

A Description of the Isle of Nicaria, olim Icarus
By Archbishop Joseph Georgirenes in 1677

The isle of *Nicaria* being under the jurisdiction of the Archbishop of *Samos*, I thought it expedient to add this relation of it, as a supplement to that of *Samos*.

Nicaria lies in length east and west; its prospect on the north is to *Scio* (probably *Xios*), on the south to *Paros* and *Naxos*, on the East to *Patmos*, and the West to *Mycone*. Three miles distant from the island, on the south-side towards *Patmos*, lay some small islands uninhabited; but known by the name of *Furny*, and furnished with good harbours; capacious enough for all sorts of vessels. Here the Corsairs of *Malta*, and other Christians used to lay in wait for shops that trade from *Scio* to *Rhodes*. It lies twelve miles distant from *Samos*. The sea about it was formerly called the *Icarian Sea*, from *Icarus*, so famous among the Ancient Poets.

*Quid fuit ut tutas agitare Dadalus alas,
Icarus immense nomine signet aquas?
Tot premor adversis, ut si comprehendere coner
Icariae numerum dicere coner aqua.
Ov. 1.4 El.tr.5*

*Icarus Icaris nomina secit aqui.
Transit & Icarium lapsas uni perdidit alas
Icarus & vasta nomina secit aque.
Ovid. 1.4 Fast*

It is upwards of four score miles in compass, and yet has not one Port nor Road for great ships, but only small creeks for little boats. The one called " τὸν ἅγιον φώκα " - Saint Phoka - from a church here dedicated to St. Phocas. The other is called *Keramy*, so extremely bad, that they that come ashore here are forced to draw up their boats after them. A mile off *Keramy* is a little island called " *Καραβοστάσι* " - *Karavostasi*, or the Rode for small vessels, called *Karavia*. This affords a good retreat for vessels in tempestuous weather. And when it is fair, they lade and unlade their vessels with all possible speed, at the shore of *Icarus*, and so retire for fear of a storm.

All the island is very mountainous and full of rocks, which causes but few villages, and those very small, none of them exceeding a 100 houses. The promontory towards *Samos* is called *Phanari*, or the *Lanthorn*, because of a Watch Tower here built, to give light to Mariners in the night. The Tower is yet standing and the common people are so far mistaken in the common fable,

as to pretend that *Icarus* and his son were here kept prisoner. But they are given to credulity of new reports more inconvenient than that of old fables, and that the belief of treasures hid in all old ruins ever since the taking of *Constantinople*, where so much was found long after it was burned. The conceit blown up by various reports, and the itch of talking on one side, and the great credulity of ignorant people on the other, hath increased into a vulgar tradition, very incommodious to the *Greeks*, and where at the *Turks* take great advantage against them, in case they meddle with any ruins either for curiosity or use. And these Islanders have a common tradition, that about this old Tower of *Icarus* lies a great treasure, whereof part, though not all, they say, was carried away some 40 years ago, by some *Asiaticks*, that came over by stealth, and in the night, dug up all the ground, And an old man, whom I spoke with, that saw them at work, but durst not come near till they had all gone aboard, and set sail, upon his approach, found the dead carcasse of a man newly slain; whom they suppose was sacrificed to the *Genius* of the place, or the *Guardian Angel* of the Treasure. They add besides, that before this adventure of the *Asiaticks*, the place was haunted with a spirit, which always appeared in black, and destroyed the Oxen, at least one in a year. But since that time, the place was no more haunted, nor did the Labourers ever complain of the loss of an Ox.

About this shore are the best *Cockles* of all the *Archipelago*. The principle villages are 1. *Cachoria* (*Akamatra*) of 100 houses, and two or three *Ches*. 2. *Steli*, (still called this) famous for great abundance of Nut Trees. 3. *Musara*, besides which is an *Hermitage*, and a *Church*, where are kept the reliques of *St. Theoctistes*, who was of *Lesbos*, and whom the people think does miracles at this day. Here are in the Isle the ruins of a greater town than any now is. The *Church* is yet standing and goes by the name of *St. Hellens*. The beauty of it's fabrick is a clear argument, it was built in the days of the *Constantinopian* Emperours, and though it has no house near hand it, yet great resort is made hither for devotion; and from time to time there never wants a *Papas* to say the Prayers of the *Church* in it.

