



The Ionian Islands

Corfu, Cephalonia,
Ithaca and Beyond

John Freely

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Introduction

This is a book about the Ionian Islands: Corfu, Paxos, Ithaka, Lefkas, Cephalonia, Zakynthos and Kythera. These are the westernmost of the Greek isles, the first six of them rising from the Ionian Sea between Greece and Italy, the seventh lying off the south-eastern cape of the Peloponnesos. Corfu and the other Ionian Islands have been renowned since antiquity for their beauty, part of the attraction that has now made them internationally famous as summer resorts. Anthony Sherley was the first English traveller to sing the praises of Corfu, writing of it nostalgically in his *Persian Adventure*, published in 1601.

A Greekish isle, and the most pleasant place that ever our eyes beheld for the exercise of a solitary and contemplative life... In our travels many times, falling into dangers and unpleasant places, this only island would be the place where we would wish ourselves to end our lives.

My book is a guide to the historic monuments and other places of interest on the Ionian isles as well as to the way of life of the islanders, past and present, which I first came to know half a lifetime ago, before the tide of tourism engulfed the Greek world, changing it beyond recognition.

Greek island civilisation is as old as that of mainland Greece but with a greater continuity because of the remoteness of the isles. The Ionian Islands, as stepping stones between Greece and Italy, as well

as between the Greek mainland and Crete, have been involved in every act of the unending historical drama that has been played out in the eastern Mediterranean since settlers first made their way out to the isles in the night of time. The tides of history that have washed over the Ionian Islands have left not only monuments but also patterns of culture that span the whole timeline of Greek civilisation, extending back even to the pre-Hellenic dawn of human existence in what is now Greece.

One aspect of Greek life that keeps it in touch with its past is its religious calendar. This revolves around the religious festivals known as *paneyeria*, which mark the passing seasons of the agricultural year, whose cycles were established in antiquity, adapted by the succession of peoples and religions that took root in the archipelago – Greek and Italian, pagan and Christian – and celebrated in songs and dances that have not changed since time immemorial. The Ionian Islands celebrate all these *paneyeria*, the high points in the life of every community in the archipelago, and the traveller fortunate enough to come upon them is always welcome.

The first chapter is a brief history of the Ionian Islands from antiquity to the present. This is followed by chapters on the individual islands of the archipelago, along with their satellite isles, describing their topography, history, monuments and customs in itineraries that take one to all their distinctive villages, churches, monasteries, medieval fortresses, archaeological sites and other places of interest. There are also appendices with information that might help in exploring the islands, such as the dates and location of their *paneyeria*, where the famous folk dances and songs of the islands are still performed in church courtyards and village squares as they were in times past.

Despite the commercialism of modern tourism the Ionian Islands still have an air of romance, partly because of their location on the seaways between Greece and Italy, which adds an Italianate element to their Hellenic character, and also because of their association with the wanderings of Odysseus. The Greek poet Kostis Palamas catches this enchantment on the wing in these

lines from his *Song of the Seven Islands*, translated by Ian Scott-Kilvert:

Your waters dazzle like a floor of diamonds
Westward your tides
Grove and caress the shores of Italy.
In a circumference of blue the seven islands
Foam-chiselled, rise, dissolve,
Join hands and dance upon the waves

Zakynthos drowned in flowers
Cephalonia seamed with toil
Kythera and Paxoi
Corfu the enchantress of the mind and heart
Ithaka a mariner's rhyme in stone
Levkas the watch-tower of the Armatoli.

From the Ionian shore
From the Ionian shore
Since Homer, since Solomos,
The poet's song, the statesman's art
Haunted these islands like sea-birds,

As if here lay the fields of Elysium
And the heroes of myth and of history
The shades of Odysseus, the spirit of Capodistrias
Walked together under a Greek sky.

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The Ionian Islands

The Ionian Islands are the westernmost of the Greek archipelagos that are scattered like marine constellations across the eastern Mediterranean. All but one of the Ionian isles lie off the western coast of Greece in the Ionian Sea, south of the Adriatic Sea, with the high-heeled shoe of Italy off to the north-west.

