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The Churches of Melos

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THE CHURCHES OF MELOS.

THE CHURCHES OF MELOS. BY H. M. FLETCHER AND
S. D. KITSON.

THE present population of Melos is collected into six or seven villages in the north-western district, all within a mile or so of the citadel of Kastro. But the whole island is dotted with small churches, some in the existing villages, some on the sites of villages which have disappeared, and others in isolated positions, used only once or twice a year as places of pilgrimage. These churches are interesting in many ways, both as showing the almost Oriental conservatism with which the Greek Church clings to its ancient methods of church-building, and because, although simple in the extreme, they yet possess certain marked differences of structure from the better-known churches of Attica and the mainland, to which, in point of design, they are often superior.

They are at once distinguished from the secular buildings of the island by the possession of a roof. The churches proper are large enough to hold a congregation, are tunnel-vaulted, with a dome in the centre, and are generally built on the highest point of the village, so that, although their vaults and domes are externally of low proportion, this mere difference of roofing serves almost as well as the spire or tower of a northern village church to make them conspicuous amid their surroundings. The chapels or shrines, which are very numerous, are much smaller than the churches, and have no domes, though the tunnel-vault still distinguishes them from the dwelling-houses.

The chief point wherein the Melian type of church differs from the Attic lies in the exterior of the dome. In the Attic churches the roof is usually flat, or, if not, it is constructed of domes so shallow as to be invisible from below. Directly from this springs a tall circular drum, surrounded by engaged columns. On these are supported arches, which cut into the dome itself. The smallness of the dome is emphasized by the large size of the tiles with which it is covered, and the general effect is that of a squat box-shaped building, on to which, as an afterthought, a spindly dome has been stuck without connection with the walls. In Melos, on the other hand, the whole church is carefully designed to lead up to the dome. The vault of the

roof leads into the square block which forms the lower part of the drum; this again leads into the octagon above it, and, lest the transition should seem too abrupt, the corners of the square are chamfered off or scooped out. Above the octagon appears the dome itself, whose outline, owing to these preparations, is usually a flattish segment of a circle. All this

care gives a pleasantly harmonious look to the building; its form is compact and pyramidal; its construction is solid, being entirely of stone within and without; and its walls are snowy with whitewash, of whose blinding whiteness no idea can be formed under our northern sun. The windows are very few, and in England would seem mere chinks in the wall; nevertheless, the interiors are lighter than those of many English churches, and larger windows would only serve to let in the glare and heat.

Probably the oldest churches in the island are the two at Kepos, close to the coast on the southern slope. It does not appear whether there was at any time a village here, or whether it was merely a place of pilgrimage. The churches are at present underground, so

KEPOS.—THE CHURCH OF CHRISTOS.

that beyond two domes, like small limekilns, and a portion of vaulted roof, nothing is visible from the outside. It would seem that this was the original construction, though no doubt the ground has risen in the course of centuries. The entrances are low, like rabbit holes, and that

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of the smaller church is hidden by a thick growth of bushes. This, the church of Christos, is of ruder construction, and probably older than the other. Six steep steps lead down to a chamber 10 ft. 6 in. by 9 ft. At a height of 4 ft. 6 in. the corners are spanned by horizontal slabs, reducing the oblong to an irregular octagon, which again grows

KEOS.—THE CHURCH OF THE PANAGIA.

into the semblance of a circle by the aid of arches springing from the slabs. Above this is a dome, flatter than a semicircle, and accommodated to the oblong shape of the church. The dome is covered with plaster, upon which no traces of painting appear. The workmanship throughout is of the most clumsy kind, and the church is a very

halting and timid experiment in domical construction. There is an apse with a small rude window, which is now below ground level. On the north side a sarcophagus or altar front of white marble is built into the wall. This consists of a fragment of entablature (frieze and bedmould), of the finest Greek work. The frieze is plain, but the enrichments of the bedmould are similar and not inferior to those on the main cornice of the Erechtheum. The builders of the church have filled the frieze with a cross and geometrical devices roughly and shallowly incised. Another fragment of the cornice has been used to

KEPOS.—THE FONT.

form the shelf of the piscina to the left of the apse. In front of the apse are fragments of the framing of a wooden screen.

