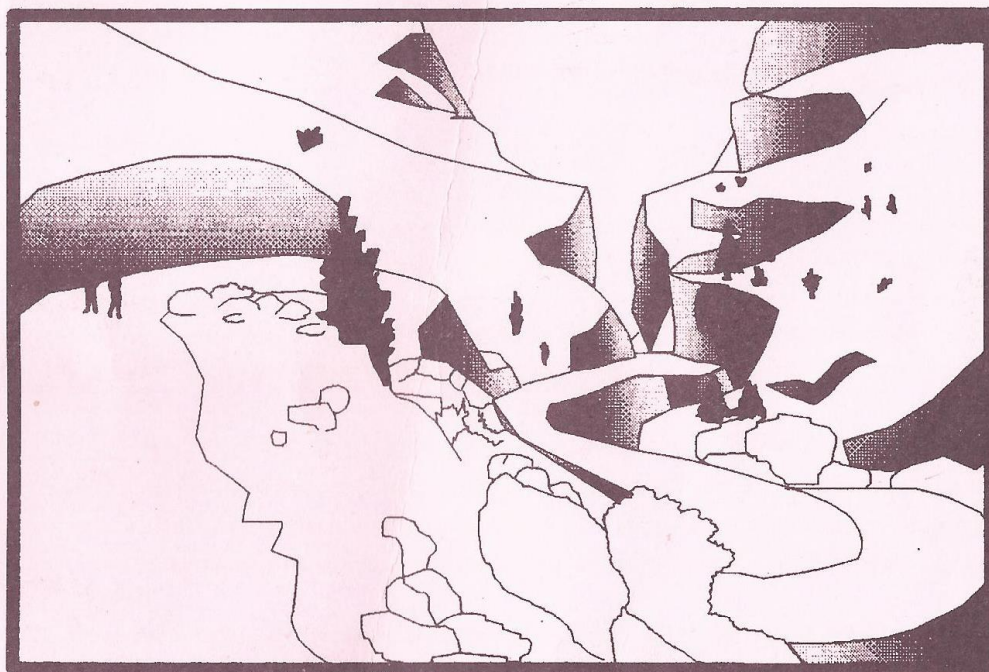


TEN WALKS IN THE PLAKIAS AREA



Lance Chilton

A guide for walkers
in the Plakias area
of southern Crete.

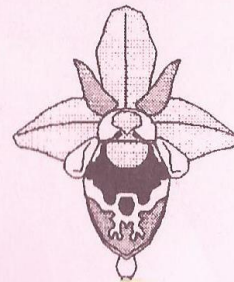
Further walks are described in
'7 More - and More Challenging - Walks in
the Plakias Area'
by the same author.

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INTRODUCTION

Although all the routes mentioned here are in reasonable condition, unless described otherwise, this situation can change quickly in an area of sometimes violent weather and subsequent landslips or altered surfaces - not to mention the locals' fondness for bulldozers. Most paths have at least some loose stones, and rain can make the steeper ones unsuitable for the elderly and infirm or inagile.

Anyone using this book does so at their own risk. Although the author has used all the routes described without any mishap, and has tried to describe the routes as accurately as possible, he cannot accept any responsibility for incidents occurring during the use of this book. Please read through the *entire* description of a walk before attempting it.

Route times given at the beginning of a walk description are *minimal* times for *fast* walkers and do not allow for rest-stops etc. If you are slower, do not attempt to hurry, but enjoy the walk at your own pace. The length of a description does not necessarily relate to the length of the walk. A walk can be long and uncomplicated or short and involved.

Compass directions are approximate and a compass is not necessary for any of the walks.

In the text, a 'track' is a vehicle-width dirt-track, though not necessarily driveable!

