

DOCKYARDS



The Naval Dockyards Society

December 2024

Exploring the civil branches of navies and their material culture

December 2024 • Volume 29 • Numbers 1 & 2 navaldockyards.org

Venetian harbours, fortifications and shiphalls in Corfu and Crete – and their current condition/reuse

Venetian Arsenal Gouvia



Widespan arches^[1]
enigmatic, roofless^[1]
vaults linked into a rectangle^[1]
Sun slants through oval windows^[1]
Grand entrance arch's lost^[1]
all fine ornament . . .
^[1]'Access forbidden to the unemployed.'
Mute structure^[1]
once humming with shipwrights, caulkers,
makers of oars and sails^[1]
maintaining and careening^[1]
the Republic's galleys, galleasses^[1]
now sits, part flooded^[1]
in a field^[1]
Lost connection to the sea.

Visiting Corfu in May 2023 I was delighted to find that the Venetian arsenal, built by the Republic of Venice in 1716 as part of its defences against the Ottomans after the second siege of Corfu, was near our hotel and the large marina in Gouvia bay, eight kilometres from Corfu town.

For Venice, Corfu was a strategic location at the entrance to the Adriatic as its centre of naval operations in the Levant. Two squadrons were stationed there, one of twenty-five galleys and the other of twelve sailing ships, each commanded by a vice-admiral. The Corfu arsenal was part of a network of Venetian bases in Greece including dockyards at Methoni, Koroni, Chalkis, Preveza, and in the Aegean: Epirus, the Peloponnese and in Chania and Heraklion in the Kingdom of Candia (modern Crete). The Gouvia arsenal's purpose was to repair ships each winter after each fleet returned from peacetime campaigning. It was ideally placed across the strait to the forests on the mainland with excellent timber for shipbuilding.



Gouvia Arsenal Landward Gateway

The monumental landward gateway to the Gouvia dockyard (right) is inscribed: ZBM/ANNO/MDCCL/XXVIII. Following the practice documented by the late eighteenth-century French consul to Corfu, Saint-Sauveur, the letters ZBM may be the initials of one of the Venetian captains who constructed the arsenal and added their coats of arms and initials to the buildings. But the Venetian Senate, anxious about competition with its own power base, the magnificent Arsenal with its Ropery, covered wet docks, Squadratori (mould loft), mast tower, Artilleria and workshops, decided to confine activity at Gouvia to careening and basic maintenance. Many captains, instead of repairing their damaged ships at the arsenal chose rather to sink them. Over time the number of ships being serviced declined, and active use of the arsenal ceased when the Treaty of Campo Formio was signed on 18 October 1797. This ended the long history of the Republic of Venice and also of its four-hundred-year rule over Corfu.

But that wasn't quite the end of activity at the arsenal. During the siege of Corfu in 1798 the Russian Admiral Ushakov (1745–1817), vice-admiral of the Black Sea Fleet, landed his troops at the Gouvia arsenal and established a camp there. He had a long and distinguished career. After the Russian Empire conquered the Crimean Khanate in 1783 Ushakov personally supervised the construction of a naval base in Sevastopol and the building of docks in Kherson. During the Russo-Turkish War (1787–92) he defeated the Ottomans at Fidonisi (1788), Kerch Strait (1790), Tendra (1790), and Cape Kaliakra (1791), demonstrating his innovations in the art of naval warfare. In the course of forty-three naval battles under his command he did not lose a single ship and never lost a battle. The Baltic Naval Institute in Kaliningrad is named after him; as was

the medal for navy officers who have achieved victory over a numerically superior enemy in 1944, and in 2001 he was canonised by the Russian Orthodox Church. Gouvia Arsenal also served as a base for the French in 1917–18.

Conservation of the Arsenal

Given its historical importance for the Venetian period of Corfu and to the Ionian Islands and Greece, in 2011 the regional director of the Ionian Islands submitted a conservation plan for the arsenal to the Greek Ministry of Culture funded by the European Union Regional Interreg III fund Greece–Italy. It included development of the ruins based on plans developed by Bari Polytechnic: photographs, historical analysis of the structure and diagrams. The application proposed restoration of the walls and roof and conversion of the building to a Museum of the Sea. The director of the 21st Ephorate of Byzantine Antiquities of Greece approved the idea, calling it ‘very good and indispensable’. The ministry proposed immediate repair and structural bracing of the gateway, with participation of the 21st Ephorate in any future repair works. In 2017 the regional director approved the sum of €500,000 for the ‘rehabilitation and promotion of the Venetian arsenal at Gouvia’, a first for the Ionian Islands for the 2014–2020 fiscal period, funded by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and the Greek government.

On 22 May 2016, to celebrate the restoration of lighting to the monument, the local cultural agency of Gouvia and the Greek Society for the Environment organised a concert at the arsenal with the Philharmonic Society of Corfu ‘Mantzaros’; the German choir ‘Dinkelsbühler Knabenkapelle’ from Neumarkt in Germany performed marching songs.



