

The Architects of Venice

The modern city of Hania rises around its former Venetian harbor and the Old Town hugging the coast. The protective walls surrounding it were built in the mid-seventeenth century by the Venetian architect Michele Sanmicheli, who also designed the walls of Padua and Iraklio. Everywhere you look, monumental mansions with vaulted windows, marble family crests stamped over arched doorways and a host of other architectural elements, large and small, are lingering influences of the city's medieval rulers.



Tourists strolling down Angelou street in the heart of the Old Town.

It's a cloudy winter's day on Angelou Street in the Topanas quarter of Hania. We're in the *palaia poli*, the old town, around the corner from the Maritime Museum, on the Venetian harbor. Eight years of living in a Venetian stone house, whose walls date from the early 1600s, are coming to a close for my son, as his studies in electrical engineering at the polytechnic there are finishing. We are packing up, our hearts heavy with the thought of losing our connection with this beautiful city in Crete, a town that bears the graceful imprint of so many Venetian details, a town that has been known as "Venice of the East".

Beginning with the magnificent lighthouse at the mouth of the harbor, Venetian influences are everywhere. The Venetian lighthouse, or *pharos*, built in 1570 but actually completed three centuries years later, is Hania's most famous landmark. On a summer evening close to dusk, hundreds of tourists are getting their cameras ready to snap its profile in the sunset.

The Venetian occupation left many marks, but Hania's history, like many towns in the eastern Mediterranean, is a story of multiple invaders. Walking around the old town, it is hard not to feel a sense of history, beginning with Minoan times when Hania was known as Kydonia because as myth tells us it was built by Kydon, a grandson of the mythical King Minos of Crete. The Minoans settled on the hill in back of the Kioutsouk Hassan Mosque at the harbor. Strolling alone Karnevaro street in back of the harbor, one can see a large tract of Minoan excavations of houses of that time. During Roman times, the city grew, but nothing remains of Roman monuments because all of the materials were used by subsequent invaders. The Venetians, for example, later used stone and marble from the Roman theater to build the city walls. The city was captured by the Byzantines and held for about five centuries years until it was lost in 828 to the Saracens from Cordoba in Spain. They gave the city the name of Al Canea, and when the Byzan-

tines recaptured it in 961, they dropped the Arab prefix *al* from the name, and it became known as La Chanea in Latin or Hania in Greek. The Byzantines continued to build their settlements on the Kastelli Hill at the back of the harbor; the Venetians as well first settled in this spot. Karnevaro street, site of the Minoan excavations, in fact was the main *corso* of Venetian times. Today, not much remains of the Byzantine walls, but if you walk along Sifakas street, the place to go to buy Cretan knives, you can see remains of Byzantine construction.

How did Venetian rule come about in Hania and generally in Crete? In 1204, as the Fourth Crusade was dissolving the Byzantine empire and its territories were being divided among the Crusade leaders, Crete initially was given to one of them, Boniface of Montferrat. But he found that he couldn't enforce his control over the island and sold his rights to Venice, it is said, for 100 silver marks. In the beginning, Venice had to beat its rival Genoa for control of the island. So began what at first was a very strict and oppressive regime, which was not taken to kindly by the local Greek Orthodox population, and in fact, according to exhibits in the Maritime Museum, as many as twenty-nine rebellions were reported in the first 150 years or so. There was a clear Venetian elite and the two groups were kept separated; until the end of the thirteenth century, even mixed marriages between Cretans and Venetians were prohibited. However, it seems that by around 1400 or so, the Venetian rulers relaxed their control somewhat and this, in turn, led to greater acceptance of the Venetians. In 1453, after the Fall of Constantinople, many priests, monks, and artists settled on Crete and so-

lidified the character of the town into its Byzantine and Venetian elements. Around this time, a new prosperity and exposure to the Renaissance culture grew, which other areas of Greece that were untouched by the Venetians, didn't experience.

In the later years of Venetian rule, there was in fact a thriving literature in the Cretan dialect. It was during this time, the early seventeenth century, that Vincentzos Kornaros wrote the *Erotokritos*. Earlier, the most famous Cretan of the Venetian period, Domenikos Theotokopoulos was born. Theotokopoulou street, one of the main thoroughfares in the Topanas quarter, and which intersects Angelou, is named for the famed El Greco whose work is considered a precursor to several important modern art movements. (As with many Greek cities, of course, street names are a veritable catalog of local men and women of note.)

The official name for Crete during this time was the Regno di Candia, the Kingdom of Candia, after the name of the capital (modern-day Iraklio). The writer Nikos Kazantzakis, in his autobiographical novel *Report to Greco*, also refers to Iraklio as Candia.

There might have been a thriving cultural renaissance, but there was a constant reminder of Hania under Venetian rule, as for example Marco Bozzini's 1651 painting of the *Entire Kingdom of Candia*, which shows a Winged Lion, symbol of the Venetian empire, standing over the island of Crete.