There are besides these three already named, a great many little villages scattered up and down through the whole island, which for the number of houses, are larger of extent than those in *Samos*, for here every house is environed with its proper *Garden*, *Orchard*; but the houses in *Samos* are commonly built closer, and their *Gardens* and *Orchards* at a greater distance.

The whole island is for the most part mountainous, and rocky, the valleys are few, and little in compass for that with great labour and difficulty they force out of so barren a soil that little corn they have, which is not sufficient to feed the inhabitants above one half the year; and lays a necessity upon the

Nicarians to traffic abroad for supplies elsewhere. But principally they trade to Scio (Xios) for corn, whither they carry wood from Samos, and the neighbouring parts of *Anatolia*. They are very expert in making boats, and small vessels, which are in such esteem that they are bought up by all their neighbours. Besides their traffic in wood and small vessels, they vend good store of sheep and goats, wherewith their mountains are well stored. And yet their care to keep them is too small that without either milking them, or driving them into Coats, or folds, or making any limits or bounds, they only visit them twice a year, to count the number of their flocks, and to imprint the marks of the proper owners. Some there are and those of the richest that are at the trouble of milking so many, as may supply their family with cheese. They vend likewise good store of swine flesh. Wax and honey they have great plenty of, but their honey is in no great esteem because of that bitterness of taste which it receives from their Bees feeding up on Fir leaves, which tree that island abounds with.

The most commendable thing of this island is their air and water, both so healthful, that the people are very long lived, it being an ordinary thing to see persons in it of 100 years of Age, which is a great wonder, considering how hardily they live. There is not a bed in the island, the ground is their tick, and the cold stone their pillow, and the clothes they wear is all the coverlet they use. They provide no more apparel than what they wear all at once, when that is past wearing any longer, then they think of a new suit. Betwixt their ordinary time of eating, there is not a piece of bread to be found in the isle. A little before dinner, they take as much corn as will serve that meal, grind it with a hand-mill, bake it upon a flat stone, when it is baked, the master of the family divides it equally among the family; but a woman with child has two shares. If any stranger comes in, every one parts with a piece of his own share to accommodate the stranger. Their wine is always made with a third part water, and so very weak and small. When they drink it, so much as is thought sufficient is put into one large bowl, and so passes round.

The *Nicarians* are the only islanders of all the Archipelago, that neither keep wine to sell, nor lay it up in wooden vessels, but in long jars, covered all over in the ground. When they have a mind to tap it, they make a bung hole in the top and draw it out with canes. Their houses are so plain, that all the furniture you can see is an hand-mill, besides this, there is nothing but bare walls: That little they have besides is all hid under ground, not so much for fear of the Corsairs (from whom their poverty is sure guard) as out of custom. Nor are they all so poor, as not to be able to buy beds, but custom has brought, them into contempt of beds, as merely superfluous; in so much that when they travel into other islands, they refuse the offer of a bed. A priest of *Nicaria* coming into *Samos*, was courteously entertained by those of his order, and at night was offered a bed to lye in; he thanked them but refused, nor could by any

importunity be prevailed upon, but told them the earth was his mother, from whence he would not keep a distance; besides he was afraid of being sick, if he should lye in a bed; therefore if they had a kindness for him, they must give him the liberty of sleeping after his own country way.

When I went to visit them as Archbishop, and ignorant of the custom of the country, carried no bed, at night, where I first lodged, asking for a chamber, they told me they had no other than that where I first came, then asking for a bed, they told me it was not the custom of the country; then desiring to borrow some bed clothes for love or money, all they bought me was one smock made of course Dimity.

