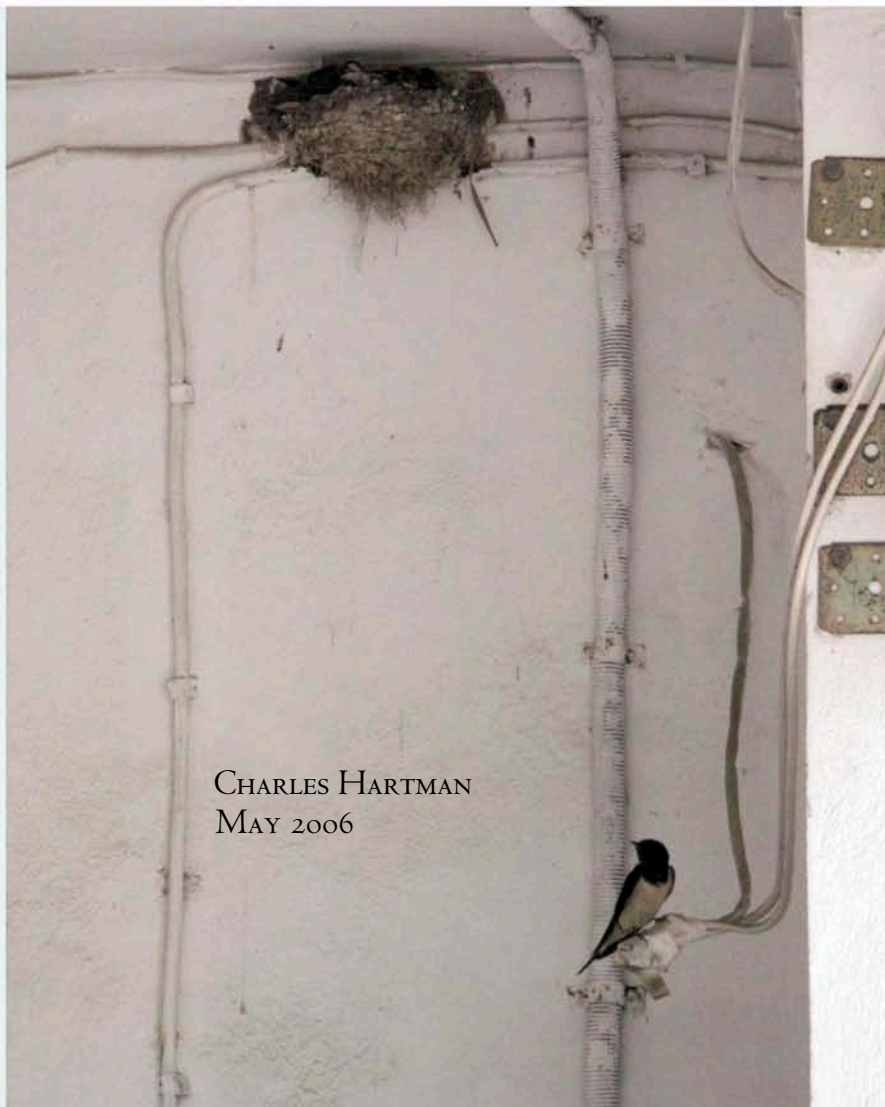


CRETE



CHARLES HARTMAN
MAY 2006



Far at the western end of the island, about three thousand years ago someone began fortifying the acropolis at Polyrrinia. From the hill below those sparse ruins, this is the view north toward Kissamos, also called Kasteli, four kilometers away, where the ancient city-state had its port.

In the village below the summit, directions:





Crete — May 2006

Crete lies between Libya and mainland Greece, to which it has belonged officially since 1913 — though it was a center of resistance to the Ottomans in the Greek war of independence in the 1820s; though its Minoan civilization, Europe's first, predates "Greece" by centuries; and though Athenians trying to make sense of the place for Americans call it "the Texas of Greece." People have lived on this island for ten thousand years. No inch of it doesn't speak of long scrutiny.