The church of the Panagia lies a few paces to the north, and, like that of Christos, is built east and west. We descend through a doorway covered by two stones, sloped against each other to carry the wall above. Eight steps lead down to a tunnel-like vestibule, 8 ft. 6 in. broad by 13 ft. long, roofed by a pointed vault, and strengthened about the middle by a flat vaulting-rib. The vestibule is separated from the dome by a wall roughly built without mortar. This cross

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wall is not bonded in with those of the vestibule, and they are all probably of later date than the rest of the building. The dome itself shows a decided advance upon that of the church of Christos. The plan is a square, 9 ft. 6 in. each way. On all four sides are arched recesses, of which that on the west contains the door, and that on the east extends into an apse. Over these arches the change from square to round is made by the use of pendentives, whence springs a nearly semicircular dome, covered with plaster. This is painted with

the head of Christ in the centre, below which are full-length representations of the Apostles, drawn in the traditional Byzantine manner. On the semi-dome of the apse is a large half-length figure of Christ. In this church the workmanship is in every way more skilful than in that of Christos, and though the stones are but roughly squared, and irregularly put together with wide joints, yet the building shows signs of greater knowledge and forethought. The ground plan is a true square, the dome is a true circle, and pendentives take the place of the primitive slab and arch construction of the lower church.

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A drum of an antique column serves for altar, and has this inscription:—

+ ΑΓΙΕ ΘΕΟΔΩΡΕ ΦΡΟΝΤΙΖΕ ΗΜΩΝ.

In front of the apse is the font or *κολυμβήθρα*, which is the most curious feature of this church. It is built of slabs of red volcanic rock, $4\frac{1}{4}$ in. thick, in the form of a Greek cross. On three sides are seats, on the fourth, towards the door of the church, are two steps down, and in the middle is a well 2 ft. square. The corners are

ΠΑΛΑΙΟΧΩΡΑ
SECTION OF SMALLER CHURCH

strengthened by square stone posts. The floor of the well is formed of a single slab of stone, and there are no traces either of a spring or of a drain to carry off the water. On the other hand, during the excavations in the field below Trypiti, known as the Field of the Three Churches, a font of similar construction was unearthed. In this the seats were rounded at the ends instead of square, and the floor was provided with a drain-hole and gutter to carry the water off towards the east. It would be interesting to hear of such fonts in other places, whether on the islands or the mainland, as the form is certainly unusual.

The next church, or rather pair of churches, that we come to, is that of Palaeochora. In the days when Melos was a possession of Venice, Palaeochora was the capital. It lies in the narrow part of the island, at the head of the bay, but some two or three miles from the shore. Fever has driven the inhabitants away, and nothing remains of Palaeochora but this pair of churches and some heaps of stones where the houses were. The churches, however, unlike those at Kepos, are still in use, and are kept in good repair. Whether they were built

before or during the Venetian period does not appear. In any case, there is no sign of Venetian or Italian influence in their architecture. The only dates on the building are 1645, over the door of the large church, and 1688 over that of the small, and these are misleading, because, from internal evidence, it is fairly plain that the smaller church is the older. It is built on a level, unencumbered site, with a roadway passing the door. The larger church, on the contrary, evidently added when the town had grown and the congregation had

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overflowed the old church, is built partly over the road, and the end of it runs into rising ground. Advantage has been taken of this to make a gallery, which is an effective feature of the interior, but it is clearly not the site to choose in building the first church of a new town. The exterior of the churches is simple, and of the type which has been described as characteristic of Melos; but the grouping of the two apses and domes is very pretty and well carried out. Of the two

interiors the smaller is decidedly the better, being, indeed, the best on the island. These Melian churches usually fail in the internal treatment of the dome, which is not in any way started from the floor, but simply hung up on pendentives above the moulding from which springs the main vault of the nave. This cuts the church disagreeably into an upper and a lower part, having no connexion with each other. Here, however, the arched recess brings down the lines of the dome into the body of the church, and, by being higher than the recesses on each side, gives it sufficient prominence as the central feature. In the larger church the interior is less interesting, as it suffers from the

THE CHURCH OF PANAGIA
THALASSITRIA
AT KASTRO: MELOS.

