

Golden Coins Of Legend: Kastellorizo's Konstantinata

by Nick Bogiatzis, Canberra



There are fascinating and true stories of hoards of gold coins found by residents of Kastellorizo. The island was regularly under threat from war, pirates or other upheavals. The residents learnt to keep their surplus wealth as gold coins, so they could flee strife, carrying or hiding this portable commodity that was universally accepted.

Traditionally these coins were also used to adorn their women. Wealth was displayed by the chains of gold coins, or amarthies, around their necks, as well as on their wrists, or from their ears. Pins of gold coins held their head scarves, or mandilia.

Reflecting the extent of the island's trading networks, many different coins were accumulated by this community. But one coin in particular was treasured: the Konstantinato, or coin of Constantine.

Why was this so? Behind it lies a fascinating story, particular to our island.

The story begins at the beginnings of Christianity. The Roman Emperor Constantine promulgated Christianity as the new religion of his empire. His mother, Helen, sought to strengthen this new faith by going to Jerusalem to find the cross of Christ. Some 1,000 years later, Western Europe undertook a similar quest, for similar purposes, in looking for the cup Christ reputedly used at the Last Supper, known as the Holy Grail.

Our local tradition has it, quite probably, that Helen stopped at Kastellorizo on her journey to Jerusalem, and asked that a church be built there in her name. That is why we have the cathedral of Saints Constantine and Helen. Though built as late as the early 19th century, it is reputedly built on the remains of older churches.

But back to the coins. This local tradition further adds that Helen had little luck in her search for the cross until one morning, while walking on a hill, she found a girl digging out a sweet smelling plant. The girl told Helen that she was trying to transplant it to her garden, but it always died, yet another plant always reappeared at the same spot.

Helen took this as a sign, and put her soldiers to digging up the hill. After an ongoing lack of success the soldiers became dispirited. To encourage them, Helen minted gold coins and hid them in the earth at night, so the soldiers would keep digging the next day. The coins showed her son holding the cross, and herself kneeling before it. On the other side was Christ in a mandala of stars.

Thus encouraged, the soldiers eventually found a cross, then another, and then a third. But which was the cross of Christ? At that time a funeral was passing. One cross was placed on the coffin: nothing. Then the second: nothing. With the third cross, the body returned to life, and Helen was assured of her find.

These coins were therefore greatly revered, especially on Kastellorizo. And even the scented plant is grown throughout Greece today. We know it now as the plant of the king, basiliko, or basil.

A great story, embedded in our Kastellorizian tradition. But why are there so many of these coins today?

Part of the reason is that the coins were often copied. There are such coins from our island that bear the hallmark of Egypt, where they were reminted. But the real reason is that they were in fact the currency of Venice: the ducat, or zecchino.

What the coin actually shows is the Doge or ruler of Venice kneeling before the city's patron saint, or guardian of the Serene Republic, St Mark.

Just as Britain's gold sovereign became a near universal currency in the 19th century, so had Venice's ducat become the popular currency of trade. Do you remember Shakespeare's Shylock who sought 'a pound of flesh' instead of the 3,000 ducats owed him?

The ducat, made of .986 gold, became a standard coin throughout Europe, especially after it was officially sanctioned in 1566. It was also called the zecchino after the Venetian mint, the Zecca, after 1543.

The design remained unchanged for more than 500 years, from its introduction in 1284 until the conquest of Venice by Napoleon's troops in 1797.