There are seven principal Ionian Islands: Corfu, Paxos, Lefkas, Ithaka, Cephalonia, Zakynthos and Kythera, with the first six in the Ionian Sea and the seventh far removed from the others south of Cape Malea in the Peloponnesos, the southern part of the Greek mainland. (Kythera was added to the Ionian Islands in 1669 by the Venetians, who had previously administered the island from Crete, which had fallen to the Turks earlier that year.)

The Ionian Islands are the peaks of a submerged mountain range that extends from the north-western corner of the Balkans through the seas bounding Greece to its west, curving from there in a great arc around to Crete. The islands in the southern part of the Ionian Sea are close to two separate geologic faults extending out from the Greek mainland; one of these runs south from the mountains of Epirus, the north-westernmost region of mainland Greece, and ends at Lefkas; the second, which is the more severe flaw, stretches from the western end of the Corinthian Gulf to the seismic epicentre in the bottom of the sea between Cephalonia and Zakynthos. These

faults have given rise to numerous earthquakes, the two most recent occurring in 1948 and 1953, with the first centred on Lefkas and the second hitting Ithaka, Cephalonia and Zakynthos. The two quakes destroyed more than 70 per cent of the buildings on the four islands, sparing few of their historic monuments.

The high rainfall of the islands in the Ionian Sea has made them unusually rich in wild flowers and flowering fruit trees, bushes, herbs and weeds, particularly in Corfu and Zakynthos, known to the Venetians as Zante, which they called *Fior de Levante*, or Flower of the East. Zakynthos is famous for its sultana grapes, the basis for the currant trade that in times past made it the wealthiest of the Ionian isles. Zakynthos is also celebrated for its *verdea* wine, which led Sir Richard Torkington to write after his visit to the island in 1517: 'There is the greatest wines and strongest that ever I drank in my life.'

The landscapes of the Ionian isles are dominated by the olive tree, covering the islands in vast groves that look like silvered green seas as their leaves quiver in the breeze. Another ubiquitous Greek tree is the pine, whose resin has since antiquity been used to caulk ships and to flavour retsina wine. The most beautiful variety is the Aleppo pine, which usually graces country chapels and the courtyards of old Venetian mansions. Still another is the tamarisk, whose wind-swept groves often shade remote beaches on the islands, forming a pale green frieze between the blues of sea and sky. Less common is the palm tree, which one sees occasionally in the neglected gardens of old Venetian estates in the interior of the islands.

A small tree with interesting mythological associations is the bay or laurel (in Greek, *daphne*), which in ancient Greece was sacred to Apollo, because the mountain nymph he pursued turned into that form to elude him. Laurel trees have since classical Greek times been associated with catharsis, or ritual cleansing; hand-brooms made from its branches were (and still are) used to sweep the floors of holy places, and its leaves were affixed to houses as talismans, carried in procession and used to crown the victors in athletic games, and even today at religious festivals are scattered on the floors of churches.

Another tree with mythological connections is the fragrant myrtle, which was used at weddings because of its association with Aphrodite, and whose leaves were used to weave crowns for initiates in the Eleusinian Mysteries. In Christianity it became associated with the Panagia Myrtidiotissa, Our Lady of the Myrtles, whose miraculous icons are always found enveloped in myrtle leaves, as was the fragment of the True Cross discovered in Jerusalem by St Helena, mother of the Emperor Constantine the Great.

The Ionian isles have an abundance of fruit in season. A catalogue of some of the fruits in the Greek cornucopia, all of which grow on the Ionian isles, is found in these verses from the *Palatine Anthology*, a collection of ancient Greek poetry:

Lamon, the gardener, to Priapos prays,
Grant that his limbs keep strong and all his trees,
And this sweet gift before him lays:
This golden pomegranate, this apple, these
Elfin-faced figs, new grapes, a walnut green
Within its skin, cucumber's leafy sheen,

And dusky olives, gold with gleaming oil –
To you, oh friend of travellers, this spoil.

