An Early Irish Visitor to the Island of Crete: The journey of Symon Semeonis from Ireland to the Holy Land

In 1575 an account of the extraordinary journey of one Symon Semeonis was presented to the library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge by Archbishop Matthew Parker, one of the most important figures in the early Anglican church. It is the first comprehensive account of a pilgrimage undertaken from Ireland to Palestine, and is unique in its description of the social and economic character of Europe in the 14th century. Although we have records of 570 written narratives of pilgrimages undertaken between 300 and 1500CE, Symon Symeonis’ is the only one of Irish origin.

The Itinerarium Symonis Semeonis Ab Hibernia Ad Terram Sanctam details the social and economic character of Europe in the early part of the fourteenth century. In particular, Symon gives extensive details of distances, prices, religion, the value of money and the manners and customs of the people and places in the different countries that he passes through. He therefore not only offers an early and unique description of the character of Europe at this time, but also communicates the scale of such an itinerary, travelling such a great distance and seeing so much before even reaching the Holy Land.

The description falls into roughly three sections. Firstly, there is the trip from Clonmel across Europe to Alexandria on the North African coast. The second section involves a description of Egypt and the third describes the journey from Cairo to Jerusalem. The account of Jerusalem is cut short and we have little or no information about his return journey. It is thought that Symon wrote his account in Norwich, but after that we have no further information about him.

This article illustrates the experiences of Symon as he passed through the island of Crete, then under Venetian control. It is of great interest to scholars of Greek archaeology and prehistory for understanding the history of the island, particularly during the important period of Venetian dominance. For the most part, the study of the archaeology of Crete is only a hundred years old. Symon’s account therefore fascinates in affording us a picture of the island as a crossroads in the Mediterranean, a role it has played for thousands of years.

Symon leaves Clonmel in October 1322 and travels to Dublin, from there to North Wales across the mare Hybernicum ferocissimum (‘the very rough Irish Sea’) and on to Chester, where he spends the Easter of 1323. Travelling south, he visits Coventry, London and Canterbury before leaving for the continent. Symon then visits Paris, which he declares to be:

This city is the home and nurse of theological and philosophical science, the mother of the liberal arts, the mistress of justice, the standard of morals, and in fine the mirror and lamp of all moral and theological virtues.

Symon and his companions then journey through France, south to Marseilles and Nice, from where they sail to Genoa and onward to Venice, remaining there for seven weeks.

In August 1323 he travels down the Dalmatian coast to Corfu and Cephalonia and lands in western Crete, where our interest in him is focused. Symon spent a particular amount of time describing the character of the island at this time. Symon opens his description of the island thus:

We next reached the island of Crete, of which the poet says ‘Saturn came first from the shores of Crete’.

Symon here refers to the Eclogues of the ninth century poet Theodulus, the sole non-biblical quotation in his writings. Theodulus is, in turn, identified with the writer Godescalc (Gottschalk).[i]

Symon’s recording of place names is unfortunately not backed up with surviving records elsewhere. The first locality he visits is listed as Conteryn, which does not survive today. It may be that it was a Venetian outpost named after the 11th century Doge Contarini. Onwards from there, they reach the important town of Canea, modern day Hania:

Proceeding thence on foot we came to the town of Canea (Hania), surrounded by a magnificent forest of cypress trees, in which forest trees of wonderful height are found, which, like the cedar of Lebanon, surpass in height both towers and steeples. So great is the perfume issuing from these materials that it seemed to be paradise or an apothecary’s preparation.

From there Symon travelled by boat along the north coast of the island past Retimo and Mylopotamos to Candia (modern Heraklion). Symon claims this journey to be one of 230 miles, which is a generous exaggeration and is in fact no more than 100 miles by sea. Due to the mountainous nature of the island and the rebellious character of the Cretans, the great majority of long distance travel was undertaken by boat. On the island there exists only one caravanserai, on the old road between Rethymnon and Heraklion.

