this, Colocotronis embarked for the Ionian island of Paxo with Major Church and a force of 50 Greek and 50 British troops. The French garrison there quickly surrendered and, as with the other islands, the Greek soldiers serving with the French were inducted into the British Service. Church and Colocotronis then landed at Parga, the Ionian enclave on the nearby coast of Albania, and took it from French hands. Now only Corfu among the Ionian islands stood against the British. Over the centuries the Venetians had given it formidable defences. Time and again Corfu's great fortresses had stood firm against Turkish armies. The French now had 5,000 troops there and with the hopes of Britain resting on Wellington's campaign in Spain and Portugal, there was no prospect of getting the forces needed to take Corfu. It would have to wait.

The British Secretary of State for War and the Colonies, Lord Liverpool, first learned that British forces had taken Santa Maura when he read about it in the French newspapers. Like the original expedition to the Ionian Islands initiated by Admiral Collingwood, the attack on Santa Maura had been undertaken without instructions from His Majesty's Government. Lord Liverpool specifically ruled out a siege of Corfu and it would not come into British hands until the fall of Napoleon in 1814.

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According to Colocotronis, General Oswald was jealous of Major Church's successes with his Greek soldiers and for this reason Church lost his position. Relieved of the duty to wear a uniform, Major Church made the interesting decision to attire himself in Greek dress like that worn by Colocotronis, and for a time he assisted him in his appeals to the British Government for aid in bringing the Greeks out of Ottoman rule. But after the threat from Napoleon was gone, the British Government showed little interest in cultivating Greek national aspirations and the Ionian Corps was disbanded. Colocotronis said later, 'I then saw that what we had to do, we must do by ourselves without any hopes of help from foreign powers'. Within its ranks the 'Greek Legion' as it was sometimes called, had gathered not only Colocotronis, but Anagnostaras, Grivas, Niketas, and other men who would soon distinguish themselves in the Greek Revolution. <sup>6</sup>

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

KATSEHAMOS AND THE GREAT IDEA

*A true story of Greeks and Australians  
in the early 20th Century*

*'The benefits of the Protection  
have greatly outweighed any evils.'*

– William Gladstone.

*'Down with the Protection!'*

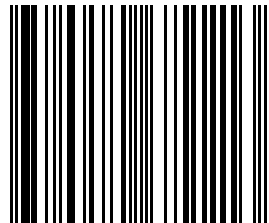
– Crowd in Argostoli, Cephalonia.



*'A labour of love, meticulously researched.  
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