Homer does not mention the Ionian Islands as such, and there is some confusion about the names that he uses for the various isles of the group. Homer's first mention of these islands in the *Iliad* is in the 'Catalogue of Ships', in which the only isles that can be identified definitely are Zakynthos, Cephalonia and Ithaka, whose combined contingent of twelve ships was commanded by Odysseus, son of Laertes. This contingent is mentioned directly after one from 'Doullichion and the sacred Echinai islands', a flotilla of forty ships led by Meges, son of Phyleus. The Echinaia are obviously the Echinades, a tiny archipelago off the mainland east of Ithaka, but the identification of Doullichion is uncertain, though some have suggested that it is the ancient city of Pale on Cephalonia. Corfu, known in Greek as Kerkyra, is not mentioned in either of the Homeric epics, but it is generally identified with the island of

Scheria, which in the *Odyssey* is the land of the Phaiakians, who had first settled there under the leadership of 'godlike Nausithoos,' father of King Alkinoos. Homer describes Scheria as being 'at the extreme ends of the Earth', which is to say that in his time it was on the outer limits of the *oecumenos*, the 'inhabited world', particularly for a poet from the eastern Aegean.

According to mythology, Corfu took its Greek name from the nymph Kerkyra, but there are two different versions of her origins. One version has it that she was a daughter of the river god Asopus by the Arcadian maiden Netope. The second version says that she was the daughter of the sea god Oceanus and the goddess Tethys, the personification of the feminine fecundity of the sea. Both versions agree that Kerkyra was kidnapped by Poseidon, who married her on the northernmost of the Ionian isles, which was thereafter named for her. They also agree in saying that Kerkyra bore Poseidon a son, Phaeax, who gave his name to the Phaiakians.

The earliest reference to the Ionian Sea is by Aeschylus in his *Prometheus Bound*, written ca 463 BC. There Prometheus identifies Io as 'the child of Inachus, the sting-vexed virgin, for whom the heart of Zeus is hot with love, but Hera hates her and drives her far asea, travelling perforce in unexampled ways'. Telling Io of her wanderings, Prometheus describes how she crossed the lower Adriatic (literally 'the Gulf of Rhea'), 'wherefore that gulf and corner of the main shall bear the name Ionian for all time'.

Corfu is also associated with the mythical voyage of the Argonauts, one version of which has Jason and Medea marrying on the island at the end of their long journey from the Land of Colchis.

One version of the myth of Aphrodite has it that the goddess of love was born on the island of Kythera. Hesiod writes that she was the daughter of the sky god Uranus, whose sperm spilled into the sea after he was castrated by his son Cronus, giving birth to Aphrodite, the 'foam-born goddess'.

The Ionian Islands were first inhabited in the early Palaeolithic period (ca 70,000–40,000 BC), as evidenced by stone tools found in a cave at Agios Mattheos on Corfu. Archaeologists have found flint

works on the beaches of Cephalonia and Zakynthos dating from the Mesolithic period (ca 10,000–6000 BC), as well as a settlement at Sidari on Corfu dating from early in the Neolithic period (ca 6000–3000 BC). Bronze Age (ca 3000–1150 BC) settlements have also been found on Corfu at Kephali, Aphionas and Ermones. During the Bronze Age there was an influx of settlers from Asia Minor on Lefkas, Ithaka, Cephalonia, Zakynthos and Kythera.

Excavations on Kythera have found the remains of a trading colony established by Minoans from Crete dating from the period ca 2000–1500 BC. The first Greek-speaking people arrived on the islands in the Ionian Sea during the Mycenaean period (ca 1500–1150 BC), probably crossing from Epiros, in what is now north-western Greece and southern Albania. During the Dark Ages of the ancient world (1150–750 BC) the Phoenicians seem to have had a trading post on Kythera, and perhaps also on Corfu.

