

The harbour and town of Kastellorizo as seen from an Italian Airforce (Regia Aeronautica) Bomber in 1941 during World War II, prior to the bombings. Note the intact buildings & well built up neighbourhood on the Kavos promontory, the lack of shipping in the harbour as compared to earlier classic photos at the beginning of the 20th century, the walled off fields in the Horafia area and the contrasting complete absence of urban development in neighbouring Kas, Turkey, compared to today. Photo credit: Manlio Palmieri <http://kastellorizo.proboards.com/thread/163/february-1941-british-assault-kastellorizo>

OPERATION ABSTENTION: THE BATTLE FOR KASTELLORIZO, 1941

Part 1: Overview and the Australian Connection. By Dr George Stabelos, Melbourne.

This is one of three articles to follow in future editions of Filia.

Part 2: The fierce battle on the island- February 25th- 28th 1941

Part 3: Aftermath, legacy and implications for the future

Overview and background

Operation Abstention was a code name given to the British and allied assisted invasion of the Greek populated island of Kastellorizo, off Greece and Turkey, from the 25th-28th February 1941, during the Second World War (1-4).

Since the beginning of the war, the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill had ambitions for the Mediterranean & Aegean seas, control of which was seen as crucial to allied security and success in Europe, the Middle East, North Africa and elsewhere (3). Through Operation Abstention and Kastellorizo, Churchill and the commander of the Mediterranean Fleet, Admiral Andrew Cunningham, saw an opportunity to gain maritime and air control in the Mediterranean and Aegean, and to influence Turkey, who adopted a neutral stance in the war thus far, to join the Allied camp and tie up Italian and later German forces as the war in Europe developed (1-4).

It has been suggested in military forums that "The events of the Battle for Kastellorizo during Operation Abstention remain practically unknown, even for many scholars of World War Two. Information and accounts of the operation are scarce, and are often reduced to a footnote or blurb, if in fact mentioned at all in Western coverage of the War"(4).

Yet there are important lessons to be learned from this battle in the Eastern Mediterranean which are just as relevant for the future of Europe, the western world, the Middle East and indeed for all humanity now and in the future, as they were then. There is also the old saying that, "History often repeats itself" or as one author stated: "I have seen a stunning amount of death and destruction.

Creation yes, but more death than birth. Mankind has learned nothing from their forefathers, their ancestors. It is true what they say: history does repeat itself"(16).

Military strategy in the Eastern Mediterranean & Aegean: Kastellorizo's geostrategic importance.

The undertaking of Operation Abstention was the first part of a longstanding British desire to destabilise the Italian position on the Dodecanese islands in the south-eastern part of the Aegean and Mediterranean seas. In order to reassert British power in the region, the British, and in particular Admiral Cunningham, coveted control of the island (1-5). As has been suggested by Allied sources elsewhere, "The early capture of the Dodecanese remained an operation which should be given high priority. It would give us complete control of the Eastern Mediterranean. The Italians had done nothing much, but if the Germans succeeded in establishing air forces there, our sea communications would be seriously embarrassed" (7). The initial goal was to prohibit the maritime communication lines of the Axis powers Italy and Germany. This would have significant implications on the effectiveness of Allied navy, air force and army forces in the Mediterranean and surrounds, which in turn would have repercussions on control, defence and stability of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa...and even later provide access via the northern Aegean to the Black sea and to Russia. "Operation Abstention would be the spark that would begin the process, and the island of Kastellorizo, the target. This small island would serve as the front-line in which each side's regional aspirations would be determined"(4).

In 1941, Kastellorizo was an island of Greek people, and the easternmost Greek inhabited island in the Dodecanese chain, just some 2km off the Turkish coast. The island was some 80 mi (70 nmi; 130 km) from Rhodes and was then under the control of Axis power



The Savoia-Marchetti SM.81, an Italian three-engine bomber/transport aircraft, similar to how it would have appeared during the counter-attack, dropping bombs over British positions on Kastellorizo, during February 1941, WWII ⁽¹²⁻¹³⁾. The photo shows the plane escorted by Fiat CR.42 fighters that had flown out from Italian bases in Rhodes. Over four days in February 1941, one report from an Italian source, states 130 Italian Regia Aeronautica airforce aircraft are used by the Italians to attack the British on the island ⁽¹⁷⁾. Italian airforce planes wreaked havoc on the 200 or so British special forces no. 50 ME commandos, in addition to the 24 British marines and 150 Sherwood Forrester soldiers who had landed or disembarked from Kastellorizo in the days before, in an attempt to free it from Italian occupation during Operation Abstemtion.

