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Searching for the lost city of Fermenia on the island of Kythnos

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Abstract

During the 15th and 16th century travellers and cartographers of all kinds sailed across the Aegean Sea. Their nationality and background differed as did the reasons that made them undertake their journeys. Whatever their purpose, they left an extremely valuable documentation of the Aegean islands during this period. The outline of the maps drawn in their ‘isolarii’ may not be that accurate and their observations cannot always be trusted, hovering between myth and reality. Nevertheless, they provide an interesting and unique source of information, as they document places and events long lost even to the collective memory of the contemporary inhabitants.

That is the case of the fortified city of Fermenia on Kythnos. According to the accounts of numerous cartographers of that period, Fermenia was the medieval capital of the island, a prosperous insular castle located near the south-east coast visible to the approaching ships. However, no built remains have survived to the present day and from the 18th century on Fermenia vanished also from all written sources.

This research focuses on late medieval documents and maps. Combining them with known historic events (e.g. Kythnos’ capture by Barbarossa) the study aims to discover more about the city’s fate.

Keywords: Aegean, travellers, maps.

1. Introduction

The Aegean Sea has always been an interface between the East and the West. Over the years, it hosted both hostile and peaceful encounters becoming thus a major civilisation workshop.

During the centuries following the Fourth Crusade in AD 1204, due to its geostrategic location, the Archipelago was at the focal point of the great powers of the time. After the founding of the Latin states in the Eastern Mediterranean and especially the Aegean Duchy in AD 1207, numerous travellers of different nationalities and backgrounds started visiting the Cyclades and the other Aegean regions. The reasons that provided them with the impetus for exploration varied too.

Geographers and cartographers, seamen, noblemen, antiquities collectors and monks left accounts (both textual and pictorial) that are of great importance for the study of the Late and Post-Medieval Cyclades. They recorded the current state of the islands; ports and towns, population figures, local customs and myths and were even eye witnesses to historical events.

Their travel books, portolans and isolarii (book of islands) with the maps and the navigational narratives that accompanied them provide extremely useful information about the state of the Aegean islands of that period (Vionis, 2012).

However precious they may be, these accounts cannot always be trusted. Misinterpretations, deliberate exaggerations, and a blend of mythical and real elements are quite common. In addition, many travellers in order to complete their...
overambitious all-inclusive works, would just copy information from earlier sources without ever visiting these places themselves. Therefore, evidence from their works needs to be used wisely.

It is important to be aware that we rarely have access to the original manuscript. Many of the earlier works that were handwritten have reached us nowadays through multiple copying. Consequently, reproduction related mistakes and differences should also be taken into account.

In any case, due to general absence of Greek written records and historical sources, quite often these are the only available sources for the study of the Aegean islands, especially the smaller ones. That is the case of Kythnos island in the western Cyclades.

2. Kythnos island

Kythnos is a medium sized island that was under Venetian rule for almost 4 centuries (1207-1617 AD) before it was conquered by the Ottoman Turks in the 17th century. Nowadays, it has one surviving medieval fortified settlement, the so-called Oria kastro (the Greek word for castle). Oria is located in the far north-western part of the island and it is believed to have been the medieval capital of Kythnos. The study of this fortified settlement is currently the subject of my PhD research at the University of Edinburgh. However, no systematic archaeological research has been conducted at the site yet, so in order to document it as fully as possible, information from late medieval travellers and cartographers is used.

Surprisingly, there are barely any surviving accounts of Oria kastro. On the contrary, there are numerous reports of another castle located near the south-eastern coast. That fortified city was the namesake of the island (Kythnos was known as Fermenia, Fermina or Thermia in the Middle Ages) and it was referred to as its capital. Unfortunately, there are no obvious built remains left on the island or any other historical references that could confirm the city’s existence. So, the question that this study tries to answer is this: Did
Fermenia ever exist and if so what happened to it and when?

2.1. Kythnos in travellers’ and cartographers’ accounts

Kythnos has always been a rather poor island, lacking the resources and the attractions of other Cycladic islands like Naxos, Paros, or Santorini. Located out of the main Aegean trade routes it remained out of the focus of major historical events, quietly following the fate of the neighbouring islands. So, it is not surprising that it is either absent from most literary sources or referred to collectively with the rest of the Cyclades.

The same applies to the travellers and cartographers that sailed across the Aegean Sea from the 13th to the late 19th century. Kythnos had never been a famous or preferred destination. It seems that anchoring there was mostly the result of bad weather or other random events (replenishing the ship’s food or water supplies etc.).