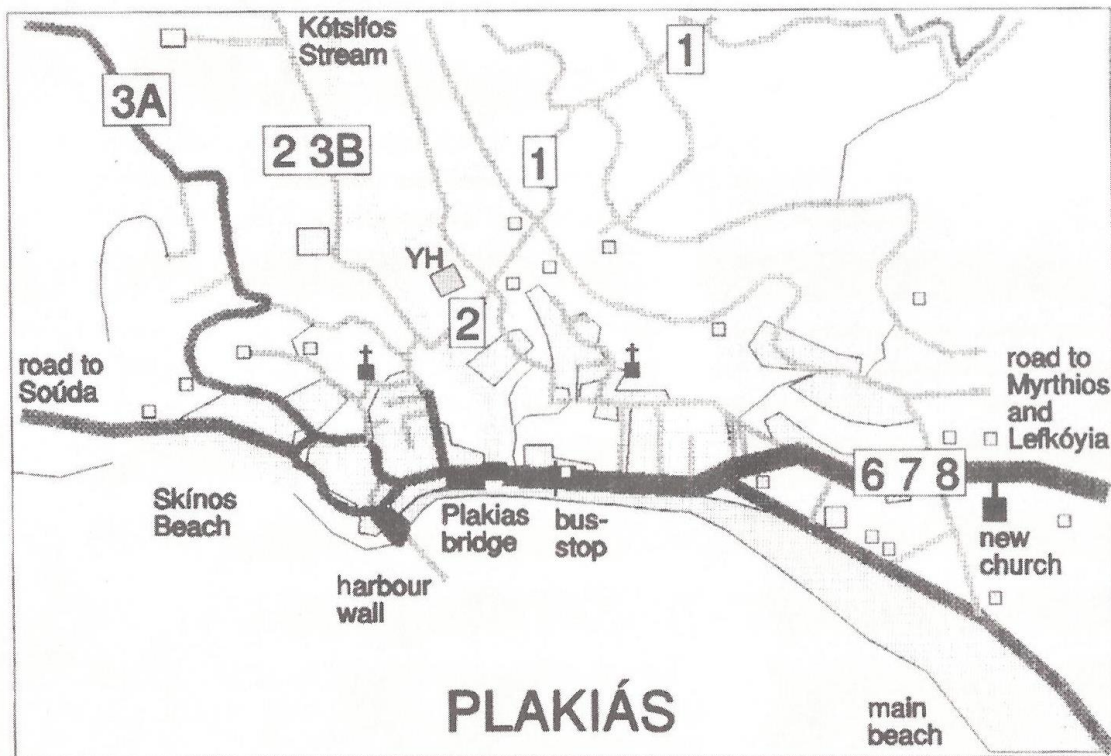
A *Kafeneío* is a small village café serving drinks, but not usually food.

Mention of cafés, tavernas, restaurants, hotels etc. by name is for directional purposes only and should not be taken as the author's endorsement. Cafés and tavernas are marked by a ☆ on the village maps.

Accents on Greek names indicate the syllable to be stressed.

There is the possibility of meeting country *dogs*, who will often behave aggressively. They can be discouraged by being shouted at, by being threatened with a stick, or by seeing you pick up a stone from the ground preparatory to throwing it at them. Be assertive. These are all methods used by locals when dealing with dogs. Forget your British sensibilities - the alternative may be a course of rabies jabs after you have been bitten. If you cannot find a stone to pick up, try miming it. If necessary, throw the stone or wield the stick, bearing in mind that if the owner is nearby he may feel that you are usurping his right to abuse the dog himself. If you meet a friendly dog, you should remember that in Greece they can carry on their fur the eggs of *Echinococcus*, a liver tapeworm causing hydatid cysts.

In one or two places on the walks described, there are prickly shrubs growing beside the paths. If you have to push past these, particularly with bare legs, you are much less likely to get scratched if you slow down and ease past gently. Paths that are thickly overgrown in May sometimes have not a sign of vegetation in late summer. If you have



secateurs, you may find it useful to take a pair with you, if you plan to walk in the Greek countryside. They should not be necessary for the walks described, but can be used to make paths more comfortable both for yourselves and others.