OPERATION ABSTEMTION (CONT).

Italy, who had occupied Kastellorizo since 1921, when it was acquired from France (who governed the island from 1915-1921) in the Treaty of Lausanne ⁽⁸⁾. In the early part of the 1940s, Italy had come into the Second World War on the side of Germany and Kastellorizo in 1941, was populated by a permanent native Greek population of around 1800 people, (down from 2200 in 1936 and its peak of 9000 or so at the beginning of the 20th century). The Italian occupying presence included Italian civilian administrators, and an Italian military garrison of 40-50 soldiers, Italian navy sailors, customs officials and police or Carabinieri as they were known ⁽⁴⁾. Up until that time in WWII, the Greeks were holding the Italians in Albania, the Greek island of Crete was being built up as a British base, Cyprus was being held by the British, the allies had beaten back the Italians in North Africa and the Germans had still not arrived, neither in Africa nor in Greece .

The British were painfully aware, that the Italians were already conducting successful hit and run attacks on the British naval forces in the Mediterranean from their bases in the Aegean Sea. They anticipated that the Germans might later deploy air forces into Sicily and indeed into the Dodecanese islands, and from the latter could attack Aegean and Mediterranean Sea traffic of the allied fleet and also possibly strike at the Suez Canal in the Middle East, which was the only exit point in and out of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea ⁽¹⁹⁾ (predictions of which, later all came true). ⁽⁵⁾ The only sure way of preventing this would be for British forces to capture the Greek populated and the then Italian controlled Dodecanese islands, before the Germans could implement any such plan.

The British commanders-in-chief in the Mediterranean had always had this task in mind, but now with the German war machine advancing south in Europe, and Italy having had numerous successes sinking allied naval and merchant shipping in the Mediterranean, it became more urgent. In the middle of January 1941, they asked the chiefs-of-staff in London for the 'Glen' class of British assault ships to be sent out as soon as possible. ⁽¹⁻⁴⁾

As has been suggested elsewhere, Kastellorizo possessed some key geostrategic assets including "The best harbour between Beirut and Piraeus", its deep and sheltered port, therefore having historically made it a busy shipping hub. It had previously been "A prosperous trading port for the Dorians, Romans, Crusaders, Egyptians, Turks and Venetians... with "the largest merchant (sailing) fleet in the Dodecanese"⁽⁹⁾.

Between the wars, Kastellorizo was also an important stopover base for the huge flying sea planes of Imperial Airways which later became British Airways and Air Orient/ later Air France and the seaplanes under the Italians. The sea plane routes requiring a stopover in Kastellorizo took in the routes from Marseilles in France, to Italian cities such as Naples, the island of Corfu in western

Greece, Athens, then stopping over in Kastellorizo, followed by the French held colonies in Lebanon, Syria and ultimately Beirut in Lebanon ⁽¹⁰⁾.

It was determined therefore that Kastellorizo, due to its strategic location, easy accessibility from British held bases on Cyprus, Crete and Alexandria and smaller Italian military presence, would be the first part of British and potentially Allied steps to control the Aegean and Mediterranean seas.

The Australian Connection

Australian naval forces provided support during the British assault on Kastellorizo during Operation Abstemtion, from the 25th to the 28th February 1941 via *HMAS Perth* (pictured below). *HMAS Perth* was a modified Leander-class light cruiser operated by the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) during the early part of World War II. At the start of World War II, *Perth* was used to patrol Western Atlantic and then Australian waters, before she was sent to operations in the Mediterranean & Aegean Seas at the end of 1940 ⁽¹²⁻¹³⁾. There, one of *Perth's* early missions was as part of Operation Abstemtion, involving escorting Royal Navy vessels transporting troops to Kastellorizo from Famagusta in Cyprus and to Alexandria in Egypt, and during Operation Abstemtion conducting operations surrounding Kastellorizo ⁽⁵⁻⁷⁾.

