

THE GULF OF SOUDA DURING THE CENTURIES



HELLENIC MINISTRY OF CULTURE
28TH EPHORATE OF BYZANTINE ANTIQUITIES
MUNICIPALITY OF SOUDA



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The gulf of Souda, at the northern shores of the nowadays Chania region, is formed by the mainland of Crete and the peninsula Melecha or Akrotiri. Its geomorphology and orientation, in conjunction with its size and adequate depth, create a safe harbor throughout the year. Its geographical location at the centre of the Eastern Mediterranean, on the trace of ancient sea-roads, acquires unique strategic importance, thus stimulating the vivid



interest from antiquity to the present day. In the gulf of Souda throughout time there have been developed complex defensive systems, verifying the continuous interest in the area by the relevant occupants.

The gulf of Souda is elongated in shape with maximum length 8km and width 2.600m at the entrance, which decreases to 1500m due to the existence of two rock-islands at its northern side. To its shallow, sandy cove ends the Moronis torrent and at its sides small bays are shaped, suitable for anchoring, such as of Ag. Marina, Limionari tis Grias to the south, Aspalatheas and Limni to the north, while outside the gulf are the Loutraki and Marathi bays, as well as a small rock-island named Palia Souda or Marathi. At both sides of the gulf the land is semi-mountainous. To the south, at the region of Apokoronas and at the eastern side of the gulf, the large sandy beach of Kalyves with three small rivers is shaped, continuing the fertile mainland.

In antiquity the city of Aptera, already known from the Knossos clay tablets as A-pa-ta-wa, played a significant role in the area. Its name seems to be connected with Artemis Aptera. According to the myth, as Stephanos Byzantions quotes, Muses and Sirens were involved in a music game "at Mouseion, close to the city and the sea," that is the gulf of Souda. After their defeat, the Sirens "dis-



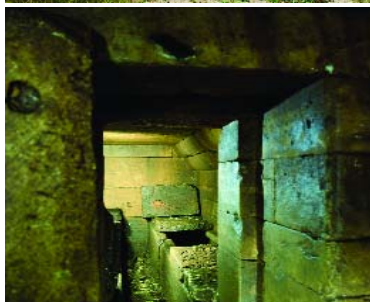
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appointed dropped their wings, became white and fell into the sea, where Aptera and Leukai islands appeared". These islets of white limestone, still remind us today of the ancient myth.

Aptera was built at a small plateau on a hill across the islet. Its harbors are Kissamos to the south possibly at the Kalyves beach, and Minoa to the side of Akrotiri, where is now-days Marathi. Aptera

flourished since the Geometric period to the Arab conquest of Crete, as it was built on a secure area, controlled the unique harbor of the region and the central road that led to the west of the island. Its peak was during the Hellenistic and Roman times. The



city seems to vanish when the Arabic raids started, which in general change the status quo at the Cretan shores. Since this period exist the name Souda, a Latin root (sudes-sudis=pole).

Information on Souda during the Arab conquest and the second Byzantine period in Crete is limited. At the end of the 12th century AD, the wider area of Aptera was given to the Monastery of Patmos which established there its most important dependency. In the 13th century AD when Crete was given to the Venetians, the gulf of Souda is referred as area of continuous turbulence. Written sources attest a possible first fortification of the island around 1230, without a clear indication of what really happened. The Florentine monk C. Buondelmonti, who visited the area in 1415 reports the existence of salt-pits at the cove of the gulf of Souda, and the Monastery of Agios Nikolaos occupied by Augustinians hermits on the island, thus named after them "Isoloto dei Frati" or Fraronisi. The salt-pits that according to Byzantine



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sources produce the "snow-white and fine salt" of Crete, during the Venetian occupation are rented to private enterprises producing close to 110.000 mouzouria a year. During the 16th century AD and while the Ottomans are continuously expanding in the Eastern Mediterranean, it is obvious that Crete will be one of their principal aims. Venice never stops to care for the fortification of cities and strategic points, following the bastion system. Since 1520 a design is prepared for the fortification of Souda. In 1538 the pirate



Barbarossa landed at Souda, burning and looting the area of Apokoronas, act that is repeated in 1571 by Beilerbei of Alger Ulutz-Ali. This situation forces the Venetians to act immediately. Among the proposed plans for the fortification of the island is selected the one by Latino Orsini, who supervises the first part of the works. It was decided the fortification of the island and the construction of a underwater anchor (Porporella) across of it.