For walks starting in Plakiás, begin at the bridge by the *Forum* supermarket on the seafront.

1. Quick Route to Mýrthios

This walk takes you from Plakiás up to the hill village of Mýrthios at 655ft/200m, in about 30 minutes.

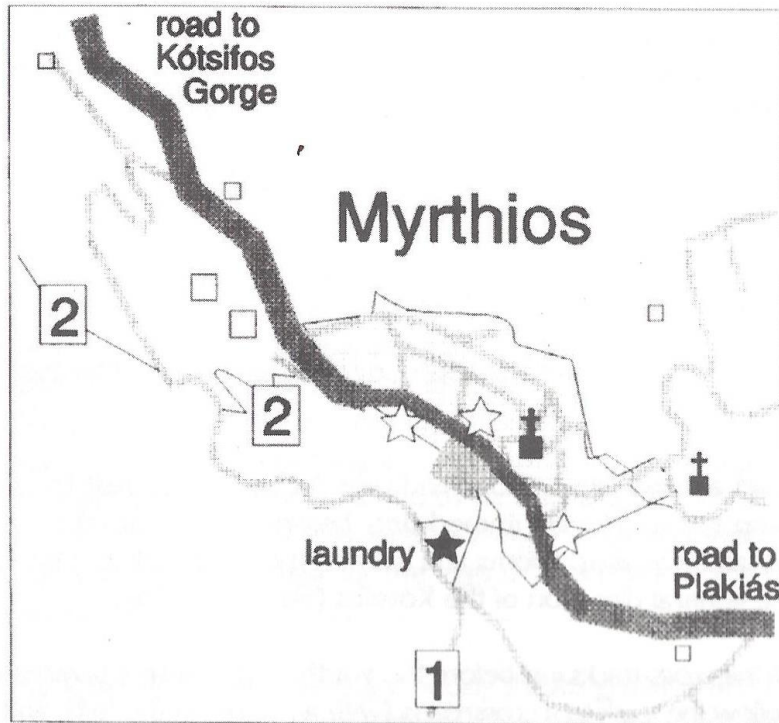
Start at the Plakiás Bridge and take the main road east for a short way, then turn left onto the short road immediately before the *Monza* office. At the T-junction, by the sociable Kyriakos' rooms and leather-shop, turn left and follow the track as it winds in the general direction of the Kótsifos (*blackbird*) valley.

At the cross-tracks just before the youth hostel, with a taverna on your right, turn right. Follow the track to a crossroads (with a house on the left), and go across to a dirt track that climbs up, swinging to the left. The track then turns and climbs to the right, passing on the left a memorial to an off-duty taxi-driver who died here while tending his olives. Keep going uphill on the track, which is a steep stream-bed in wet weather and is somewhat slippery underfoot at the best of times, and then join a track coming in from the left. Immediately after this junction there is a concrete structure on the right with a projecting metal pipe. At the next junction go left, uphill.

Follow the uphill tracks (more or less straight) until eventually you reach a cross-tracks and a narrow concrete irrigation channel. There are several of these watercourses in the area with, at intervals, exit sluices for diverting water to various sections of hillside. The water comes from the Megapótamós river in the Kourtaliótis Gorge to the east. Opposite the track you have come up, the channel is bridged and a stony track continues up the hillside towards Mýrthios.

There are several small paths leading off to the side of this section, and a few remaining huge olive trees of indeterminable age, some probably over 500 years old. EU subsidies have paid for the removal of many of them. Just below the village is a semi-open-air laundry, and next to it a reservoir tank for surplus and waste water, with exits to various irrigation networks. The fragmentary remnants of the original cobbled Mýrthios-Plakiás donkey-road (irreplaceably bulldozed elsewhere) climb up to the right of it, into Mýrthios' main square.