At Heraklion, Symon observes the activities of the Venetian harbour and colony town with splendid detail. First, he tells us of the ethnic make-up of the city, giving us a rare view of this mix of Latin, Greek and Jewish life and customs

Here and in all the island the Venetians rule in perfect peace, the Greek being subdued and deprived of the privilege of freedom. It is inhabited by Latins, Greeks and perfidious Jews, under the sway of a governor who is responsible to the Doge of Venice. Here, the wives of the Latins, like those of the Genoese, are commonly adorned with gold pearls and other brilliant gems. And when one of them becomes a widow, she seldom or never is married again not is she adorned with a nuptial garment, but wears a black widow’s veil; nor does she ever walk with a man, or sit upon the same seat either in church or elsewhere, but with her face veiled and heaving sighs she ever seeks solitary places, and never ceases to avoid the society of men, as she would that of serpents. The wives of the Jews and of the Greeks at Candia adopt a very singular costume, some being dressed in surplices like the choristers of the Latins, others wearing cloaks without hoods, which in front are carefully and curiously embroidered with gold such as are worn by foreign canons. These they wear devoutly during religious processions on the more solemn church festivities. They also usually wear ear-rings of which they are proud.

It is evident that by now in his journey, Symon’s view of the world has opened up somewhat. Gone is the wide-eyed appreciation of London and Paris. Our traveller now has a keen eye for people, custom and, in the case of Candia, the local economy:

This city, like those of Istria, Albania and Romania through which we passed, abounds in most excellent wine, in cheese and in fruit. It exports the famous Cretan wine to every country in the world. Here also ships and galleys are loaded with cheese; and also pomegranates, lemons, figs, grapes, melons, water-melons, gourds and other most excellent types of fruit can be bought here for a very small price.

This colourful description gives a wonderful picture of the prosperity of the island during the Venetian occupation. In addition to his well observed remarks on the fruits and produce of the town of Candia, Symon takes time to comment on the civic character of the town, both its positive and negative aspects:

To those at sea it presents a beautiful appearance, but it has nasty, dirty, narrow, tortuous and unpaved streets. This city is renowned for its wealth in galleys, ships and horses.

Then Symon breaks off his valuable description of the city’s character to describe the religious practices of the people. In his account, we discover that he has recorded the presence in Europe for the first time of a community of gypsies. Symon is the first European to describe these people and their customs, adapted to life within Greece:

We also saw outside this city a tribe of people, who worship according to the Greek Rite and assert themselves to be of the race of Cain. These people rarely or never stop in one place for more than thirty days but always, as if cursed by God, are nomad and outcast. After the thirtieth day they wander from field to field with small, oblong, black and low tents, like those of the Arabs, and from cave to cave, because the place inhabited by them becomes after the period of thirty days so full of vermin and other filth that it is impossible to live in the neighbourhood.

Symon’s account of these people, though hardly charitable, is interesting. That these people worshipped according to the Greek Rite suggests that they may have been on Crete or in Greece for sometime. Nevertheless, Symon is the first observer of this disenfranchised element of Venetian society.

Symon’s description of the island of Crete concludes with a geographical survey of the land:

The island of Crete is oblong and covered with very lofty mountains, among which is one quite inexpugnable, and on the summit of which is a level plain that can only be reached by a single, narrow and almost impassable path. On this plain live at least 10,000 Greeks, and everything necessary for human use is found there with the exception of salt and corn. This settlement is ruled by a certain Greek named Alexius, who holds sway among the rulers of the earth by reason of the exceptional strength of his position. It is also worthy of notice that this island has a circuit of 500 miles according to the mariners who delineate the islands of the sea.

Symon here appears to be referring to the Nida plateau on the approach to Mt. Ida, the island’s highest mountain at 2456m. Whereas today the Nida plateau is virtually uninhabited except by flocks of sheep, it could have sustained a substantial population in the past. The alternative is the Lasithi plateau in east Crete, in which the Venetian administration banned farming. The Alexius that Symon refers to is Alexios Kallergis, a Cretan warlord and descendant of the archontopoula, the twelve aristocratic families settled on Crete during the Byzantine period (early 11th century CE) in order to consolidate imperial authority on the island. These families had strong ties with the local resistance to Venetian rule and fought to maintain their aristocratic status. In 1299 Kallergis had signed a treaty which included a special proviso securing the rights of these aristocratic families.

Throughout the account of the island given by Symon, he does not seem to have encountered any actual Cretans. Perhaps he was escorted through Canea and Candia in sight of well heeled Venetians. There is little mention of native Greek custom and habit apart from the customs of local women, or the indigenous political character of the island outside the Venetian authority, such as the recent (1319) revolt in the Sphakia region of the island.

Symon Semeonis departs from Heraklion on Monday October 10th 1323, and four days later arrives at Alexandria, from where his adventures continue…

[http://www.ucd.ie/cai/classics-ireland/2003/murphy.html 26 August 2015](http://www.ucd.ie/cai/classics-ireland/2003/murphy.html%2026%20August%202015)

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