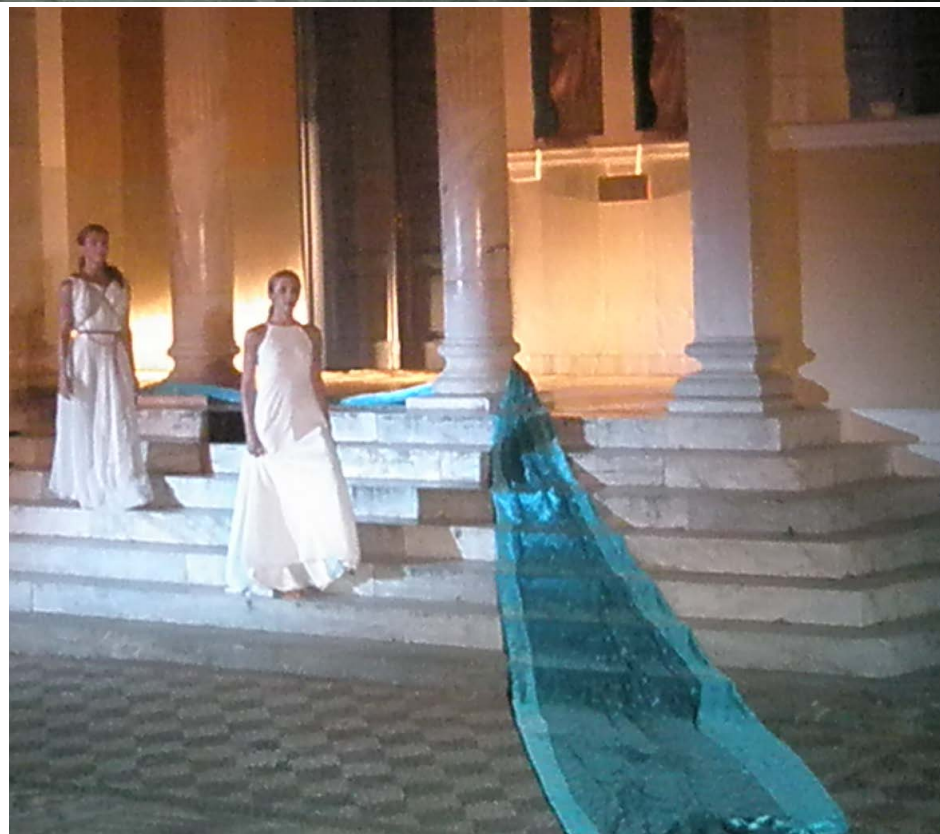
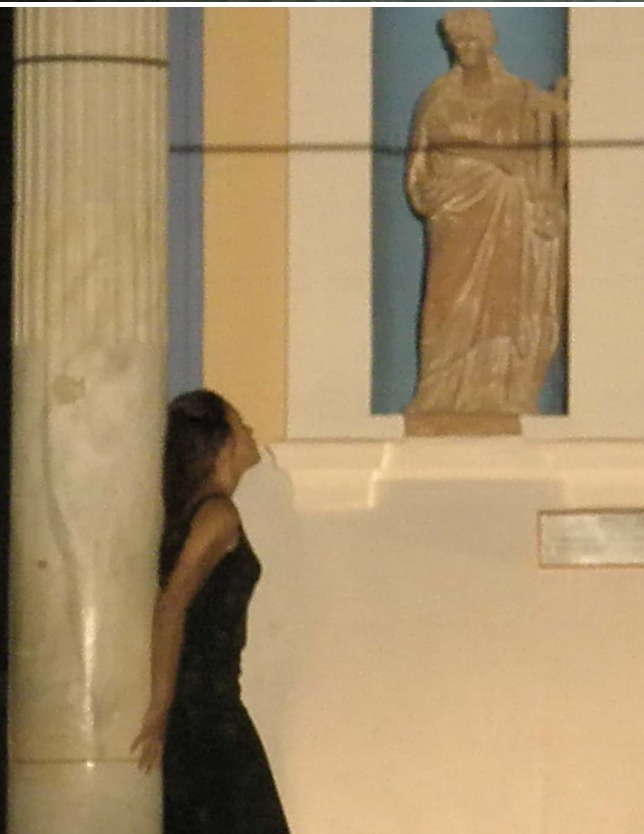
And it wasn't only in Kastellorizo that Venetian ducats took on a local meaning. For example ducats were popular in Kerala, in southern India, through the centuries old spice trade. They were made into jewellery or heavy kashumalas, coin necklaces worn on special occasions.

While Kastellorizo gave a more spiritual attribution to the coins, in Venice they had a less reverent association. They're called the toddy-tapper's coin, as the Doge is thought to be a man, perhaps already drunk, kneeling before the toddy-tapper to take the fermented toddy drink into his cupped hands!

But if you have a Konstantinato in your family – treasure it. It continues to reflect the rich trading and cultural history and traditions of our island.

Obv: The Doge receiving the gonfalon from St Mark. On the periphery S.M.VENET., name of Doge, by which the coin can be dated, and DVX (as in Duce).

Rev: Christ standing in a mandala with stars. SIT T XPE DAT QTV REGIS ISTE DVCAT along the periphery expands to Sit tibi, Christe, datus, quem tu regis, iste ducatus. ["To thee, O'Christ, duchy, which thou rulest, be dedicated"]



The Municipality of Kastellorizo organises Festivals for various occasions throughout the year. I was fortunate to be on Kastellorizo on August 29 and 30 in 2010. The Dodecanese Cultural Association organised the dramatisation of the island's history through a multi-media presentation. The photos show the splendid backdrop of the Santrapeia School which provided the perfect set for the rather poignant performance. Prior to this there was a documentary screened that outlined the tumultuous history of Kastellorizo. This documentary expands on the content of the one shown at the museum.

On the second night of the weekend festival, the Municipality organised a band from Rodos to play for locals and tourists alike. Once again, the setting near where the ferries dock, provided the perfect backdrop for this musical event on a balmy evening with the lights on Kastellorizo dancing to the tunes of the Greek music, capturing the romantic essence of the moment. No wonder the Italians have voted Kastellorizo as one of the three best places to have your honeymoon.