May 2006 was time enough to explore the tiniest fraction of the western half of the micro-continent. Into the size and shape of Long Island, Crete packs as much landscape (four mountain ranges taller than any in North America east of the Rockies) as anyone's eyes, boots, nose, notebooks, and ears could want. Rackham & Moody's *The Making of the Cretan Landscape* is a delightful source of fact and practical wisdom, and a model of fine writing in the plain style.

Polyrrinia



Again the hill below the acropolis: a little of the sense of the layers of landscape over which the builders must have gazed. They would have had their minds always on defense. But it is hard to believe they took no repose or satisfaction from the world spread below them.

The tree is far younger, old as it may be. Another may have grown here then. It is for once not an olive. Olive trees are everywhere on Crete; some have lived for a millennium.

Farther down the hill. Here is the end of a poem I wrote in May in Crete, "Too far — he said —":

Enough. That bird is karakaxa,
the one saying his name again and again, a thief,
and clever as a pig at it. Smell here. A mocker
dances without a tambourine. I commend that goat
contemplating beneath the low vault of his horns
his shadow and the shadow of his beard. A good day, and
a good thing. Pouring honey in the dark
is a waste of joy. And there,
I knew it would. From here we go on foot.

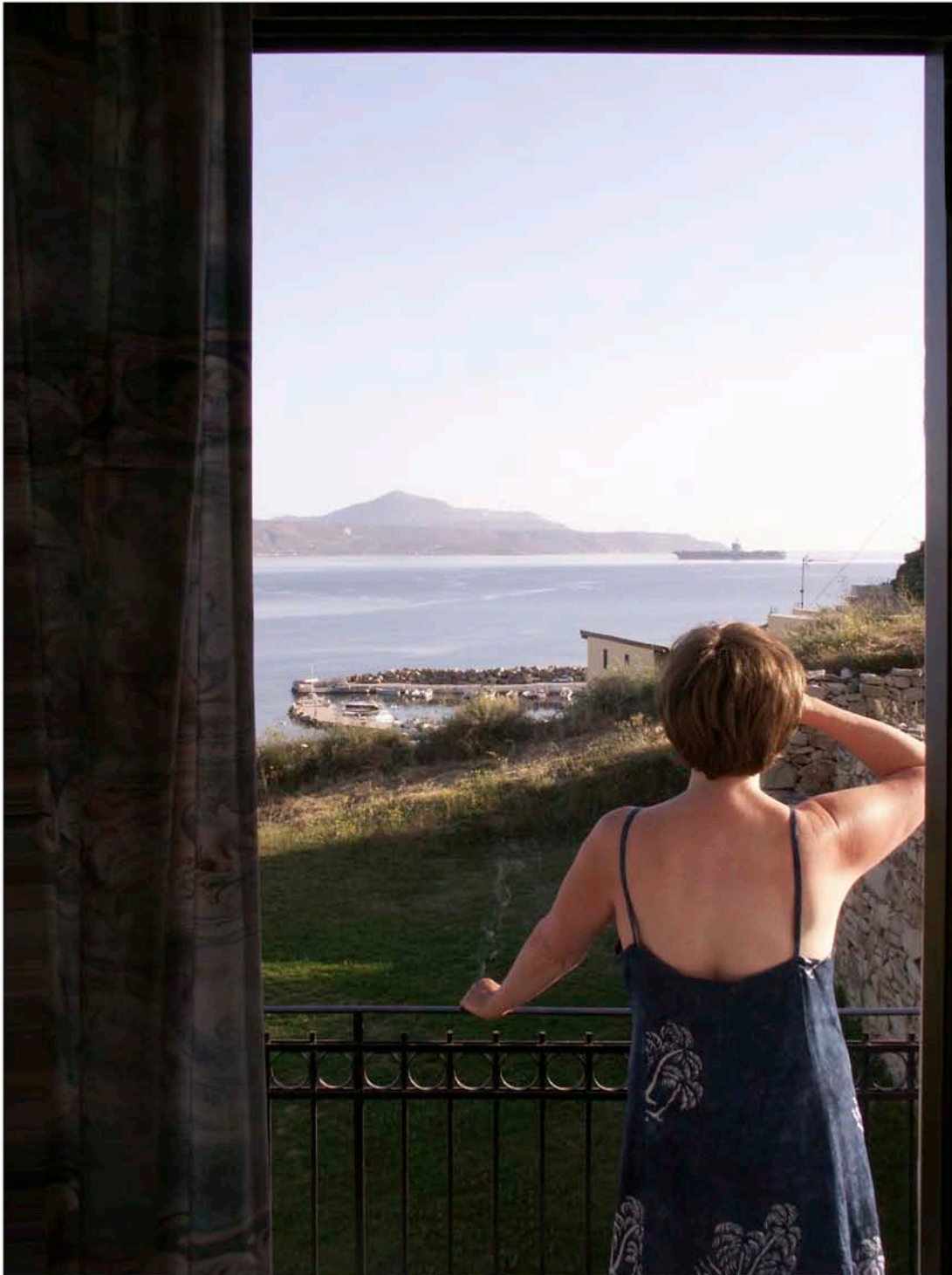




The light kept changing, so I kept taking photographs from the balcony. The one on the upper right looks north to Akrotiri past the village fishers' micro-port.

Kalives For the month we rented an apartment in this village on the shore of Souda Bay, on the north coast in the western quarter of the island. A few kilometers farther west is Chania; to the north (right), the Akrotiri peninsula. The square nubbin on the hill is a Turkish fort, later a prison. The mole in the middle of the beach belongs to a fancy hotel; it's their flag that hangs from the pole.





One morning the *Enterprise* showed up, CVN-65, ever since 1960 the longest warship in the world, the first nuclear-powered carrier. I built a model as a kid. This is Souda Bay, after all.