The islands in the Ionian Sea have always been stepping stones between the Greek mainland and southern Italy. The Corinthians, for example, founded a colony on Kerkyra in 733 BC, using it as a port on their trading expeditions to southern Italy and Sicily. The Corinthians also founded a colony on Lefkas ca 625 BC.

Lefkas was the only one of the Ionian Islands to contribute a contingent to the Greek fleet that defeated the Persian navy of King Xerxes at the Battle of Salamis in 480 BC, sending three ships. The Lefkadians and Cephalonians were the only Ionian islanders who fought at the Battle of Plataea the following year, when the Greeks defeated the army of Xerxes and forced him to give up his invasion of Greece, ending the Persian Wars.

During the fourth year of the Peloponnesian War, in 427 BC, a civil war erupted on Kerkyra between the supporters of Sparta and those who sided with Athens. Thucydides writes: ‘There were fathers who killed their sons; men were dragged from the temples or butchered on the very altars; some were walled up in the temple of Dionysos and died there.’

During the early Hellenistic period, which began with the accession of Alexander the Great in 336 BC, the Ionian Islands were

part of Macedonia. In 229 BC Kerykra was captured by Queen Teuta of the Illyrians, whose corsairs had been ravaging the Adriatic. The Romans soon recaptured the island in their successful campaign to put down the Illyrian pirates, after which Kerkyra was in effect a Roman colony. The other Ionian Islands fell to the Romans during their war with Philip V of Macedon in the years 200–188 BC. Then in 146 BC the whole of Greece and its islands was annexed by Rome.

A new era began in AD 330, when Constantine the Great shifted his capital to Constantinople. This gave rise to what came to be called the Byzantine Empire, the Christian Greek realm that developed from the pagan Latin empire of Rome. According to tradition, Christianity had already come to the Ionian Islands by then through the missionary work of SS Jason and Sosipator, two disciples of St Paul who preached on Kerkyra. In 876 Kerkyra became a *metropolis*, or archbishopric, under the direct jurisdiction of the Patriarch of Constantinople.

The Greek islands were cut off from the capital in Constantinople throughout much of the Byzantine period, as waves of corsairs and conquerors swept though the Aegean and Ionian Seas. Kerkyra was raided by the Goths under Totila in 562, which led to the building of the first fortress in what is now Corfu town. During the ninth and tenth centuries the islands were on several occasions attacked by the Saracens, whose raids forced the islanders to abandon most of their coastal towns to settle in remote mountain villages, where they could take refuge in towers called *pyrgoi* or in fortified monasteries.

In 1081 the Normans under Robert Guiscard captured Kerkyra at the beginning of the first of their three invasions of Greece, taking all the other islands in the Ionian Sea during their subsequent raids in 1148 and 1182. The Byzantines managed to recapture the Ionian Islands after the first two of these invasions, but in the peace treaty that ended the third one, in 1187, the empire lost Ithaka, Cephalonia and Zakynthos (known to the Latins as Zante), which were ruled as a personal fief by the Norman Admiral Margaritone. When Margaritone died in 1194 he was succeeded by his son-in-law Matthew Orsini, the scion of a noble Roman family, who

thus founded what came to be known as the County Palatine of Cephallonia.

Another chapter in Greek history began in 1204, when Constantinople was captured by the Latin knights of the Fourth Crusade and the Venetians under Doge Enrico Dandolo. The Latins divided up the former territories of the Byzantine Empire, with Crete and most of the other islands falling to the share of the Venetians, who then set out to conquer their new possessions. The Cyclades, the islands in the central Aegean, were taken in 1207 by Marco Sanudo, Dandolo's nephew, who thus founded the Latin Duchy of the Archipelago. That same year the Venetians took Corfu, as Kerkyra was known to the Latins, and five years later they conquered Crete.

The Greeks reconquered Constantinople from the Latins in 1261, restoring the Byzantine Empire in its ancient capital on the Bosphorus, but of their former island possessions they were able to recapture only some of the northern Aegean isles.