On Feb Feb 27th 1941, *HMAS Perth* was deployed together with HM Cruiser BONAVENTURE, HM Destroyers DECOY, HASTY, HERO and JAGUAR to take troops to Kastellorizo in support of a landing by British Commando units that first landed on February 25th. After this second group of troops landed, *Perth* carried out patrols north of Kastellorizo, presumably on the lookout for a retaliatory Italian naval or air force on the counter-attack, that might be dispatched to Kastellorizo from Italian airforce and naval bases on the nearby Dodecanese islands of Rhodes and Leros respectively. On February 28th, *Perth* also provided cover for evacuation of troops. *Perth* was later involved extensively in the Battle of Greece and the Battle of Crete ⁽¹⁴⁻¹⁵⁾ (see below).



HMAS Perth (above) painted in camouflage colours in the Mediterranean, circa 1941. Perth and her Australian crew of 600 or so sailors, took part in the Allied Battle for Kastellorizo. Photo Source: <http://www.tomandronas.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/PERTH.j1941-copy.jpeg>

OPERATION ABSTENTION (CONT).



A Photographic souvenir (above) commemorating the voyage of *HMAS Perth* in 1941 escorting Australian troops to Greece and being involved Mediterranean operations including Operation Abstention, the Battle for Kastellorizo .

Photo source; Australian war memorial <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C2089200>

Despite the distance, the Australian city of Perth and the Greek island of Kastellorizo, would later be destined to become sister cities. Perth's sister city relationship with Kastellorizo (Megisti) was inaugurated on 10 August 1984. "The increasing population of Kastellorizans in Western Australia was a key factor in establishing a partnership with Kastellorizo. From 1982 to 1988, the City's Lord Mayor was Mick Michael, a Greek of Kastellorizian origin (15)."

The objectives of the sister city relationships and friendship agreements are, "The mutual desire for international peace and goodwill, to encourage a wider understanding of other cultures and to foster economic development, tourism and trade relations" (15).



A glimpse of the beauty of Kastellorizo in more modern times, where a Hellenic Navy Fast Attack P-23 is docked in Kastellorizo harbour. The island's geostrategic location together with its sheltered, deep water harbour, made it a potentially ideal British naval base in the Mediterranean during WWII. In January 1941, Admiral Andrew Cunningham, the British commander of the Mediterranean Fleet, planned and authorised a British amphibious invasion of Kastellorizo (Operation Abstention) with support from Australian naval forces, with the intention of freeing the island from Axis power Italy and establishing a British, motor torpedo boat and motor launch base, together with a British military garrison on the island. Photo credit- instagram: @ginaesandro @ines106 (20)

References & Acknowledgement: The author sincerely thanks Nicholas Pappas AM for his helpful suggestions regarding this article.

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WOVEN TREASURES

BY ANNA KOUTSIS, SYDNEY

Traditional textiles formed by weaving, knitting, crocheting and embroidery are vital elements of culture in many parts of the world, having both functional and social significance.

Rug weaving is a century old tradition which can be traced back to the Neolithic Age (7000 BC), and hand-woven rugs and carpets were one of the most valuable goods produced.

One of the most elaborate weaving techniques, was the hand knot. Traditionally the knotting technique used, differed from region to region and was carried out by specialised artisans as it was an extremely intricate process requiring a great deal of expertise.

Rugs were differentiated by size, each having a particular function in homes. A rug is generally taken as being 6 feet by 4 feet. Anything over that size became a carpet or a runner.

They have been a part of Greek women's culture and heritage since ancient times, and it is well known that women in villages in mainland Greece would spin their own wool, from sheep in their village, to hand weave the traditional shag wool rugs, *flokati*.

On Kastellorizo, there were not enough sheep and goats to provide the raw fibre required to weave rugs and there is no evidence to suggest that every Kastellorizian household had its own loom, an *argaleios*, during the late 18th and early 19th century.

Records of the interviews from the Western Australian Folklife Project¹, conducted by Rob Willis with Katina Asvestis (nee Mikhail Christodoulou) are full of traditional folk songs, stories, food lore and craft. Katina's love and knowledge of all things Kastellorizian is well referenced in this project.