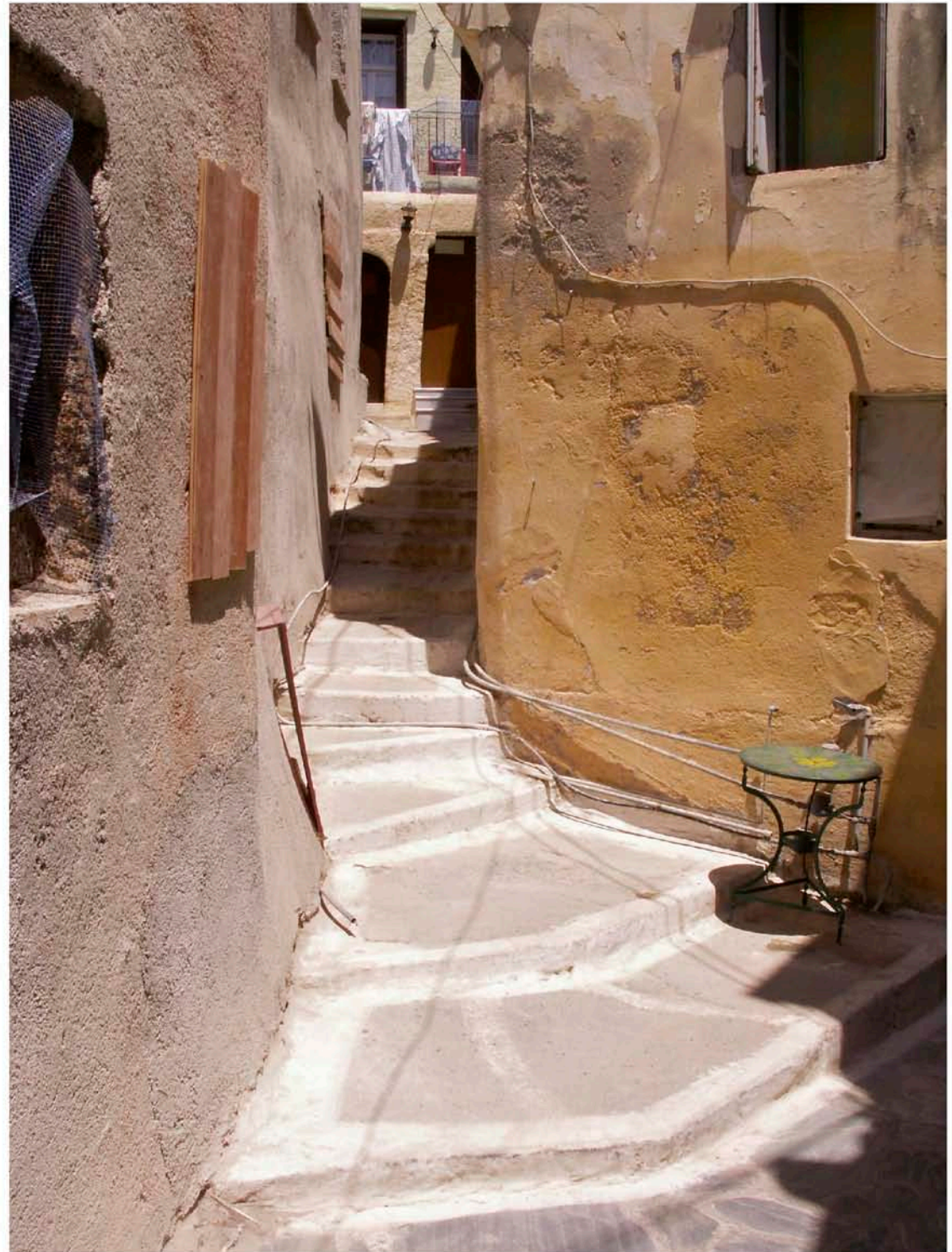


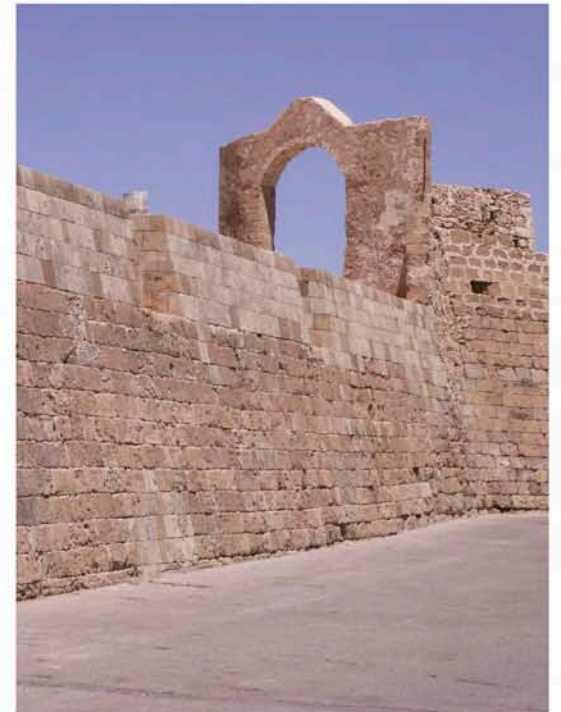
Crete has few rivers. A short one flows through Kalives, under a bridge in the middle of town: the only traffic-jams. As for the swallows, I can't catch them on the wing. They nest in crannies all over town. (Front cover: in the post-office entry.)



Chania has some claim to being the oldest city in Europe. There are bits of Neolithic underneath. Most of what we see is Venetian from the 13th to 17th centuries and Ottoman after that.