The first Venetian occupation of Corfu lasted only until 1214, when the island became part of the Despotate of Epiros, one of the fragments of the Byzantine Empire that had survived the Latin conquest. In 1267 Corfu and the County Palatine of Cephallonia passed to Charles of Anjou, King of the Two Sicilies (i.e. Sicily and southern Italy), founder of the Angevin dynasty.

Angevin rule lasted until 1368 on Corfu and until 1404 on the other Greek islands in the Ionian Sea. Prince Robert of Taranto deposed the last Orsini as Count of Cephallonia in 1324, and 33 years later he awarded the principality to William Tocco of Benevento. Thus began the dynasty of the Toccos, who broke their feudal ties to the Angevins in 1404 and went on to rule the County of Cephallonia until the beginning of the last quarter of the fifteenth century.

Meanwhile, the Venetians re-established themselves on the Ionian Islands, taking Kythera (known to the Latins as Cerigo) in 1309, Corfu in 1386, Zante in 1482, Cephallonia in 1500, Lefkas (then known as Santa Maura) in 1502 and Ithaka in 1503.

The revived Byzantine Empire lasted until 1453, when the Turks under Sultan Mehmet II captured Constantinople, which thenceforth came to be known as Istanbul, capital of the Ottoman Empire. Subsequently the Turks conquered most of Greece and its islands, with Rhodes falling in 1522, the Cyclades in 1537, Cyprus in 1573 and Crete in 1669. The fall of Crete ended the fifth of seven wars fought between Venice and the Ottoman Empire between 1463 and 1718. The seventh of these wars reached its climax in 1716, when the Venetians beat back a Turkish attack on Corfu, the last of several unsuccessful attempts by the Ottomans to conquer the Ionian isles.

Corfu, the largest and most populous of the Ionian Islands, was of great importance to the Venetians in establishing their maritime empire in the eastern Mediterranean, so they did everything they could to exploit the resources of the island and to strengthen the defences of its port. Venice offered security against the invaders, who had been ravaging the Greek islands for centuries, but in return the Serenissima demanded absolute obedience to its autocratic rule. Under Venetian rule many of the upper classes spoke Italian and joined the Roman Catholic Church, but the great majority of the islanders retained their Greek language and Orthodox religion.

Early in the sixteenth century a *Provveditore Generale del Levante* was established in Corfu, with absolute authority over the Ionian islanders and command of the Venetian naval forces in the Ionian Sea. The highest body of local government, the Grand Council, was composed entirely of aristocrats, those whose names were inscribed in 1572 in the *Libro d'Oro*, the Book of Gold. A burgher class of merchants also came into being early in the Latin period, and some of them eventually merged with the aristocracy. The Greek peasants were in most cases tied as serfs to the estates of the nobility, with the exception of artisans in the towns and those who made their living from the sea. The Venetians were particularly interested in producing olive oil, and to encourage this they gave the islanders a subsidy for every olive tree they planted. This policy produced the vast olive groves that one sees today on the Ionian isles, more than five million trees in all, so that they are among the greenest of all the Greek islands.

During the early part of the Latin period Kythera, or Cerigo, as it was then called, was administered by the Venetian governor of Crete. But after Crete fell to the Turks in 1669 Cerigo came under the control of the Venetian governor of Corfu, the *Provveditore Generale del Levante*, thus effectively becoming one of the Ionian Islands. This arrangement was continued by all the foreign powers that in turn occupied the archipelago, and even though Kythera today is administered separately from the others, being an eparchy of Piraeus, it is still referred to as one of the Ionian Islands.

The Ionian isles prospered under Venetian rule, and their harbours were always busy with trade passing back and forth between Venice and the Levant. Most of the Ionian islanders were never cut off from the outside world, unlike the Greeks living under the Ottoman Empire, and so throughout the Latin period they were influenced by political and cultural developments in Western Europe. (Lefkas was the only Ionian Island that was occupied by the Turks for any considerable period.) The Ionian isles also became a haven for Greeks fleeing from the advancing Turks, an exodus that began with the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and reached another peak with the final Turkish conquest of Crete in 1669. The latter exodus included among its refugees a number of Cretan painters, who adorned the churches of the Ionian isles with some of the finest paintings in the history of Greek art in the post-Byzantine period. This was part of a cultural renaissance that began on the Ionian isles in the late Venetian period and continued on into the early nineteenth century, while mainland Greece and the Aegean isles were cut off from Western civilisation under the Ottoman Empire.