Mýrthios has two tavernas nearby. First, *The Plateia* (*The Square*) with tables in the open square. Then the *Panorama*, a minute or two leftwards towards the western end of the village, with a balcony providing a superb view over Plakiás Bay. A third taverna is along the main asphalt road to the right. There are a few small shops in the village, including a cheese factory-shop. The post office and the war memorial are in a



small square to the right. Also here, in an upstairs building entered from a side street, was the village's communal olive press - the new press is in a much more functional building outside the village on the road to Plakiás. The olives were crushed and the pulp spread on circular nylon pressing-mats that were stacked and then pressed hydraulically to produce virgin oil. The black residue from the pressing was taken by lorry to town for chemical treatment to extract further, but lower quality, oil. Some of the pollution in streams below Cretan villages is caused by olive waste, and not, as some people suspect, entirely by sewage.

Above the main road, the village shelters under an overhanging cliff. It is a maze of streets and white painted steps, just wide enough for a couple of pedestrians or a laden donkey. You will almost certainly get lost among the whitewashed houses, but eventually you will end up back on the road. Mýrthios' main church, in the centre of the village, is usually locked, but by looking in the side windows you can see some of the wonderful wall and ceiling decorations.

To the east of the village, up a short track, there is a small church and graveyard with views out over the bay. From outside the cemetery you can see, beside the new ossuary building, the gravestone of a local who died in 1990 in her 105th year. Note the raised family tombs, constructed of marble, with little glass windows at the back containing photos of the deceased, plastic flowers, or oil for a lamp. A characteristic

sound of Cretan cemeteries is the melancholy rattle of the glass in the wind. Rather ominously, there is a cemetery extension being built with plenty of new, empty graves.

2. Walk to Mýrthios via the Watermill

This walk takes you into the valley of the Kótsifos stream, behind Plakiás, then on up the eastern side of the valley to the main road and into Mýrthios village. It takes 45-75 minutes.

Follow Walk 1 as far as the youth hostel crossroads, however, at this junction turn left onto the track which crosses the Kótsifos stream. (Ignore direction signs to the mill!) Just after the bridge, turn right and follow the track that more or less parallels the stream and goes into the olive groves. Pass, on your left, a large concrete block building, connected with the local sewerage system. A while further on, the main track bridges a small, polluted sidestream (or dry streambed) and heads upwards, away from the Kótsifos. Turn right here to keep nearer to the main stream. The track meanders among the olives and, after a narrow gullied section, passes eventually near a stepping-stone crossing of the Kótsifos stream.

The route narrows to a stony path which runs just to the right of a low wall. Unfortunately a later part of this original path has become increasingly overgrown. The alternative, through a gap in front of you on the left, and then winding through olives, is much more practical though less picturesque. Beside the *old* path there is an abandoned millstone, from the mill higher up.

Follow the new route, through the olives, until the path bends sharply right beside a tree and a gap in the wall immediately to the right. Step through the gap onto the old path, turn left and out onto a rocky ledge above the stream, from where you will be able see the stone watermill in the narrowing valley up ahead of you. The path returns briefly into the olives - turn right - before going back to the stream. The old, probably 19th Century, footbridge to the watermill will soon be in sight.

An interesting diversion, before crossing the footbridge, is to take a narrow rocky path that drops down to the left of the stream and goes on around an outcrop of rock before leading to a tiny chapel tucked into an overhang of the cliff.

Crossing the bridge, the path zigzags up beside the mill and then continues upvalley. The watermill is a partial ruin and, following a serious fire in 1986, the remaining wooden roof beams are less stable than they once were, so any exploration of the structure is at your own risk. It is a chimney-mill, a very ancient design from Mesopotamia, introduced to Crete by the Venetians during the 1500's for milling grain, although this particular one is not of that age. The chimney is the vertical pipe at the end of the big

wall that projects from the valley side. Water from the Kótsifos higher up the valley used to be diverted into a channel along the side of the valley. This channel kept level as the parent stream dropped downwards, so that by the time the channel reached the top of the mill's chimney there was sufficient head of water to drive a horizontal turbine at the base. The power was then geared down to a stone grinding wheel, the broken base plate of which can still be seen. At the base of the main chimney, the run-off water went in a second channel, to a smaller, lower chimney. By climbing up beside the arch under this second channel, it is possible to see, in the main chimney run-off exit, the decaying metal turbine. In one of the lowest rooms, an old bread oven can be found.