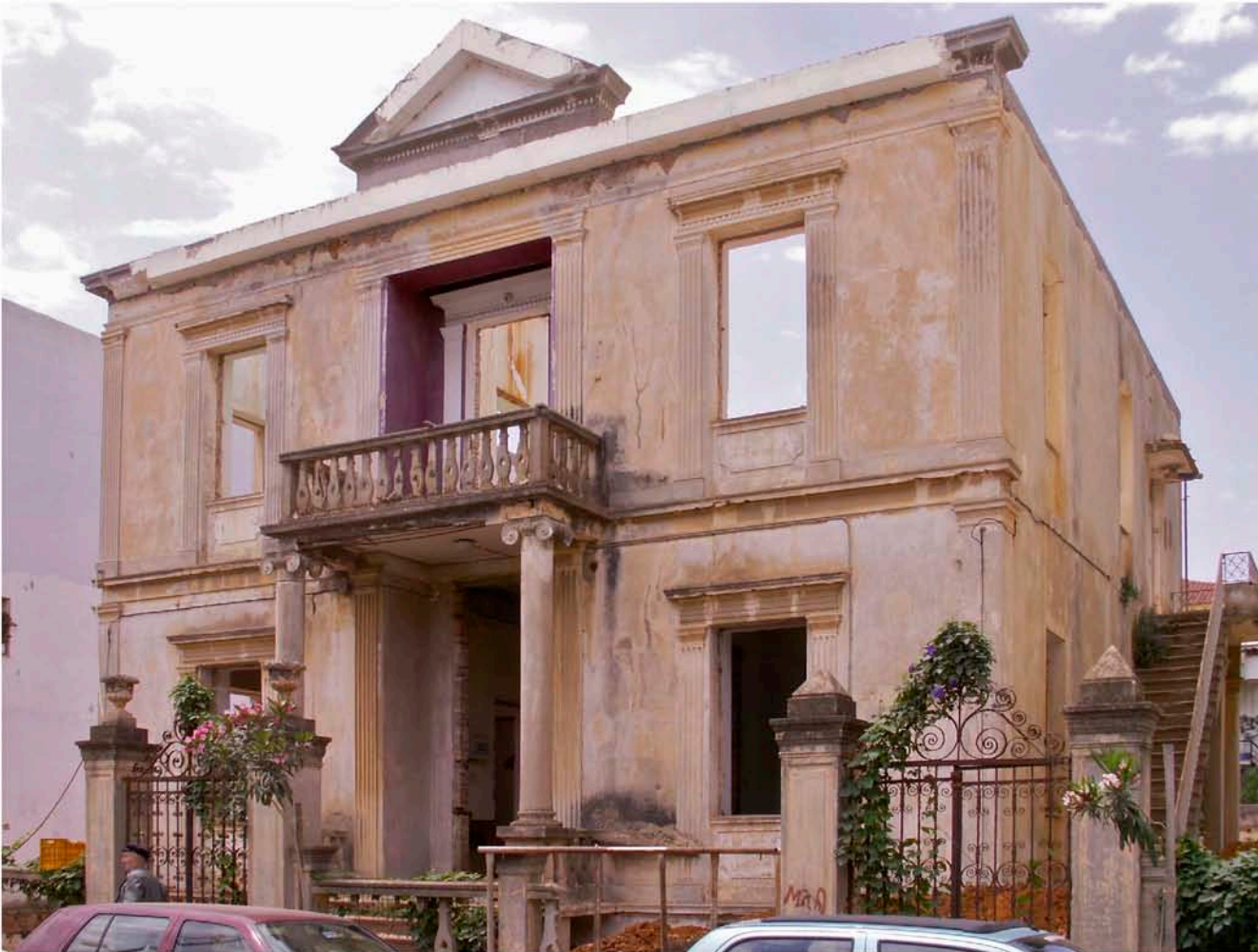
This is the "old town" around the two small harbors, within the prominent fragments of fortified wall. The new city that surrounds it on the inland side is busy and full of detail, but looks more or less like other modern Greek cities. The old, dedicated to tourist traffic as it is, keeps speaking earnestly and individually to someone who walks it slowly: an invitation up this winding stair-street, a teasing question about whether left or right at the top will lead anywhere, the offer of a table from a cafe not even visible, a story about who knows what old catastrophe that tended to carry tables away. No one used that ochre plaster thinking, *This will be picturesque*. The white paint underfoot is to lend clarity to the eye at twilight, not (as in the Kalives taverna below) to trick concrete out as the stone the visitor to Greece demands.







Guy selling pneumatic creatures on the waterfront; guy ostentatiously nonchalantly steering his Zodiac into the harbor with his feet; guy repairing a Venetian wall. Amber cat half a meter tall ("not for sale"). A house made empty and ready for reconstruction, I hope.



The city's names: Kaino, where Britomartis was born. Cydonia, a Minoan place called "quince" by Greeks. Chania by Arabs; La Canea by Venetians. CHX by pilots.