The Venetians continued to hold the Ionian Islands until 1797, when the Serene Republic of Venice surrendered to Napoleon I, who then sent garrisons to occupy all the isles. After a brief occupation by the French the Ionian Islands were then placed under Russian protection, and became an autonomous state called the Septinsular Republic. Napoleon took control of the Ionian Islands again in 1807, and the French occupied them until their garrisons surrendered one by one to the British navy during the years

1809–1814. Then in 1815 the Ionian Islands became a British protectorate, a well-administered state that was to last for nearly half a century.

The Ionian isles benefitted from both French and British rule, under whose administrations the islands' first roads and schools and other public works were built, early in the nineteenth century. One Corfiot who rose to international prominence in the early nineteenth century was Count John Capodistrias, who began his career in the service of the Septinsular Republic, of which he became Secretary of State in 1807, at the age of 30. He then entered the Russian diplomatic service, serving as Secretary of State for Tsar Alexander I at the Congress of Vienna in 1814. Capodistrias looked after Greek interests while serving the Tsar. This was reflected in one of the articles that Capodistrias was influential in writing into the Treaty of Paris, signed on 5 November 1815, whereby the Ionian Islands became 'a single, free, and independent state under the exclusive protection of His Britannic Majesty'. The treaty also specified that the British would appoint a commissioner, whose first task would be the convocation of an assembly that would draft a constitution for the new state.

The first Lord High Commissioner for the British Protectorate of the Ionian Islands was Sir Thomas Maitland, whose imperious ways gained him the nickname of 'King Tom'. One of his many critics on Corfu described Maitland as 'insufferably rude and abrupt, particularly dirty in his person, and consistently drunk and surrounded by sycophants'. The 'Lord High' had little patience with the idea that the Greeks on the Ionian Islands could be left to govern themselves. As he wrote at the time: 'Any man who has seen much of them would agree with me that colonial assemblies are injurious to the people, and disadvantageous to good government.' Maitland completely controlled the Constituent Assembly that he convened in Corfu town in April 1817. Within a fortnight the Assembly had agreed on the constitution that Maitland had drawn up and submitted to them, one that would leave all power in the hands of the Lord High Commissioner.

Maitland's constitution remained basically unaltered for the next 32 years, giving the Lord High Commissioner exclusive control of the police, postal services and sanitation, with the power to arrest, imprison or exile anyone without benefit of trial. Foreign affairs and military matters were handled directly by the British government, and most of the important posts in the protectorate were held by appointees sent out from England, including the Treasurer General, the Principal Secretaries, the Residents in the seven islands, and the members of the Supreme Judicial Court. The Greeks on the Ionian isles played a part in the government almost solely through the weak and ineffective bicameral legislature, which comprised a Senate with five members and an Assembly with 40 representatives, each body headed by a President. General Sir Charles Napier, who as a young colonel was Resident on Cephalonia from 1822 to 1830, wrote of this first era of the protectorate: 'Elsewhere history is the biography of societies, here it is the biography of the Lord High Commissioner.' Nevertheless, the Ionian isles were well governed throughout the protectorate, with Maitland and his successors administering justice fairly and building roads, bridges, police stations, jails, post offices, hospitals, asylums and schools, including a university founded at Corfu in 1824, the first institution of higher learning in modern Greece.