When you visit Kastellorizo make sure you read the notices on the lamp posts for announcements that provide information about events on the island, otherwise, you can miss out on some wonderful events.

Australian Friend

Historical Findings of Major Religious Significance in Kastellorizo

by Dr Paul Boyatzis, Perth

Whilst routine maintenance work was carried out on the walls of the Cathedral of Saints Constantine and Helene in Kastellorizo recently, stone structures were unearthed which may well be part of an earlier Church believed to have been built on the site by Saint Helene on her return journey from the Holy Land following her discovery of the Holy Cross.

Tradition has it that following the finding of the Cross whilst returning to Constantinople, Saint Helene took refuge in the safe harbour of Kastellorizo in order to avoid the treacherous seas that prevailed. It is believed that the devout Christian and mother of Emperor Constantine commissioned the building of a small church on the island as a way of thanking God for providing protection.

The religious significance of the Patron Saints of Kastellorizo, Saints Constantine and Helene, in the lives of Kastellorizians is well known. Indeed our parish Church in Perth is named in keeping with the Cathedral in Kastellorizo, even though the architectural design and structure are quite different.

The photograph taken during my recent visit to Kastellorizo reveals an arched structure on the south eastern wall of the Church building with a cross at the apex which according to the island's well known priest, Father George Maltezos, may well be the entrance to the small original Church. The stone blocks can be identified in the photo.

The current Gothic church was erected in 1835 on the site of yet another church (apart from the purported initial St Helene's dedication) and has a magnificent interior and superb marble iconostasion. The roof structure is supported by 12 ornate giant monolithic granite pillars which were transported by barges from Patara of Lycia (now Turkey).

According to Father George, permits for extensive excavations are imminent and if the findings are as suspected, the importance for Kastellorizo and indeed for Christendom as a whole is most significant.



Photo by Ariane Kikiros

AFK eNews

Do you know each month AFK sends out an email newsletter to over 850 people throughout the world ?
If you would like to be included or wish to include a family member or friend please forward
email address to coordinator@kastellorizo.com

Books of Kastellorizo

Donations



AFK would like to thank Eustathios (Stan) and Marika Kondilios for generously donating 20 books to the school on Kastellorizo in memory of Stan's maternal grandparents, Michael Hatzikomninos, cafe proprietor Mesi tou Yialou and Margaret (Nicholas Mavrou) Hatzikomninos, both of whom attended Santrapeia School on Kastellorizo.



AFK would also like to thank the children of Michael Canaris (also known as Lefkaritis/Peigiorgi, born Kastellorizo 1885) & Evangelia Canaris (nee Kailis, born Kastellorizo 1899) for generously donating 20 books to the school on Kastellorizo in memory of their parents. Evangelia attended Santrapeia School on Kastellorizo.