I was fortunate to be able to conduct and record a series of oral history interviews with her, regarding the use of looms on the island and rugs as they related to a dowry.²

Katina recounted that in the early 1900's, two women on the island, Stavroula Gatti and Anastasia Pitsoni, had access to simple looms, and made a limited number of rugs, called *setsetédhes*. The wool was imported from Anatolia and dyed on Kastellorizo. Interestingly she commented that Stavroula Gatti had access to her cousins' rug making business in Makri (Fethiye), Livissi (Kayakoy) and Myra (Demre) and that many of the rugs required for dowry purposes found their way to the island in this way.

Katina and her family migrated to Perth from Kastellorizo in 1968, and she recalled in detail the existence of municipal looms on the island in the late 1950's and early 1960's. These looms, one of which was in the Horafia neighbourhood, near the Cathedral of Saints' Constantine and Helene, were provided by the Municipal Council, to provide employment for the young women on the island.

However, she recalls the looms were used mainly to make fabric: bed sheets and cloths, called *panya*.

The bright colours and patterns of hand woven rugs that graced the floors of Kings, Queens, shepherds and every one in between for centuries, every piece an individual creation, also graced the homes of Kastellorizians for hundreds of years.

Hand knotted rugs, with roots in the Old World, were used to dine upon, called *sofra*, to sleep upon, for floor coverings and wall hangings, bestowed as gifts and also offered as part of a bride's dowry. Dowry rugs were hand knotted, treasured for life and usually laid out only to honour important guests. Hundreds of rugs were laid out by Kastellorizians in 1929, to honour the visit to the island of the Italian Royal family.

If the majority of Kastellorizian women, were not engaged in the weaving of rugs, one might ask, where, when and by whom were they made?

Life on Kastellorizo, an island just a "stone's throw away" from the Anatolian (Asia Minor) coast was intimate and therefore by definition included gentle, but serious competition. Hand woven rugs, some as elaborate and extravagant as the wedding celebrations formed an essential part of the Kastellorizian trousseau, and represented family wealth and status and as such, Kastellorizian families stocked up valuable rugs as a dowry, *prika*, for their daughters.

For Kastellorizians, the Greek word, *prika*, encompassed the meaning of the two English words, dowry: real estate, money or goods given at marriage and trousseau: the collection of clothes, household items which most women had in some form; hand worked, embroidered and crocheted pieces, tablecloths, towels, bedlinen, and at least one quilt, a *paploma* and two rugs, *setsetédhes* and many kilims.

Again, I will refer to Katina Asvestis' knowledge of all things Kastellorizian, and expand on the dowry requirement of two *setsetédhes*. It was custom on the island, until around the early 1930's, when wrought iron beds were imported from Alexandria Egypt, that the largest and very best rug, *setsetédhe*, was used for the bridal bed, called *pottsaki*. The other rug was laid out in the dining room, the *sala*, on the Monday after the wedding when lunch was served to the bride and groom and the immediate family, after which it was removed and only laid down on *namedays*.²

I was fortunate to acquire an exceptional rug, a woven treasure, from my maternal grandmother. A rug, in unusually pristine condition,



Anatolian rug



Turkish roller beam loom , 1908

given its age, which I later learnt was made for a specific purpose. My grandmother, Christina Fermanis (aka Spirou), was born on Kastellorizo in 1894, to Iakovos and Evangelia Giacomou (aka Giacomaki / Geronikolas), a well-known and respected commercial merchant family, both on the island and in Antiphellos, Kas on the Anatolian coast. Both her parents were born on Kastellorizo, her mother Evangelia, was the daughter of Vasilis and Christina Adgemis (nee Papanastasiou).

Most of the rugs in my grandmother's time were not made on Kastellorizo, but were made by women on the opposite shores of Anatolia, a region often referred to as the "rug belt."

A substantial Christian community of Greeks lived in the region, at the time, and Greek women were involved in rug making, many woven as dowry pieces for trousseaus. Rug making was a part of their daily activities as well as a basic source of their family incomes.