The path goes on upwards immediately to the right of the mill (look out for the remnants of the water-channel), through a rather overgrown section, before turning sharply back to the right. Some of the shrubs crowding the path are prickly, so slow down to pass them if you have bare bits. Continue upwards, with good views steeply downwards on your right to the mill ruins. Follow the path, which runs between fences in a more cultivated area, onwards and upwards. The bulldozing of yet another track above this path has resulted in considerable damage from falling debris. The path climbs to the new track and joins it. Turn right on the track and follow it for a way, looking out for an upward path to the left. This is the onward path, which zigzags backup to the asphalt road, but is not always easy to find. *(If you miss these paths you will reach the laundry in Walk 1).* Reaching the asphalt road, on your left is a roadside memorial to a local family, above you on the far side of the road is the local primary school (and access to the upper village), and to your right is Mýrthios village.

From Mýrthios to Plakiás, you can return by Walk 1 or 2, reversed, or by the main asphalt road, which is longer than you would expect it to be because of the number of bends as it descends. If taking this latter option, just follow the road southeastward out of Mýrthios, to a junction where you turn right and downhill, passing the new village olive press. At the next asphalt junction, near the Shell garage, turn right towards Plakiás. *You can also turn right earlier onto a dirt track, immediately after and below the big asphalt S-bend. There is usually a wheelie-bin parked here. This track will take you above Plakiás and eventually to a T-junction with Walk 1, where you should go left. Go straight on where the track swings right, and go down to and across the crosstracks. At the next crosstracks by the new taverna and youth hostel, go left, or straight on then left, for your chosen half of Plakiás.*

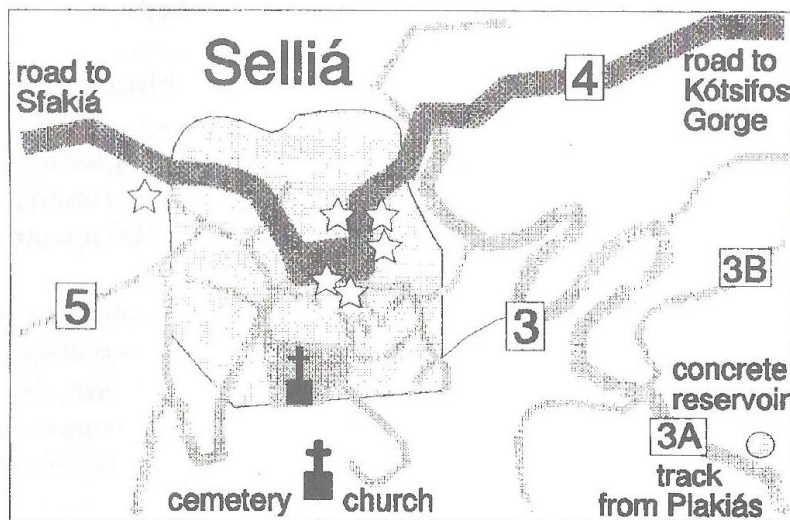
3A. Walk to Selliá

This walk takes you up the western flank of the Kótsifos valley and into Selliá village. It can be quite steep for a considerable part of the way and may be tiring in very hot weather. It can be done in half an hour, but allow at least 45-60 minutes to do it comfortably. The steeper parts of the road surface have been concreted, and there is more traffic, so you may wish to consider alternative route Walk 3B.

From the Plakiás Bridge, take the main waterfront road west. Then take the second, concrete, road to the right, just past the bakery shop, where the seafront curves to the left. The road goes between the *Sofia Hotel* and the billiard hall and a supermarket. Turn left uphill then curve right, up the ridge that comes down to the western end of the village. The road along this ridge has buildings on the left and, between them, good views over the bay to the west of Plakiás.