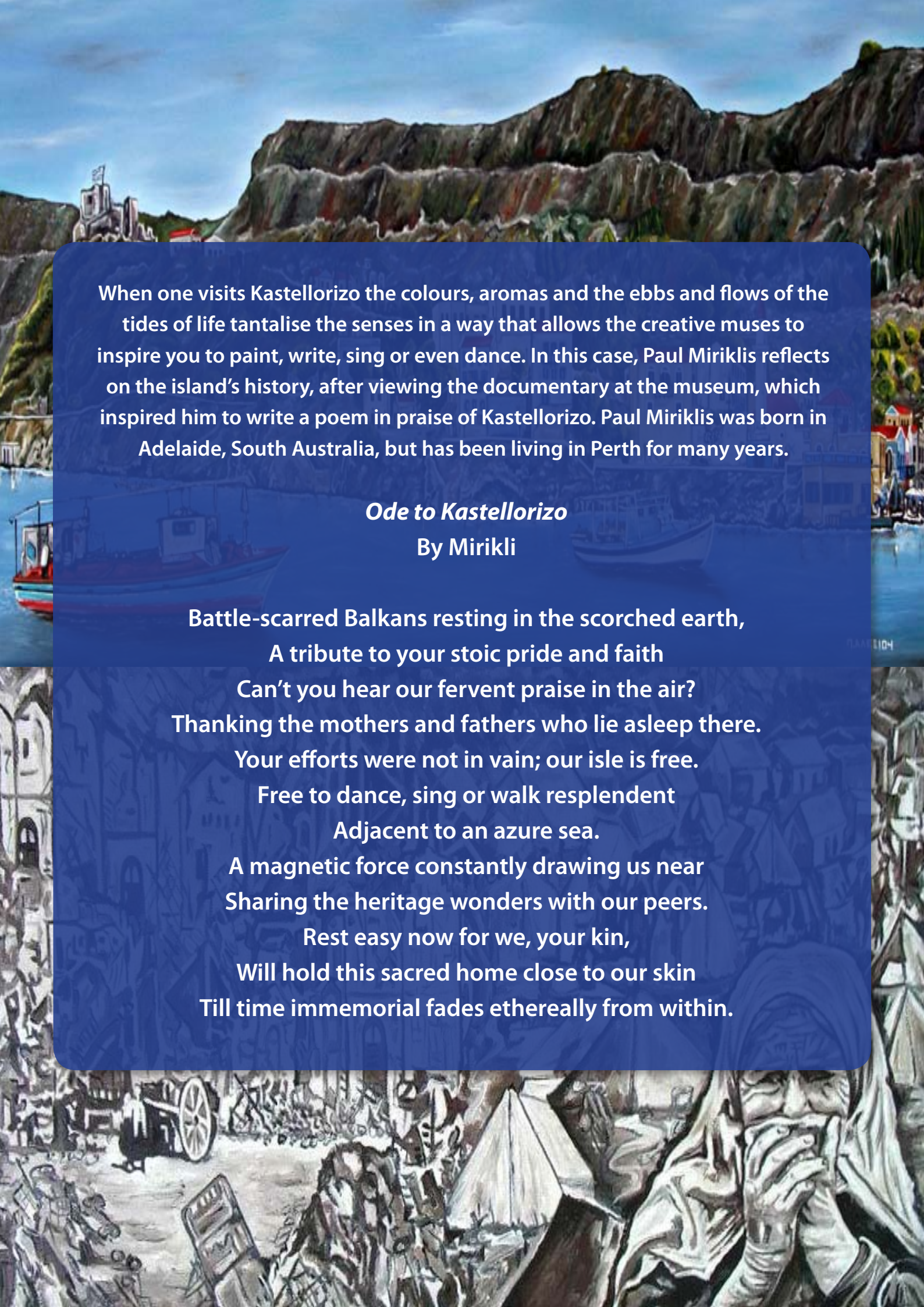
Children's Illustrated History

Kastellorizo: My Odyssey

The book printed in Australia and launched in November 2010 is now sold out.

If you are visiting Kastellorizo this summer you can purchase a copy on the island. A limited number will be printed on Rhodes Island, Greece for sale on Kastellorizo.





When one visits Kastellorizo the colours, aromas and the ebbs and flows of the tides of life tantalise the senses in a way that allows the creative muses to inspire you to paint, write, sing or even dance. In this case, Paul Miriklis reflects on the island's history, after viewing the documentary at the museum, which inspired him to write a poem in praise of Kastellorizo. Paul Miriklis was born in Adelaide, South Australia, but has been living in Perth for many years.

Ode to Kastellorizo
By Mirikli

Battle-scarred Balkans resting in the scorched earth,
A tribute to your stoic pride and faith
Can't you hear our fervent praise in the air?
Thanking the mothers and fathers who lie asleep there.
Your efforts were not in vain; our isle is free.
Free to dance, sing or walk resplendent
Adjacent to an azure sea.
A magnetic force constantly drawing us near
Sharing the heritage wonders with our peers.
Rest easy now for we, your kin,
Will hold this sacred home close to our skin
Till time immemorial fades ethereally from within.

Proverbs by Dr Paul Boyatzis

Fasouli me fasouli yemizi to sakouli.
(With a single bean at a time you can fill a whole bag).
Don't underestimate patience in achieving your goal.
Very popular and often quoted proverb.

Oti vgali to tsoukali moro mou.
(Whatever comes out of the pot my child).
A well pointed response of a mother to a member of the family who asks "What's for dinner"?
Don't ask questions as to what she has cooked !
(The moro / child may be referring to a forty year old man who still lives at the family home). He is unmarried, living at home and he is her moro.
Kazzy / Greek thinking of yesteryear!

Kastellorizian Lexicon

The Kastellorizian word appears in bold with the demotic Greek word in brackets.

Emblase	(ehithi)	spilled
Karaoli	(salingaria)	snails
Kapsi	(piretos)	fever (high temperature)
Ma-mmi	(yia-yia)	grandmother
Xispazome	(tromazo)	to startle
Panagiri	(eorti)	celebration (nameday)
Peripezo	(koroithevo)	to ridicule
Pouli	(gramatosimo)	stamp
Sandaklitha	(kounia)	swing
Fola	(koumbi)	button
Froukalia	(skoupa)	broom
Hasiko	(kataspro)	pure white in colour

Proverbs by Dr George Stabelos

"O yeros kai an kordizete, stin anifora gnorizete!"

An old man can boast of what he is still capable of doing, however it is on walking uphill that his capabilities will be evident.

It is easy to make grandiose claims. The true test comes when one has to act.

"Anthropos agramatos, xilo apelekito"

An uneducated person may appear to others like an uncarved piece of timber. Knowledge and education leads to refinement.

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