Some of the travellers did not even land on the island. They sailed around it or stayed on board while at the port, gathering information from local sailors or the ship’s pilots. Others just copied the works of older travel books and nautical maps.

However, there were also those who did spend some time there and their accounts give us unique and valuable information about the state of medieval Kythnos.

3. Early accounts: 14th - 15th century

The first account of Kythnos’ fortified settlements comes from the diary of the Italian Nicola de Martoni in 1395 AD. On the way back from his pilgrimage in Jerusalem Martoni spent about two weeks on the island and from his descriptions it seems that in the late 14th c. Oria was Kythnos’ only castle. (Piccirillo 2003)

Fermenia’s existence is first hinted at by the famous Florentine monk and geographer Christoforo Buondelmonti (c.1386-c.1430). Buondelmonti travelled in the Aegean Sea in the first half of the 15th century and he was a pioneer in promoting first-hand knowledge of Greece throughout the Western world. In 1420, he drew up ‘Liber Insularum Achipelagi’ the first book of islands, the so-called isolario in Italian. It included 79 coloured maps of islands and other important littoral regions of the Aegean together with historical and geographical texts.
‘Liber Insularum Achipelagi’ had a huge impact on travel literature and it was copied and used as a reference by numerous other travellers. Sadly, no original version of the isolario has survived to the present day. There are several later copies held in Libraries around the world. The manuscripts used for this study come from the National Maritime Museum in London, the Universitäts-und Landesbibliothek of Düsseldorf, the Gennadius Library in Athens and the Bibliothèque Nationale De France in Paris.

Buondelmonti’s account is the first one that suggests the existence of Fermenia or Thermia as he calls the island's capital: ‘Ad orientem vero Sancta Helenai cernitur, ubi planus extat, quo in capite Thermia civitas engitur, quam Turci iam, ibi mancipi, prodiitiorie, inocote, captis civibus, desolavere; sed nunc repopulata est.’ (Sinner 1824) He writes about a city that has the same name as the island and lies to the east, at the end of a plain. He also gives information about the city's former capture, desolation, and recent repopulation, probably referring to the 1416 Turkish campaign against the Cyclades.

The text goes on by accurately describing the rest of the island; however, the castle of Oria up the north-western mountains is not mentioned at all. What is puzzling though is that on the map of all four manuscripts the city Thermia is depicted in the north-west side. So, there seems to be a discrepancy between Buondelmonti’s text and map. Even if we assume that there was an orientation error and he actually meant to write west instead of east, Oria kastro that is located on a steep cliff at an altitude of more than 200 m from sea level cannot be described as lowland.

Almost the same information is found around 1480 in ‘Insularium Illustratum’ the work of the German cartographer Henricus Martellus Germanus. It seems that Germanus copies both Buondelmonti’s text and map without adding any new observations. According to his text Thermia is located in the east on top of a plateau. On the map the fortified city is again placed in the north almost in the middle of the island.

The next mention of Kythnos comes from the Venetian seaman Bartolomeo dalli Sonetti. Sonetti’s isolario, known also as ‘Periplous Nisson’, was published in print in 1485 and it was written in verse. Even though he essentially copies Buodelmonti’s text, the outline of Sonetti’s maps is much more accurate. He even indicates the islets and the dangerous reefs.

About Kythnos he writes: ‘...The island is mountainous and on the east, there is a plateau with Sancto Clini and at the head of said island [i.e. its main city] is Termia, the name by which both are known. It was previously defeated and taken by the Turks and was in great trouble from which it has since recovered, and on the west the place is well provided with harbours...’.

The outline of the map that accompanies the text is close to Kythnos’ actual shape. This time the map agrees with the text and Termia castle is depicted on the south-eastern coast. Sonetti also adds the two hot springs that are in the northern part of the island as well as four islets at the east side. These details along with the accuracy of the map’s outline show that he visited the place himself, having first-hand experience of its environs.

4. 16th century accounts

The most certain indication that Fermenia existed comes from the famous book of navigation of the Ottoman-Turkish admiral geographer and cartographer Piri Reis (c.1465–1553). In the early 16th century Piri Reis sailed across the Aegean drawing maps on behalf of the Ottoman navy. First published in 1520 his work, ‘Kitab-i Bahriye’ was the most accurate isolario of the Mediterranean of the time. Copies are now found in many libraries and museums around the world.