The ascending road curves to the right to join a smaller ridge, with good views of Plakiás to your right. Here it then turns back up to the left by some manhole covers. Follow this road as it winds uphill for a while, past a large new concrete reservoir on the right, to a cross-roads [→ Walk 3B] below Selliá village. Take the road ahead of you which has a small area of welcome shade from a conifer tree. The road swings right for a way, towards the gorge, and then back to the left. Further up, as the road bends to the right again, there is a footpath on the left, leading directly up towards Selliá. It is partly stony, partly concrete, and follows a polluted streamlet past some locals' vegetable plots, into Selliá's Plakiás Street. (If you miss the path, the road you are on loops upwards and eventually joins the main Kótsifos Gorge road just northeast of Selliá village. Turn left into Selliá.) From Plakiás Street go right, then left and up, then turn right towards the main square.

Selliá village (altitude 920ft/280m) used to have a taverna (now closed) on the church square, but there are several *kafeneíons* (coffee-shops) of various sizes, mostly around the square where the main road loops through the village. Some may have a small selection of food. There are a small food shop and a



cheese factory-shop. There are two churches, the upper one (by the cemetery) providing excellent views down to Plakiás and in both directions along the coast. It should be noted that, as a result of their experiences during 1941-44, there remains considerable anti-German feeling among some of the villagers.

From Selliá, you have a choice of onward/return routes. You can return by either of the outward routes, or as follows: cross the village square to the western side (away from Plakiás) and you will find an exit road, heading southwest below the lower of the village's

two main churches. This track winds down the hillside - always take the well-used descending option, until the final junction, near the sea. Here you will see that the track to the right runs to the coast towards the west, and on to Soúda Bay. Take the left-hand asphalt road, which leads into the western end of Plakiás. Alternatively, to continue from Selliá into the gorge, see Walk 4, or to Fínikas, see Walk 5.

3B Alternative Route to Selliá

For an alternative walk up to Selliá, which is somewhat more shaded, though often more humid, start westward from the Plakiás Bridge as before, but turn right (just before Zorbas' taverna) onto the *first*, asphalt, road beyond the Kótsifos bridge. Follow this road, which becomes a track, northwards into the olive groves, passing on your left a large concrete block building, part of the local sewerage system. Where the track crosses a polluted streamlet, follow the left fork of the main track up the western side of the valley. Ignore side tracks to the left and right, and after climbing a few hundred feet, turn left onto a more level track at a T-junction (*the track to the right goes upvalley and eventually joins the Kótsifos Gorge road*). The Selliá track curves round to the left and brings you out at the crossroads [→ Walk 3B] in Walk 3A. Turn right and later look out for the path on your left to the village as described above.

4. Walk from Selliá to the Kótsifos Gorge and Mýrthios

The Plakiás-(Hóra) Sfakiá bus goes via Mýrthios and Selliá, in season. It usually leaves Plakiás more or less on time, but is less reliable on the return journey. Check at the bus office next to the *Plakias Market* shop for details. 75-100 minutes from Selliá to Mýrthios.

Leaving Selliá village, take the northeast asphalt road into the Kótsifos valley and towards the gorge, passing the village war memorial. Various entries include the 1866 uprising against the Turkish occupation, the Greco-Turkish war, the republican revolution of 1922 (when Greece became the only modern European country to execute three former prime ministers in one day), and the mainland civil war of 1948.

The road winds along the side of the narrowing valley, and is often a good area for bird-watchers, particularly in spring when flocks of migrating small birds go through the gorge. It is often possible to see griffon vultures (17 on one occasion), and other raptors using the thermals above the cliffs. Look out for the folding of the rock strata, visible where the road was cut into the hillside, and for the excellent views down to Plakiás and Plakiás bay. Take care on the corners, since vehicles can come round on the wrong side of the road, and are sometimes inaudible because of the wind. Particularly in summer, Plakiás can be extremely windy, and most of this wind funnels through the Kótsifos Gorge.