Elafonisi means "deer island," though Crete has had no deer for centuries. (It had pigmy elephant, too, after the last Ice Age.) The tiny island lies off the extreme southwest corner of the big one: face seaward, and you scan a horizon beyond which lie, right to left, Vesuvius, Malta, and the Libyan Sahara. The island is separated from Crete by a few dozen yards of water a few inches deep.



Out of the parking lot (it's a long, occasionally breathtaking mountain drive from any large town), this offer of help is the first thing you see. A French guy who arrived at the same time was just as delighted as I: "Do you *see* that?" he kept exclaiming.





I can find no good way to describe the colors of the sand on the beaches of Elafonisi, and no obvious way to photograph them: layers of white, black, pink, and the whole normal universe of beige, in bands that constantly shift and recur. Above high tide the eye settles on a satisfied Buddha of volcanic rock, or a pair of paddle-boats fading like bad ideas into the dune.





Gavalochori This village, close to the north coast but not quite in the zone of British and German summer boxes yet, has a fine-art glassworks and a wonderful folk art museum. One of its larger thoroughfares divides evenly around a plane tree, room enough each side for a buggy. A cafe's premier table claims one corner of the microplaza.



The stele before the tree speaks of an 1892 commission to awaken the Cretan people from the Ottoman slumber imposed by an 1879 treaty. (Saki: "The Balkans have always produced more history than can be consumed locally.") The sign on the tree itself invites us to a Quiz Night at the cafe on Friday the 26th.