Some women, perhaps my grandmother included, considered the rugs too valuable to be put on the floor on a daily basis, and draped them over tables or hung them from their balconies on gala occasions, or kept them carefully packed away for safe keeping in a trousseau chest or glory box, *casella*, to be passed on to daughters and granddaughters.

In the early 1900's, Christina married Lazaros Mikhail Fermanis and travelled to Brazil, where her husband's family owned and operated Greek restaurants, tavernas, in Santa Catarina.

Kastellorizo had a strong dowry tradition and the contents of a dowry travelled widely when the women migrated. Their travelling chests were our treasure troves, and in her travelling chest, *baoulo*, my grandmother packed many textiles, including my rug.

Most of us will have precious textiles in our possession from our mothers and grandmothers or both. I recall my grandmother's stories, of her precious objects, those she managed to bring with her to use in her new life and stories of the *prika* she was forced to leave behind.

My rug, made the great trek to Australia, first stopping off in Santa Catarina, Brazil then back to Kastellorizo, and then on to Adelaide, South Australia and finally Sydney, Australia.

It was evident to me that the materials used and the strong Ottoman influence in design and technique indicated that my rug was produced by weavers who lived in a wealthy region and had access to Ottoman artistic products.

By way of background research, I read that the exact design for

each rug, and the symbolic motifs used in the patterns were made by a specialised rug maker, called a *kalfa*, meaning a skilled woman worker, obliged by contract to work for a few years for a small payment. The symbolic motifs used in the patterns were a closely guarded secret, created by women where oral tradition was the norm, memorised and passed down from mother to daughter.

I learnt that the primary symbols included the tree of life, stars (a sign of happiness), crosses, flowers, the eye and amulets, (to protect against the evil eye, malice), triangles indicated marriage, and birds (happiness and unexpected good news). Flocks of crane birds symbolized unity and solidarity. The combination of these were infinite.

I learnt that colours played a major role in conveying the story of a rug. Red, for instance is the colour of wealth, courage, beauty, joy and faith. White for purity, blue for truth, brown for fertility, yellow for power and glory and the evil eye, and orange for devotion.

I learnt that each wool dyer, *boyadji*, had his own professional secrets and that this knowledge was passed from him to the male heir of the family. No dyer kept his designs in a notebook, but carried them in his head. Plants, flowers, fruit, vegetables and insects were some of the principal sources of the dyes used in all old rugs.

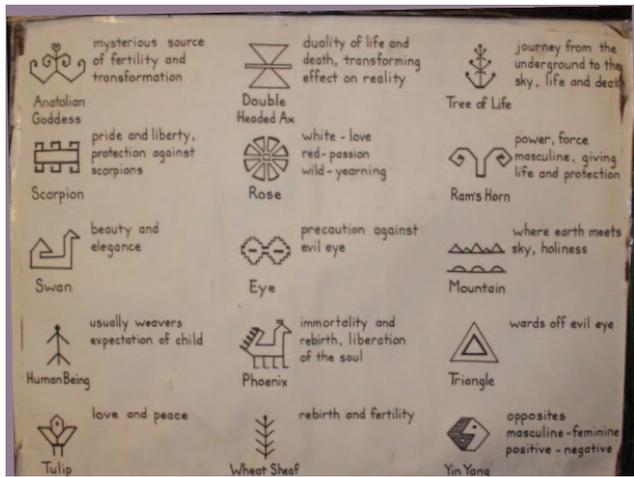
I also learnt that through the ages, weaving looms have remained relatively unchanged and two types of looms were in use. Custom and circumstances determined the type of loom used. Villagers usually employed a fixed vertical loom while nomads, for the sake of portability, generally employed a horizontal ground loom where stakes driven into the ground held the loom in position.

I needed to bridge the gap between my research and practice. What is the significance of my rug? Where, when and by whom was it made? I needed to "certify" authenticity.

Realistically I knew it would be impossible to certify an exact date, the precise origin and the quality of an anonymously produced hand-crafted object particularly one with some age.

However, I needed someone to make an "educated" guess about the rug which I had inherited. Someone who had handled and studied hundreds or thousands of such objects to be able to make valid judgements about them, their craftsmanship, their dyes and materials, their probable dates and their original intended use.