They have no great communication one with another, any farther than the public times of Sacred Solemnities, or Civil Benefits doth cause them to come together. At other times they keep strictly within the narrow sphere of their own affairs. Formal visits, treats and entertainments, are things unknown. If any business do put them upon a visit to their neighbour, they come not close to his door, but stand off at a great distance, and call aloud to him, if he make them answer, they discourse the business they came about standing off at the same distance; except they be earnestly invited to come in. And this way of discoursing at a distance they practice more in the fields and mountains; their voices being so strong, that it is ordinary to talk at a miles distance; sometimes at four or five; where the valleys interposed between two hills, give advantage to the voice. Sometimes they can discourse at that distance, that the carriage of the sound through the winding of the valleys, shall require half a quarter of an hour's time, and yet they make distinct; and proper answers, both audible and intelligible, without the help of a *stentorophonical* trumpet.

Their habit for the men, is a shirt, and over it a short cassock down to the knees, to which, in winter they add only a short vest, that reaches a little below the middle. Stockings they never wear. Their shoes are only a piece of thin copper, bowed to the shape of their feet, and every one is his own shoemaker. The women have nothing but one smock, but so large, that they wrap it double, or treble down to the girdle, but below the girdle single. The priests for greater reverence in the church tie two towels round their legs, the one is their usual bonnet, and the other their girdle; so that they perform sacred offices un-girt, as well as uncovered.

Of all the isles of the *Archipelagos*, this only admits of no mixture with strangers in marriage, nor admits any stranger to settle with them: They being as they pretend, all descended of the Imperial Blood of the *Porphyrogenneti*, must not stain their noble blood with inferior matches, or mixtures with choriates (villagers) or peasants, for so they term all the other islanders.

Porphyrogenneti, were those of the Blood Royal, in the days of the *Greek* Emperors, so called from their wearing of Purple, which was a badge of royalty, and allowed only to Princes of the Blood; and not from the house called Porphyra. Where the Empress were wont to lie in. But purple was throughout the east, the known badge of Royalty. Hence came the unsanctified wit and learned writer that ever opposed the Christian religion with his pen, to be called *Porphyrius*: for his true name in the language of Syria, his native country was *Malchus*, or King, but the *Greeks* did paraphrase it *Porphyrius*, or purple robed; that being a colour peculiar to Kings.

They have great happiness; by reason of their poverty, in not being molested by the Turks, who think it not worth their while to come among them, nor if they should, were they likely to enjoy any quiet, without keeping a stronger guard than the revenue of the isle would maintain. Once they slew a *Caddee* (a servant), sent by the *Grand Seignior* and being summoned to answer for their crime, they by common consent owned the fact but would name no particular man. So that the Turkish Officers looking upon their beggarly clothes, thought there was neither gain nor glory in punishing such miscreants. And that in justice, they must punish all, or none, dismissed them untouched.

From that time no Turk ever troubled them: For they take all courses imaginable to seem poor, and where so ever they come abroad they count it no shame to beg alms: Yet they make a shift every year to levy 300 crowns for the Archbishop. They are governed by a *Proesti* (leader) of their own choosing, who also levys their Haratch or Tribute to the *Grand Seignior* and takes care to carry it to the Aga of Scio (Xios). As for their religion, it is the same with that of Samos, but their priests are more ignorant.

Thus you have an account of a small island, the poorest, and yet the happiest of the whole Aegean Sea. The soil is barren, but the air is healthful, their wealth is but small; but their liberty and security is great. They are not molested with the tyrannous insolence of a Turkish Officer, nor with the frightful incursions of barbarous and merciless pirates. Their diet and apparel is below the rate of beggars in other countries, and their lodging is a thing of the no more care, or cost, than that of the beasts of the field, yet their bodies are strong and hardy, and the people generally long lived. They live with as little forecast, as if they expected not to survive a day, being contented to satisfy the present necessities of nature. They do properly *In diem vivere*, or as we say from 'hand to mouth'. They have but little, yet they never want. Their ignorance is equal to their poverty, and contributes much to their content. And how well they esteem of their own condition, their contempt of their neighbouring islands, and scorning to mix with them in alliance by marriage, is a manifest sign. Whence we may learn, that they approach the nearest to contentedness is this life; whole desires are contracted into the narrowest compass.