WEST END

NORTH SIDE

CROSS SECTION, LOOKING EAST

EAST END

GROUND PLAN

ROOF PLAN

SCALE OF FEET

THE CHURCHES OF MELOS.

usual fault of the hung-up dome. The gallery, however, finishes the west end well. It is reached by a door from the outside, seen in the sketch, and looks into the church through a bold semicircular arch, springing direct from the gallery front, and spanning the whole width of the nave.

The village of Kastro is at the north-west end of the island, and,

owing to its steep and lofty position, would seem the natural point of refuge for the inhabitants at the period of the Venetian and Turkish struggles. The church here has three dates inscribed upon it, namely, 1552 over the west door of the south aisle, 1667 over the north door, and 1855 on the belfry tower. On the lintel of the same door, which contains the first-mentioned date, are also carved the arms of John

VIII. (Crispus), last Duke of Naxos, and his initials, J. C., together with the day of the month, December 13, which probably was the time of the dedication of the church. The building is of yellowish volcanic stone, and the whole is whitewashed externally, except a part of the belfry tower, where some carved bands of ornament, a cross in relief, and the date 1855 occur. Internally, the nave is 18 ft. 6 in. wide by 43 ft. long, and access is gained to the south aisle by low pointed arches, springing direct from the floor of the church. This aisle is 8 ft. 4 in. wide, and runs the whole length of the church, and part of it at the east end is divided off by a wooden screen. The nave is roofed by a pointed tunnel vault, by which, in the centre of the building, the dome is carried. The lateral arches carrying the dome are recessed only above the springing. The dome itself is carefully constructed of 17 courses of stone, graduating systematically towards the top, where a cross is painted in scarlet, surrounded by a circle of ornament. At the top of the dome externally is a stone socket containing the stump of a flagstaff. The screen, which is raised above the floor-level of the nave by three steps, is of wood, coarsely carved, coloured and gilt, and has painted representations of saints in its panels. Above these is a large rood-cross, which is flanked by two figures in niches. In the sanctuary, the altar is placed in front of the apse, and is made from the drum of an ancient marble column. In front of the screen on the south side is a shrine of the Virgin, containing a picture richly decorated with metal. A wooden seat for the bishop occupies the centre of the south wall of the nave, and a large brass candelabrum hangs from the vault, very fancifully decorated with birds, figures, cherubs, and roses, worked in the same metal. Below this hangs a great globe of glass. Round the west and part of the north side of the church there is a small temenos or courtyard, enclosed by a wall with stone seats running round it, and entered from the lane by a round-arched gateway. A roof stretches from this gateway to the house opposite, forming a sort of lych-gate. The courtyard is paved with pebbles, brown and grey, which are laid in geometrical patterns, interspersed with the forms of trees and fishes. At the church in the neighbouring village of Trio Vasállo, a similar pavement had just been finished, and was shown to us with much pride by the priest. Among other devices it contained animals, clocks,

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workmen's tools, sailing-ships, and steamers, all conventionalized to suit the material in which they were worked. The church of Agia Marina lies on the north slope of Mount Elias, and forms the centre of a square, which is surrounded by the cloisters of a now deserted convent. As usual, it is entirely built of and roofed with stone, and is whitewashed externally. There are no aisles, and a dome rises in the centre from an octagonal drum; the angles of the square below are not, as at Kastro, cut off with a flat chamfer, but are scooped out into a semicircle. A small circular window at the east end is formed of a

THE CHURCH OF AGIA MARINA.

slab of stone, pierced in the shape of a cross, and is unglazed. A slit in the wall of the north side carries the rainwater from the roof into a stone trough set in the face of the wall. The small and quite simple cloisters show the same arrangement as at the Monastery of Mendéli, near Athens, and their flat roof forms the walk in front of the cells above.