The works begun in 1572 based on the plans and under the supervision of the Military Commander of Crete Latino Orsini, and were completed in 1583. The walls enclosed the entire surface of the island. At the north-western side the cavalieri Venier and Orsino protected the central gate and in conjunction with the cavalieri



Michiel and Martinengo covered the defense of the island at the Akrotiri shore. The defense of the northern side was covered by the cavalier Mocenigo, at the highest spot of the islet. At this site was the headquarters and the Cathedral of Annunciation (nowadays Agios Nikolaos), which is well preserved. The main defensive work on the island is the semi-circular cavalier Mezzaluna (=half-moon)



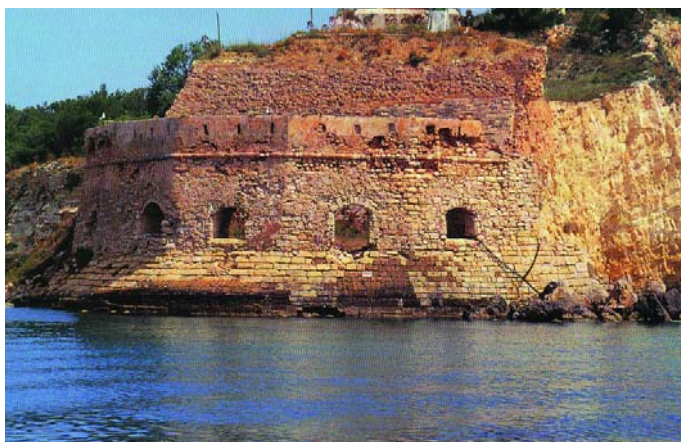
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or Lingueta with cannon-holes at the southern side that prevented the entrance of the ships to the harbor. At the coast across under the Podomouri hill a reef anchor was constructed, the Porporella, that forced the ships to come close to the firing of the island's cannons. At the interior of the castle, preserved in ruins exist supply depots, barracks, churches and houses. Water supply was possible through large underground cisterns and wells, scattered at the site. In many places traces of hastily prepared buildings which housed the population during the siege, are visible. For its importance and its completeness as a fortified islet, it was named by the Venetians as "the eye of the Kingdom".



The fortification system of the gulf of Souda was reinforced in the 17th century with the design of additional works in strategic points. Thus, the opening of the small lake across was widened and transformed to a safe place for the ships during the winter, the so-called Porto Novo, begun the construction of another castle at Palia Souda or Marathi islet, while two more castles were designed at the Kalogeros site (Akrotiri region) and Podomouri (nowadays Kalami, Apokoronas region). The last two castles were finally built by the Ottomans in order to control the island from the land.



In 1645 Chania after a brief siege fell to the Ottomans, and in 1669 the conquest of Crete is completed. Venice surrendered with the condition to retain the fortified islets of Gramvousa, Souda and Spinalonga. Thus, Souda, will be the base of the Venetians in Crete. The reinforced guard and the local rebels with their families leaved on the island under extremely difficult circumstances for a long period, fighting against the new occupants with the relevant consequences. During the last Venetian-Ottoman war the castle of Souda held heroically for 72 days and finally surrendered to the Ottomans on the 27th of September 1715.

During the Ottoman occupation the harbor of Souda continued to serve for the new occupants. It became a naval

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base, permanent anchor and supply station for the Ottoman fleet. When the Greek Revolution started in 1821, it was on the centre stage of hostile activities between Greeks and Ottomans.