I sought the help of rug connoisseur, Robert (Bob) Cadry³ as I realized that comprehensive and accurate knowledge cannot



Motifs to help you interperate the symbols in your rug



Anatolian women weavers

always be obtained from books alone.

Bob's spontaneous response to my rug was:

"What a pretty rug, with such happy colours, a perfect dowry carpet. From the image it looks like a Turkish weaving that could have been woven in a number of villages in Western Anatolia. It could also have been woven by Greek weavers in regions populated by people of both origins that were influenced by one another. It would be woven with wool."

"These patterns are folk motifs, mostly stylised leaf and flowers typical from that region. As such there is no actual story to be read, although I am sure one could be poetically derived where the symbols are talismanic in purpose that ward off the evil eye, bring good luck and fertility."

All this information was derived without actually seeing my rug and with a warning not to over romanticise the symbolism of the motifs.

I obtained more interesting information from Bob Cadry, following a visit to his showroom, accompanied by my rug.

My rug, made in the early 1900's around 1920, was described as a "dowry" rug, however judging by the pattern used, not one woven specifically by a young woman herself, for her own dowry, but one that was commissioned as a wedding gift for a bride's dowry.

Rugs woven by the young woman herself formed one of the most important items in the dowry of a young Anatolian girl preparing for marriage. They were "samplers" produced as a demonstration or a test of the skill of the young woman and her worthiness as a wife.

I was interested in some irregularities in the design of my rug. I learnt that domestic weaving among women is most often a joint project with family members and friends working together. No one expected two individuals working side-by-side to produce identical results, as those participating in the weaving may in fact add their own unique touches or "signs" to the work.

He remarked on the "freshness" of my rug, commenting on the bright red cochineal and other bright coloured chrome dyes used and the quality of the undyed, unbleached sheep's wool.

He described the rug as a folkloric village rug, traditionally made in villages by groups of women who worked in their homes with primitive looms that lie on the floor and with just three tools: scissors, a comb and a knife with a hooked blade. My rug would have been woven and hand knotted by two women on a simple village loom, and taken about six to eight months to complete.

Bob commented that rugs are named from the provinces or cities where they are woven. Some of the motifs in the pattern of my rug were typical of the flowers, bushes and shrubs from Western Anatolia, mainly Megri (Makri), present day Fethiye. Other motifs were birds and eyes, denoting the evil eye and the warding off of evil spirits; all symbols appropriate for a dowry rug.

Another interesting comment made referred to the differentiation of rugs according to their size and function. My rug measured exactly 6 feet by 4 feet, and Bob used the term *seccade* pronounced "cer jar der" to describe the size of my rug. The term *seccade* usually refers to a prayer rug, however it also can refer to a scatter rug, a small decorative rug, that can be easily moved around from place to place. My grandmother always referred to my rug as a *setsetédhe*. Maybe this is the Kastellorizian pronunciation for this same term.

I now had a better understanding of my grandmother's rug, thanks to two passionate and knowledgeable people; a woman born on Kastellorizo, who migrated from Kastellorizo to Australia with her family in 1968, and a man born in Australia, whose family migrated to Australia from Tehran in the early 1950's.

Anatolian rugs collected and preserved by Kastellorizians represent a rich legacy of customs, culture and traditions; a legacy which remains largely unexplored and sadly may be in danger of becoming lost.

There is still much "uncovering" to be done. There are rugs, carpets and stories hidden away all over Australia.

The next time you look at your woven treasure, I hope you will appreciate its beauty all the more and treat it as a symbol of an old age custom and tradition, passed down as a way of preserving our history, helping to continue our ancestral traditions; family heirlooms that tell a story of a place in time.

1. An interview of Katina Asvestis by Rob Willis for records of the Western Australian Folklife Project. Recorded on October 26, 2005 at Perth, Western Australia. Donated to the Curtin University Library in 2008. Original held by the National Library of Australia, Canberra, ACT.

2. Oral history interviews with Katina Asvestis conducted and recorded by the author Anna Koutsis, on January 9, 11, 12, 2018.

3. Robert Cadry, Cadrys, Edgecliff Sydney, New South Wales. December, 2017.