The Venetians put a lot of their energy into walls and fortifications, which have given the town the form it mostly has today. The Old Town is surrounded by Venetian walls of mostly the fifteenth century. For example, rising across the harbor from the lighthouse is the *fortezza*, the fort that has a marvelous view of the harbor and the open sea. On east and west sides of the Old Town are walls and moats, which are used

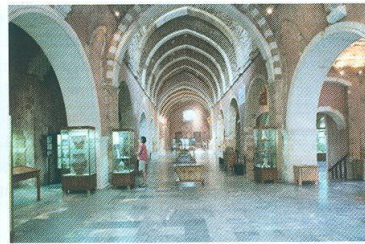




The limits of the Venetian city



The lighthouse at sunset



Archaeological museum interior

today: the eastern side is a lovely site for an outdoor theater in the summer, with a rich program of concerts and theater, while the western moat has been used the last couple of years for the annual agricultural fair the end of July.

What we most likely think of first when we think of the Venetians is the sea as the republic's status as a trading power was built largely on its maritime strength. The Venetians were shipbuilders, and they built twenty-two arsenals or *neoria* as they're called, along the eastern section of the harbor which is where they built and repaired their ships. Seven of these dockyards survive and can be seen most advantageously while walking along the ramparts leading to the lighthouse. Some have been renovated; one, at the easternmost end, for instance, has been restored and reconverted slightly for use as a café. The stately Grand Arsenal today is used for the Center of Mediterranean Studies and also for visual arts exhibits, such as painting and photography as well as all kinds of events. Along the harbor you can find several maps of "La Canea" as it is believed to have been under the Venetians. Mapmaking or cartography is another skill associated with the Venetians, and many of their maps are on exhibit at the Maritime Museum.

Fortifications are an important element of Venetian construction but its influence is by no means limited to the city's walls or harbor. Fountains adorned with elaborate sculptures, arched doorways, narrow flights of stone steps leading up the side of buildings, and a host of embellishments also betray the one-time presence of Venice. Luckily many of these buildings have been preserved, restored, and converted for modern usage. One such example is the Case Delfino hotel, which occupies what was a palazzo in the seventeenth century. And like many buildings in the old town, its history has also been preserved.

Giovani Delfino was a ship-owner and merchant from Genoa who, in 1835, was blown off course to Gramvousa, at the northwestern end of Crete. He decided to settle in Hania with his family and bought a Venetian mansion near the harbor. When his daughter Margaritte was ready to marry, he arranged a marriage with a Genoese, but on the boat on the way there, she fell in love with the captain and turned around to return to Hania. She was given the mansion as a dowry and all the succeeding generations of the family continued to live in there until the second world war, when the house suffered extensive bombing. It was abandoned until one of the descendants, Manthos Markantonakis, initiated restoration work in the early 1980s with an eye to converting it to a hotel. The family story is now a part of the hospitality shared with guests along with homemade cakes and other treats.

Another family associated with Hania, this one during Venetian times, were the Reniers, whose gate to their mansion in the Old Town still exists, as does the chapel area they used. Until a couple of years ago, the front yard was used as a tavern, but it has since closed.

The Venetians, of course, also built churches—at least twenty-three, according to sources. Some of the finest examples of these that have survived include San Salvatore on Theotokopoulou street and San Rocco and Ayios Nikolaos on the main square in the Splanzia area; many, like Ayios Nikolaos, were later converted to mosques by the Ottomans. The Hania Archaeological Museum on Chalidon street is housed in what was originally the Monastery of St Francis. Built in the fourteenth century, after Venetian rule it was converted to several uses—a mosque under the Ottomans, a military warehouse after the second world war, and a cinema. Yet while it has suffered through the centuries, the building is one of the finer examples of Venetian church architecture. Another fourteenth-century church became a synagogue serving the local Jewish population residing in the Ovrai-ki as the Old Town's Jewish quarter was known. It as refurbished in 1999 and still serves as a synagogue, although its role is both religious and cultural.

The massive fortifications they raised in Hania and other Cretan cities like Rethymno and Iraklio were not enough to preserve their rule forever. In 1669, the island fell to the Ottomans, who left their architectural mark on many of the old Venetian structures. This layering of styles symbolizes the island's history in a vividly visual manner: skirting the ramparts towards the lighthouse, one also enjoys a wonderful view of the town's two minarets, one in the Spiantzia about midway along Chatzimichali street and the other next to Ayios Nikolaos.

One of the most popular sites for pointing out architecture is on Angelou street itself. Sitting on my son's balcony in the spring or summer, I experience the tours that start early in the morning in Italian, French, German, Scandinavian languages, English, Greek. The guide points out the round window of the building around the corner on Antonio Gambasta street, now used as an art gallery, and indicates the rounded windows and niches of the Iphigenia hotel, abandoned for the last couple of years, where cats now loll around waiting to be fed. Tourists peer into the Fagot-to-Bar, into the courtyard of the jewelry store Als and take photographs. Newlyweds often choose Angelou for their photos.

On this early winter morning when we have arrived on the boat from Piraeus, we experience quite a different beauty from the summer. The waves are hitting the faros. Dawn is breaking as we sit in the Remezzo cafe near the *syntrivani*, or fountain at the end of Chalidon—a landmark that has given its name to that end of the harbor, Sandrivani. With the plastic covering, we are well protected from the splashing of the waves on the promenade, but we can see the colors of the sky and a few early risers walking their dogs. We drink our cappuccino here before heading up to Angelou street to begin our weekend of packing up. The desolate beauty touches us physically and psychologically as we linger here by the Venetian harbor in this beautiful town of Crete. **O**