Such are some of the more interesting churches of Melos. The chapels, or shrines, are countless, and, as a rule, of small interest. Some, however, are worth a visit, such as one in the descent from Trypiti to Klima, near the mouth of the caves of Trypiti. This contains a small picture of the Virgin, graceful and dignified beyond the wont of Byzantine painting. The blue of the robe and the folds of the drapery are really well and broadly treated. Others are interesting from the beauty of their situation, such as that in the little bay on the

north of the island, where the telegraph-cable runs into the sea; or that on the summit of the ancient acropolis. This and others might prove, if carefully examined, to have valuable inscriptions or fragments of old Greek work built in and hidden under the whitewash of centuries. The chapel in the cemetery is one of the best in design, and often and often, even where there is no other interest in the shrine, the gleam of its whitewashed walls gives point to an otherwise bare and stony landscape. And small and unassuming as these churches and chapels may seem, yet they one and all possess two qualities which make them more deserving of study than many far more famous and far more ambitious buildings; and those qualities are fitness and charm.

CRUCIFORM FONTS IN THE GREEK ISLANDS.

Notes by R. C. Bosanquet.

1. In Paros, in a side chapel of the curious church of Our Lady of the Hundred Gates (Bent, *Cyclades*, p. 378; Ross, *Reisen auf den Gr. Inseln*, i., p. 46).

2. In Melos, at Kepos on the almost uninhabited south side of the island. Unknown before our visit. Tournefort (*Voyage du Levant*, i., p. 60), in 1718, mentions "Notre-Dame du Jardin—Παλαιά Κήπο" as one of the thirteen monasteries of Melos.

3. In Melos, on the "Three Churches" plateau above the theatre of the ancient town. Brought to light by the British School excavations of 1896. (See Mr. Mackenzie's article and Mr. Clark's plan in the forthcoming number of the *Hellenic Journal*.) This font and the church to the north of it, from the forgotten foundations of which we obtained such a harvest of statues and inscriptions, were standing above ground as late as 1825, when Prokesch Osten saw them (*Denkwürdigkeiten*, i., p. 537). The "cave-like" appearance which he notes implies that this little church, like those at Kepos, was then half buried in accumulated soil.

There is some reason to think that this type of font is very ancient. The church at Paros is said to have been founded by St. Helena. At Kepos we have signs of early work in the lettering of the invocation to St. Theodore inscribed on the marble ambo (published by Mr. Cecil Smith in the *Hellenic Journal*) and in a square marble pillar lying in one of the chapels, which resembles the marble posts of the *cancelli* in the fifth century church at Olympia. In the case of the church above the theatre at Melos, the wholesale destruction and mutilation of statues, one of which was sanctified with the sign of the cross before being sunk with the rest in the foundations, may fairly be considered to point to the same early period; it is not far from the fourth-century catacombs.

A baptismery in the form of a Greek cross is mentioned in Petersen's *Reisen in Lykien*, p. 38 ff., but I do not know of other instances in which the basin, as opposed to the building, has this form. A passage in Isidore of Seville, *De eccl. officiis*, ii., 25, 4 (quoted by D. V. Schultze in his *Archäologie der altchristlichen Kunst*), points to a similar arrangement of the steps: "(fons) cujus septem gradus sunt: tres in descensu . . . , tres alii in ascensu," the floor of the font counting as the seventh step.

The font which stood in the open-air on the "Three Churches" plateau must have been supplied with water artificially; the Kepos font, on the other hand, may have been built over a natural spring. There is a tradition that it was formerly supplied by a natural source, and that this *ἀγίασμα* dried up when a woman of impure life presented herself for baptism. A shepherd told me that after heavy rains he had seen water welling up into the basin.