In 1867 within a plan for controlling Crete through a network of castles, Housein Avni-Pasha built at the north-eastern side of the Aptera hill another castle, known as Koules of Soubasi (=sergeant). Across the islet of Souda, at Kalamí, Reouf Pasha expanding the existing since



1646 Ottoman fortifications, built in 1870 a big castle which with its German cannons surveyed the entrance to the harbor of Souda. The castle was named Itzedin in honor of the successor of the Ottoman throne. Near the cove of

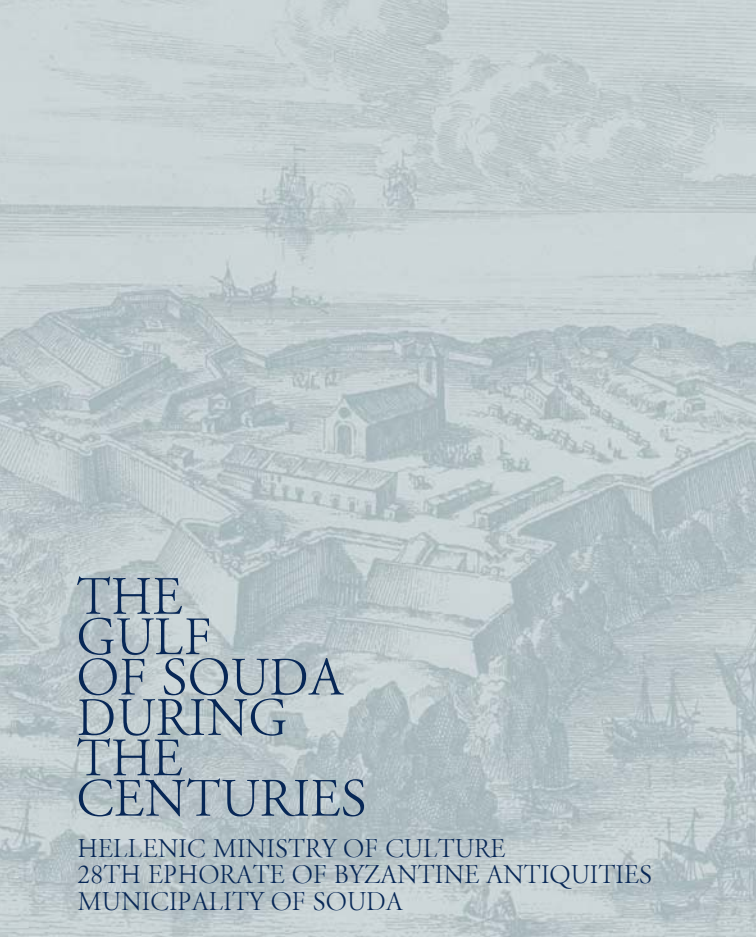


the gulf the big Naval Base of the Mediterranean was established; many of its buildings are today used by the Greek Naval Base. In close proximity was the settlement Touzla (=salt-pits) or Azize for the Muslim inhabitants of Souda that consisted the core of the modern town of Souda. During the Cretan State the harbor of Souda was permanent anchor of the Great Power's fleets, which supervised the independent state. At Souda took place the glorious reception of Prince George in 1898. Finally it was in Souda where played the final act of the Ottoman occupation of Crete, when the Greek flag was raised again on 14th of February 1913.

During the Second World War, the harbor of Souda retained its strategic importance and was used both by the Germans and the Allies. The Germans added their defensive works to the already existing ones at the Naval Base, Malaxa, Vlites and Aroni. Controlling of the harbor's entrance was possible by underground constructions at the Kokkino Chorio region, where cannons and supply depots existed. Soon after the German occupation ended, the Greek Naval Base was once



again established in the old buildings, serving as a significant component of the Fleet. Today, at the region of the gulf exist as well American and NATO bases, which use this highly important site for their activities.



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