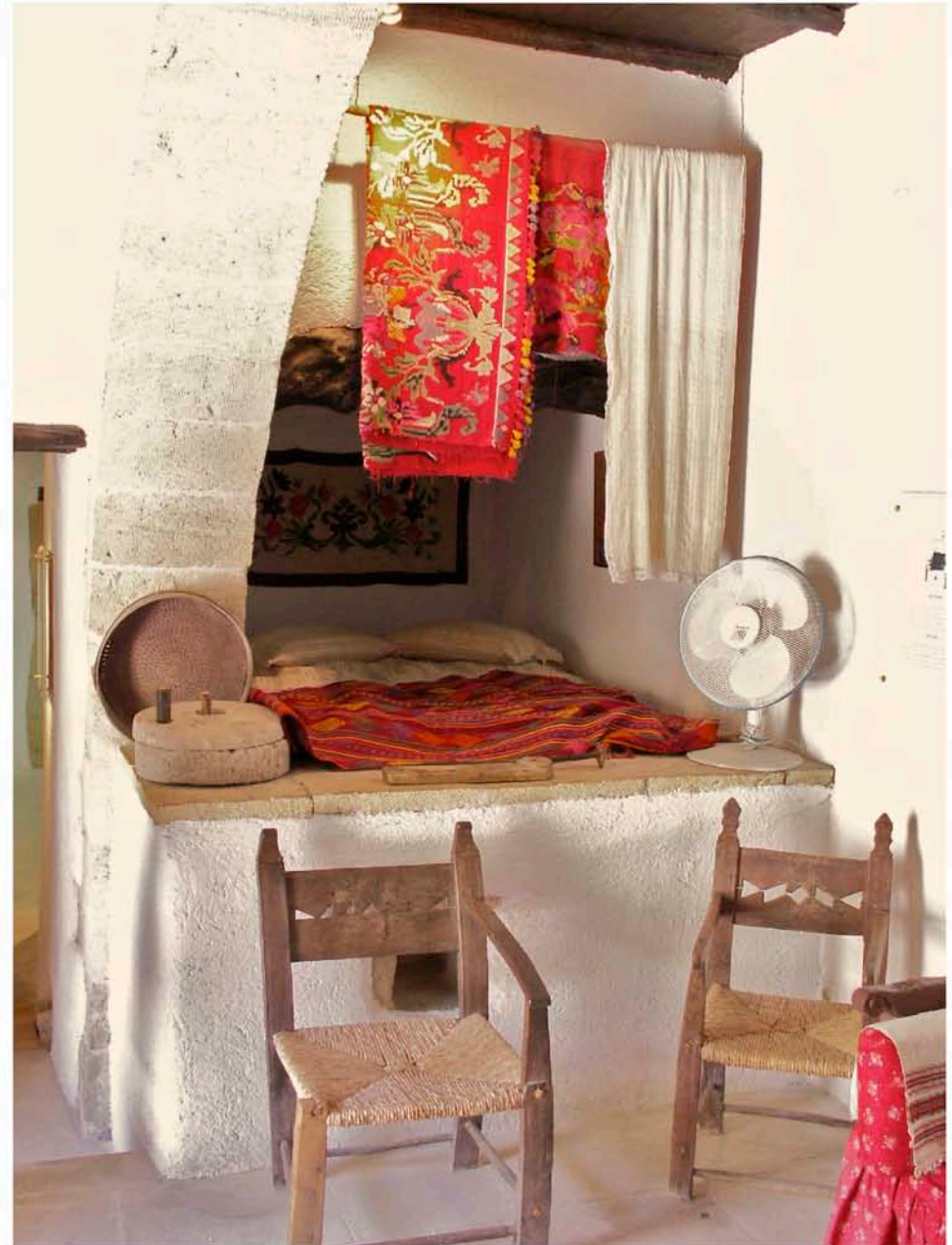


The museum's main room is a "kamara house" built before Shakespeare, inhabited when Queen Victoria died. The design was ubiquitous and indigenous in Crete: a single large rectangle, spanned lengthwise by an arch (*kamara*) whose ends define four "rooms" in the corners: kitchen, bed, weaving, and a fourth now turned to corridor.



The bed is high because it is also the *patitiri*, the vat where grapes were trampled to make wine, then raki double-distilled from the fermented must. The aroma would never quite have left. The