The translation of his text about Kythnos is as follows: ‘...The place around the castle that was built to the southeast is flat. There is another in the northwest. If one wants to sail from Naxos to Kythnos, he must have the island on his left hand. While approaching the coast the castle becomes visible. Then at six miles’ distance there is an inlet. While entering the inlet, to the left there is a round cape and to the right a rock that looks like an island. Opposite here there is a church. (....)
and also, the two small islets that are characteristic of the island of Terme (Kythnos)...’ (Λούπης 1999).

Piri Reis is therefore the first to mention not one but two castles on Kythnos. Although his map must be turned by 180° in order be oriented properly, it correlates fully with the text with both castles being depicted in their relative places. The lost castle of Fermenia is again placed on the south-eastern coast as on Sonetti’s map and it appears considerably bigger than that of Oria.

The great similarity of the outline between Sonetti’s and Reis’s maps possibly suggests some mutual influences, however the work of the Turkish cartographer is certainly original. Except for the fact that he gives detailed mooring guidelines that indicate personal experience, his work was done on behalf of the Ottoman Navy to be presented to the Sultan himself (Λούπης 1999). That was just a few years before the Turkish fleet under the command of the infamous admiral Hayreddin Barbarossa set out to conquer the Aegean Sea (AD 1537-38). Consequently, ‘Kitab-ı Bahriye’ was not simply another isolario. Its ‘military’ use that required accuracy and precision makes it a reliable source of information.

Benedetto Bordone (1460-1531) was an Italian manuscript editor, miniaturist, and cartographer. From his isolario that was published in 1528 in Venice we gather the same information about Fermenia as we did from the previous authors ‘...& to the east it has Santo Clini with a good plain, at the end of which is located the very well populated city Termi, to the west is Santo Luca ...’. His map shows the fortified city on top of a small hill on the south-east coast. The mountainous north-western region is also depicted but there is no indication of Oria castle.

As mentioned before, in 1537 AD Kythnos was captured by the Turkish fleet and fell under Ottoman suzerainty along with the rest of the Aegean Duchy islands (Miller 1908). According to the sources Oria kastro as well as the hinterland villages were then destroyed and most of Kythnos’s male population was either
slaughtered or enslaved. Although Oria apparently recovered to live for another 30 years, most of the villages did not and only their place names survive today (Βάλληνδας 1882). Fermenia continues to appear on later maps, so we can quite safely assume that 1537 was not the date of its final destruction.

One example is the isolario of the Spanish cartographer, instrument maker and historian Alonzo de Santa Cruz (1505-1567). It was published in 1542 after Barbarossa’s attack on the Aegean islands. Sadly, Santa Cruz does not offer any new information on the matter as both his map and the text that goes with it are copies from earlier works (most likely Buondelmonti and Sonetti).

Fermenia is also mentioned in the mid-16th century by the French geographer and author André Thevet (1516-1590) in his works ‘Cosmographie du Levant’ (1549) and ‘Le Grand Insulaire et Pilotage’ (unfinished). Although the outline of his map is completely inaccurate, Thevet clearly places La ville de Termici as he calls it, on the south-east coast. In the text, he also states that the city is in the east at the foot of a hill. Nevertheless, Thevet’s accounts are not very reliable. They are known to contain a combination of information from older and contemporary sources as well as completely imaginary descriptions. In any case Thevet’s writings about Fermenia add another testimony to the city’s existence.

In AD 1566, the Ottoman fleet sailed again to the Aegean and recaptured all the Duchy’s islands, finally establishing the Ottoman rule over the whole Archipelago (Miller 1921). The Cycladic islands, and Kythnos amongst them, suffered again great loses from that campaign. It is characteristic that the population figures in the years right after the second capture, record Kythnos as uninhabited (Δημητρόπουλος 2004).

It must have been after that second destruction that Oria kastro was abandoned and the inhabitants relocated to the hinterland of the island (Βάλληνδας 1882). It would be reasonable to assume that a similar fate also befell the castle of Fermenia. A violent capture followed by a total destruction could quite logically account for the city’s disappearance. Nonetheless, the accounts of some late 16th and 17th century travellers attest to the contrary; In the isolario of the Greek captain and cartographer Antonio di Millo (active 1567-1591) a castle located at the eastern part of the island is mentioned in the text and depicted on the map of Kythnos. Millo marked also Oria’s ruins in the north, confirming the castle’s abandonment in the late 16th century.

That is also the case in Marco Boschini’s (1602-1681) isolario that was published in 1658 in Venice. Although in the text Boschini does not clarify the capital’s location, on the map Termia is placed on the southeast coast as usual. However, it seems that Boschini was based on Sonetti’s work published almost a century before. Both the outline of the map and the information of the text are most likely copied from ‘Periplus Nisson’.