The Ionian Islands played an important part in the Greek independence movement. When the Greek War of Independence began in 1821, some 3,000 volunteers from the Ionian isles crossed over to the mainland to join in the struggle. But Maitland pursued a policy of strict neutrality, disarming the islanders and reducing the flow of volunteers to a trickle. When Maitland died in 1824 he was succeeded as Lord High Commissioner by Sir Frederick Adam, who continued his predecessor's policy of neutrality, preventing the patriots of the Ionian Islands from joining in the struggle for Greek independence. Three years later Capodistrias was elected President of the Third National Assembly, whereupon he began a tour of the European capitals trying to get support for the Greek cause, but when he tried to stop off at Corfu on his return voyage Adam

prevented him from landing. After Capodistrias was assassinated at Nauplia, on 9 October 1831, his body was brought back to Corfu town for burial in the convent of Panagia Platytera, where his tomb is now a national shrine.

The first changes in the constitution of the Ionian Islands were instituted during the first ten days of May 1849 by Lord Seaton, who was then completing his six-year tenure as Lord High Commissioner. As one observer remarked of Lord Seaton: 'In ten days he hurried the wandering Ionians through more political changes than England had undergone in ten generations. On 1 May 1849 the Lord High Commissioner had more power than Queen Elizabeth. On the tenth of the month he was left with less power than Queen Victoria.'

Seaton's constitutional reforms gave the Greeks of the Ionian isles a greater voice in their government, and they immediately used this to call for *enosis*, or union with the rest of Greece. In 1863, after the approval of the other four powers that had signed the Treaty of Paris – Russia, France, Austria and Prussia – the Assembly of the Ionian Islands was convened by Sir Henry Storks, the last 'Lord High', and the members voted unanimously for 'a perfect union with Greece', whereupon they conveyed their message to Queen Victoria along with a note of gratitude. The final documents for the British cession of the Ionian Islands were signed on 21 May 1864, and by noon on 2 June of that year the last of the British troops on Corfu were evacuated. Four days later King George of the Hellenes landed in Corfu town and celebrated a *Te Deum* in the church of Agios Spyridon, the patron saint of the island.

Thus the Ionian Islands rejoined the Greek world to which they had belonged since the beginning of recorded history, for the men of these isles fought in the siege of Troy, at Salamis and Plataea, and in the Greek War of Independence. They were occupied by the Italians and the Germans during World War II, along with virtually all of the other Greek islands, and Corfu town suffered considerable damage in aerial bombardments. But that damage has now been repaired, as has most of the destruction wrought by the earthquakes in 1948 and 1953.

There are a number of museums of various types on the Ionian Islands that preserve objects from all periods of the archipelago's past. These include museums and galleries devoted to archaeology, Byzantine art, Ionian art, folklore and numismatics, as well as memorials to famous writers, artists and statesmen, of which the Ionian Islands seem to have had more than any other region of Greece in times past.

The most prominent historical monuments in the Ionian Islands are the fortresses that still dominate many of its principal towns, dating in their origins from the Byzantine, Angevin, Venetian and Turkish periods, sometimes with elements of all these eras represented in the same structure. There are also a number of fortified villages dating from these periods, when many of the islanders were forced to flee from coastal towns because of corsair raids, resettling in the mountainous interior. Besides walled villages, there are also medieval *pyrgoi* and fortified monasteries, where the islanders took refuge in times of corsair raids. Some of the monasteries are still inhabited by a few monks, who carry on a way of life that has not changed since the medieval Byzantine era.

There are many churches and monasteries on the islands dating from both the Byzantine and Venetian periods. Some of these have icons by leading artists of the post-Byzantine period from both Crete and the Ionian Islands, when a brilliant school of art flourished under Venetian rule. Besides churches and monasteries, the architecture of the island also includes public and private buildings of both the Venetian period and the era of the British protectorate, the most prominent examples of which are to be seen in Corfu town. More humble examples include the houses and farm buildings in the villages of the Ionian isles, which range from Venetian-style dwellings in the isles of the Ionian Sea to the Cycladic architecture of Kythera.

One of the most characteristic elements of Greek life, particularly on the islands, is the cycle of religious festivals and other celebrations that enliven the year. The two major religious holidays are Christmas and Easter, followed closely by the Feast of the Assumption of the