rest of the year it was covered with boards and a thin mattress, the front hung with rugs and the walls with icons and allegorical histories.

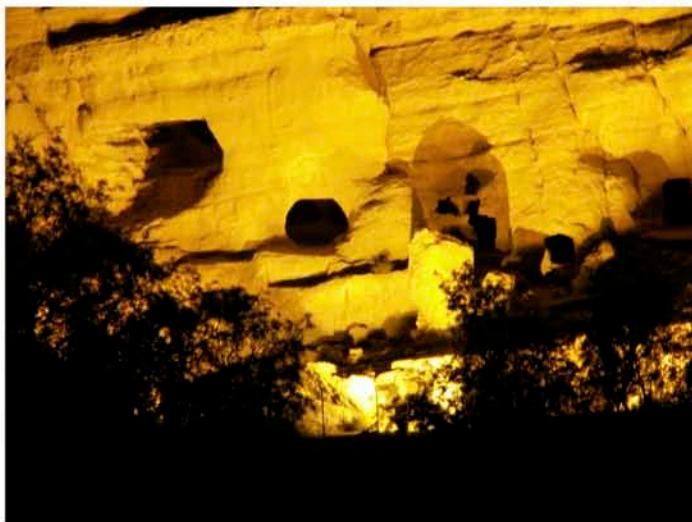
Next door to the museum, the skeleton of another house.



Aptera (*A-pa-ta-wa* in Linear B) flourished as a city-state into Hellenistic times: Roman baths; a triple-arched cistern; bits of Doric temples. An earthquake destroyed it all in the 7th Century; a monastery built in the 12th lasted until 1962. The dormitory window looks south to the White Mountains. Kalives is away to the left.