Consequently, the last reliable account regarding Fermenia’s existence is that of Antonio di Millo in the late 16th century.

Fig. 3 - Fermenia map and text in Antonio di Millo’s isolario, 1590 (P/17(78V) National Maritime Museum, London)
5. Fermenia’s disappearance

Other than Boschini’s vague account there are also several 17th century reports of ambiguous nature that most likely refer to Kythnos’ current capital Messaria or are largely imaginary. From the 18th century on Fermenia officially disappears from all written sources. On the contrary, reports of the Oria kastro ruins are to be found in all traveller’s accounts, starting with that of the famous French botanist Joseph Piton de Tournefort in 1700. Tournefort also drew a remarkably accurate map of the island, sadly without marking its settlements or any place names.

In the 19th and early 20th century Tournefort was followed by many others like J. Portier, M. Lacroix L. Ross, A. Buchon etc. who visited Kythnos for various reasons. Some of them left us lengthy descriptions of Oria, however there is not a single indication of Fermenia. Even the archaeologist G. Gerola who in 1911 recorded the island’s Venetian past, fails to mention the possibility of the city’s existence.

The only contemporary hint that Fermenia might have actually existed comes from a book of folk tales, where some of the older locals tell of a sunken Venetian city and port located at the southeast coast, at the exact place where Fermenia was depicted centuries before. They add that some of the city’s ruins can still be seen at the bottom of the sea (Βενετούλιας 2007). Unfortunately, no field research that could confirm these claims has been carried out at this spot yet.

6. Conclusions and speculations

Did Fermenia ever exist? Based on the evidence provided by numerous travellers and cartographers and if we set aside the possibility of an unfortunate error found in Buondelmonti’s representation of the island and copied by his successors, we could be positive that this fortified island city existed sometime between the 15th and 16th or early 17th centuries. Amongst the aforementioned accounts those of Buondelmonti, Sonetti, Piri Reis and Antonio di Millo are widely regarded as relatively trustworthy. In particular, Piri Reis’s account is thought as the most accurate and reliable one. According to his writings in the early 16th century there were two castles on Kythnos with Oria possibly predating that of Fermenia, as he specifically states the latter was: “…the castle that was built to the southeast…” suggesting that it could have been relatively new founded at the time of his visit.

If we combine this data with historical sources and known historic events and also take into account what was happening at the same time on the neighbouring islands we could come up with the following scenario: Oria kastro was the Byzantine capital of Kythnos island. It was possibly founded sometime between the 6th and 7th century, when it has been suggested that marine evasions destroyed the ancient capital (Μαζαράκης 2005), although other scholars see this as a relatively peaceful era in the Cyclades (Magdalino, forthcoming). After the 13th century and the establishment of the Aegean Duchy the castle of Oria was maintained and further improved by the island’s new rulers. As Nicola de Martoni writes in his diary in 1395 AD, the city of Fermie is up in the mountains 8 miles from the port.
However, whether due to its remote location or its lack of a proper port the Gozzandini i.e. the Venetian lords Kythnos was ceded to (Gerola 1923-24), decided to build another fortified city on the easily accessible south-eastern coast. Other than being close to the hinterland and the island’s agricultural production base this new location offered an excellent and protected port. So *Feromenia* became the new capital and thrived for more than 100 years. The successive capture of the island in the 16th century, first in 1537 and then again in 1566 AD must have put an end to the city’s prosperity. The eruption of the powerful Santorini volcano and earthquake that took place in 1570-73 could have been the reason for *Feromenia’s* further demise and final abandonment. A natural catastrophe could quite possibly account for the sunken ruins reports. What is more, the city’s easily accessible location enabled the reuse of the building material by the inhabitants. In addition, the area where *Feromenia* possibly once stood, suffered from intensive mining in the 19th century. Any medieval inhabitation traces would thus have been either erased or made extremely difficult to identify. In any case, this scenario cannot be anything more than just a hypothesis until proper archaeological excavations and on field surveys are conducted or a historical document that concretely confirms the city’s location is found.

In conclusion, I believe that the study of medieval Kythnos is a subject with great potential that has remained unexplored to the present day. Although the island cannot be listed amongst the most important of the Archipelago, it has its own interesting local history. Its study would undoubtedly contribute to the better understanding of the Late and Post-medieval settlement evolution in the Cyclades.

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