

The twelve Archontopoula

Cretan nobility and the legend of the twelve young rulers

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One often hears, while travelling around Crete, claims from some of the villagers that they are from royal blood, descendants of nobility that once existed in Crete. The visitor would often dismiss such stories as the ramblings of old people, or as a misunderstanding due to the sometimes difficult Cretan dialect. But they would be quite wrong, as nobility did exist throughout Crete during the later part of the Byzantine era and later during the Venetian rule period. These were mainly the descendants of Byzantine nobility that came and settled in Crete in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The second settlement is also known as the legend of the twelve *Archondopoula*, part legend, part history, some of it well document but other parts based on forged documents prepared especially for the new Venetian rulers of Crete who took over the island in 1204.



From a 1787 manuscript of the epic poem, *Erotokritos*, depicting the procession of the son of the Emperor of Byzantium

When the Byzantine general Nikiforos Phokas, who was later to become an Emperor of Byzantium, freed Crete from the Arabs in 961, he became concerned about the low moral standing and religious beliefs of the population after 137 years of Arab rule. This, combined with unrest by the local population against the new Byzantine administration prompted the Emperor Alexios I Comnenos, towards the end of the 11th century, to send a number of prominent Byzantine families from Constantinople to settle in Crete to improve the control over the local population and raise the moral and religious standards in the island. It appears that this was not effective as a century later, under the reign of the Emperor Alexios II Comnenos, great-grandson of Alexios I, another large contingent of nobles from Byzantium arrived in Crete and they were

also allocated significant property rights and administrative positions. Their arrival has been known for centuries as that of the story of the twelve *Archondopoula* (young rulers). This event has been the subject of some controversy amongst historians over recent years. The story, or the myth according to some, is detailed below.

The Emperor Alexios II Comnenos, disturbed by the continuing unrest in Crete sent twelve prominent Byzantine families to Crete to re-establish strong links with Constantinople and improve the religious, moral and economic standards of the community. In a document, called the *Chrysoboulo*, a document sealed with gold to authenticate the Emperor's signature, the Emperor, after threatening the Cretans with severe punishment if they were not to fully submit to his will, said that he was sending them as king and trustee his son, Isaakion, together with twelve *Archondes*. The current historical debate relates to the document's authenticity and the date at which it was issued, amongst others.

The families that were named in this document, and which became prominent in Crete's long and turbulent history since then, were those of Ioannis Phokas (the family's name changed during the Venetian era to Kallergis), Marinus Skordilis, nephew of the Emperor, Philippos Gavalas, Thomas Archoleos, Eustathios Chortatzis, Leon Mousouros, Constantinos Varouchas, Andreas Melissinos, Loukas Lithios, Nikiforos Argyropoulos, Dimitios Vlastos, and Mattheos Kalafatis, all of them heads of families which contained anything up to eight male members.

Large areas of Crete were allocated to each of these families, and their names are reflected today as place names in numerous locations in Crete, their family crests can be found on churches and monuments, and members of these families are prominent members of today's Greek community. The same names appear numerous times in Crete's turbulent history over the next few centuries as many of them played prominent roles in great historical events.

Because of the absence of the original documents relating to this settlement (only Venetian records of supposedly translated Greek records or Greek translations of earlier Venetian documents exist) and possible errors of the translated documents, a view exists today that the document and its associated story was a fabrication by members of these same families in order to convince the Venetians of their aristocratic status and thus secure for them a place within the new political elite.

What is not disputed though is that these families that arrived in Crete from Byzantium were all from prominent noble Byzantine families and that when they settled on the island they formed the new elite that was to play a prominent role in Crete from then onwards. Their prominence survived the centuries, especially during the Venetian rule era. The families of the descendants of the twelve *Archondopoula* as well as those of the first group of Byzantine nobles were granted certain privileges by the Venetians, the latter group referred by the Venetians as the *Archondoromeoi* (the Byzantines were known as *Romeoi* -from the Eastern Roman Empire- and *Archon*, the ruler) and both were part of the *privilegiati* or privileged class, which included also all priests and all Sfakians, the latter all being considered by the Venetians as descendants of the *Archon* Marinus Skordillis.

So, if during your travels around Crete you come across someone that claims to be a descendant from nobility, don't dismiss their claim, there may be some truth and a long and interesting story behind it.

Notes:

For a discussion on the controversy relating the documentation and other aspects of the settlement of Byzantine nobility in Crete see: "Byzantine Crete, From the 5th century to the Venetian Conquest", by Dimitris Tsougarakis, Historical Publications St. D. Basilopoulos, Athens, 1988.

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