Concert in the roofless arsenal



Corfu Public Library

But eight years later there’s no sign of a roof, interpretation or of vital drainage works on the site – as my poem laments. In contrast, the British Royal Engineers Barracks in Corfu town has been excellently converted to the public library and Corfu archives.

Crete – Heraklion, Chania, Rethymno

The successive layers of Minoan, Byzantine, Arab, Venetian, Ottoman and Egyptian history make exploration of Crete evocative of these many cultures. After the siege of Constantinople, Bonifatius of Monserrat gave Crete to the Venetians, who occupied it from 1212 to 1669 when it fell to the Ottomans who ruled it until 1898, except between 1830 and 1840 when it was

occupied by Egypt. After a short period as an autonomous state in 1913 Crete became part of Greece.

The Venetians' extensive fortifications to protect the cities from marauding pirates and invading Turks include the massive Fortezza in Rethymno and the defensive walls and seaward forts designed by Michele Sanmicheli in Heraklion, Rethymno and Spinalonga.

The lack of natural harbours in Crete led the Venetians to construct sheltered ports in Heraklion, Chania and Rethymno – and alongside, waterfront groups of shiphalls in Chania and Heraklion to house the construction, repair and storage of their navy's ships under cover. As in Venice's main Arsenale, the Republic's ships were used for both military operations and civilian trade. Some of these fortifications and shiphalls have found new uses, while others await creative transformation.

Heraklion

When the island came under Venetian rule, 'Candia' (as Heraklion and the whole of Crete were named by the Venetians) became 'the Venice of the East'. Large scale export trade developed with Egypt, Syria, Armenia, Cyprus, Rhodes and Chios, particularly in wine, honey, cheese, wax candles, silk, raisins, cotton, olive oil – and salt, which was a Venetian monopoly. At the same time the port was a major Venetian naval base for the entire Mediterranean. In the seventeenth century it reached its final form. A range of tall deep vaulted shiphalls in three groups was constructed open to the sea: the Arsenale Antichi, Vechi and Arsenale Nuovi. They were 50m long, 9m wide and 10m high. Inside up to fifty Venetian galleys, marseilianes, karamousalia, palantres, seines, skiratsa, galleons, naves and shuttles were built, repaired and stored. Next to the Arsenali Nuovi was a large salt storage building and a water tank with a capacity of 20,000 barrels, still used today to supply the port: 70,000 litres a day.



Venetian harbour, Heraklion: on site illustration



The harbour today



Koulas/Rocca al Mare, Heraklion, 1523–80



Construction of the promenade and expansion of the port led to demolition of many of the shiphalls. Only four half-length vaults of the Vechi and five of the Nuovi survive.

Chania



Chania Grand Arsenal

The Grand Arsenal was the westernmost Venetian shiphall, constructed in 1585. In 1872 the vaulted roof was demolished and a floor added to host a school for the city's Christian community. The western side was restored in neoclassical style while an imposing double-arched opening was added to the north. Restored in 2002 it now houses the Centre of Mediterranean Architecture hosting cultural events and exhibitions.



Neoria shiphalls – waterfront Chania



Neoria – rear view Chania

The Neoria, an extensive series of seventeen vaulted shiphalls in Chania, were built from 1599; the Moro group of five date from 1607. Only two Moro shiphalls remain and eight from the larger complex. The munitions store of the Firkas fortress which the invading Turks converted into a barracks and prison in 1645 houses the Laboratory for the Conservation of Antiquities, but the massive stone vaults of the Neoria remain closed and mostly empty.



Marina Sailing Club, Chania



The Marina Sailing Club and a lovely glass fronted café occupy one of the tall Moro shiphalls, while historic vessels from the Maritime Museum collection including the *Minoa*, a replica Minoan ship which sailed from Crete to Athens for the 2004 Olympic games.

Rethymno



Venetian harbour and lighthouse, Rethymno

Rethymno's grand town houses and narrow streets evoke memories of Venice. The Loggia of 1597 was a meeting and recreation space for the city authorities. It housed the Archaeological Museum until 1989; now it's the Ministry of Culture and Sports museum shop. In the Byzantine period the small harbour silted up, but from the sixteenth century it developed links with major commercial ports including Alexandria, Marseille, Constantinople and Smyrna. The lighthouse of 1838 was built during the Egyptian occupation of Crete on the site of an earlier one.



Loggia



Grand Venetian house

Celia Clark, June 2024

Sources and references

Fieldwork; on site interpretation

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venetian_arsenal,_Gouvia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fyodor_Ushakov, Crete Mediterranean Editions Mediterraneo Greece Stella Kalogerski nd ISBN 978-960-8227-86-7 Crete Lonely Planet Ryan Ver Berkmoes, Andrea Schulter-Peevers nd