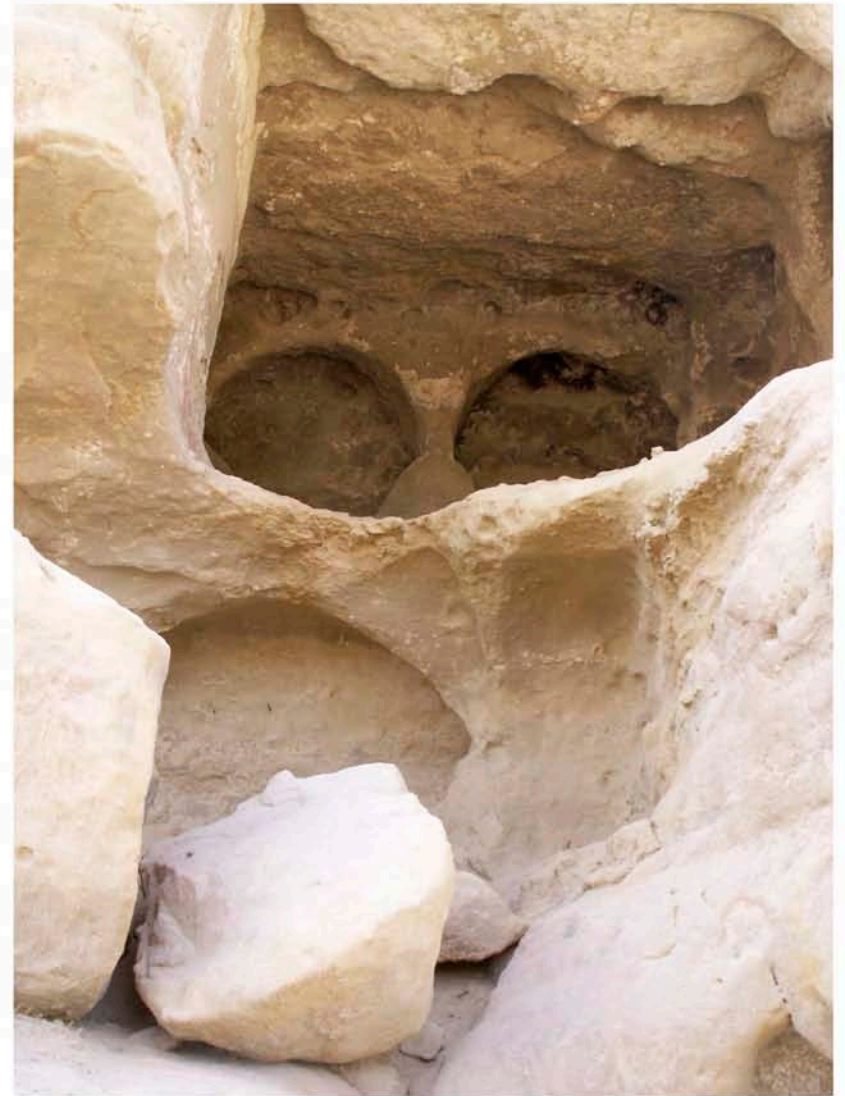






Matala was the venture farthest afield of the May trip: a couple of hours over the White Mountains to the south coast; halfway east along the island; near the rough midwestern-looking town of Timbacki, and the astonishing Minoan sites of Phaistos and Gortyn.

Matala's famous modern moment arrived, not long after the hippies, with the *Life* magazine article of July 19, 1968. They came to live free in the caves. Joni Mitchell ("Carey") tells a story of those times.



A few thousand years before, Matala was the port of Phaistos, then of Gortyn. The limestone caves were artificially enlarged before history. By Christian times they were in use as catacombs. After the tourists followed *Life*'s lead, the pocket valley whose mouth is the beach got a cement bed and a bridge and the downstream end was paved for parking. (The geology says it must be a waist-deep torrent in winter months.) The hippies having been evicted, the caves were fenced in, off-limits at night, and lit.



A nearby sign calls this the "original church" of Matala, but doesn't explain much else. The door is something under five feet high.

Outwardly defined against the cliff by whitewash and a smoother surface, the chapel crouches a few small bent streets back from the beach and the tourist shops. Above it, the carved stairway through the rock arch, speaking of the ridge that rises as the south wall of the valley, may begin or end in the church. Or not: just beside is a house, more or less continuous with a cave with a blue door.





If it is useless to speak briefly about Crete, it is fractally useless to speak briefly about this corner of it. Just outside Kalives, the taverna *Koumos* was envisioned, assembled, sculpted, and concreted, obviously over years, by **Giorgos Chavaldhakis** (bottom left). Everything is a creature. He mosaicked the very light-poles. An acre of antic, furious, naive, shrewd, romantic, bitter detail. And in the evenings, great music and food.



Kalives - Crete - May 2006

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