Just before the mouth of the gorge, the Mýrthios-Plakiás road loops down to the right. The local rubbish dumps, often gently smoking, are up to the left and right. Here is the answer to the burning question - where does all the used paper go, after the bin? The road through the gorge is post-war. In the 1940's there was only a stony donkey-path, remnants of which, disconnected by recently bulldozed tracks, can be just seen on the hillside below the Selliá-Kótsifos Gorge road.

The gorge proper becomes quite narrow and very dramatic, with lots of fallen stone lying beside the road. The stream itself, and a tall waterfall on the east side, dry up early in the year, usually in March or April, but the stream continues to run underground in the heat of summer and to reappear much lower down in the valley. Below the waterfall, towards the north end of the gorge, is an illustrated memorial to a local lad who died there in a road accident. Beyond it, there is a bridge at the end of the gorge, and the road runs into a small upland valley before going over a low ridge and into the attractive semi-wooded valley of the Megapótamios River. This river flows eastwards where it penetrates the mountain ridge through the Kourtaliótis Gorge.

Much of southwestern Crete is limestone and this, combined with the climate, produces dramatic karst landscapes. Underground streams carve tunnel-caverns, which collapse to form gorges. The Kourtaliótis and the Kótsifos are just two of over 20 major gorges along the southwest coast. A number of the plants growing in the Kótsifos Gorge, particularly the narrowest part just before the bridge, are endemic to Crete (that is to say, found nowhere else in the world except Crete and nearby islands). There are at least 24 of these endemics in the gorge. A larger percentage of these species are to be found in very specialized habitats, such as gorges, than elsewhere.

Having looked in the Kótsifos Gorge, return to the southern, Plakiás end of the gorge and turn down onto the Mýrthios road. Follow this road as it swings back on itself to a battered bridge over the stream. A very large boulder fell on the nearby road a few winters ago, and the repair work is clearly visible. Before the slope down to the bridge, you will have passed a rough track off to the right, which stays to the west of the stream, leading off through a gap in the battered safety barrier. It is possible to follow this track back to Plakiás since it eventually joins both the Plakiás-Selliá routes (3B + 3A), but it is very stony in an early section.

If you are using the main road back to Mýrthios, just stay on it along the eastern flank of the valley and into the village - the quickest return to Plakiás goes straight down from the village square (Walk 1 in reverse). Part way back from the gorge to Mýrthios, note a large impact crater made in the asphalt road by a falling boulder.

5. Walk from Selliá to Fínikas Monastery and Soúda

This walk continues on from Selliá to the ruins of the Fínikas Monastery (40-60 min), and then down towards Soúda Bay (30-40 min).

From the square where the main road loops through Selliá village, turn left at the western end. This road leads down to the main church and then on to the coast, but a few moments from the square you turn sharply back right off the road and down onto a concrete path. Follow the path as it swings left and then right by a house wall. Continue downwards until you pass, on your right, the entrance drive of a new, blue building. Immediately beyond this drive, turn right onto a more level dirt track.

The track leads westwards, through olive groves and small cultivated plots. Pass through a small dip with a couple of buildings on the left and a new cheese-store on the right, and then come to a junction of several tracks. On your left, a track goes down then splits again. To your right a track leads up. Take the more level, central track, which continues westwards through more open country.

After a while, there is a cross-tracks. Stay on your present track which curves right, to cross a stream-bed, then left again. The track winds along the hillside, passing through an area of olives below some cliffs on the right, then swings southwards. The track forks, with a downward turning to the left to a small church whose roof was visible earlier. Take the right, slightly upward fork. There was a serious fire in this area in July 1995, and there was considerable damage as far as the Fínikas Monastery ruins. Round the next corner look ahead to the right and you may be able to see, on the steep hillside, the burned remains of a distinctive, solitary, upright cypress tree. This tree marks the position of the monastery ruin. The track enters olive groves again as it approaches the end of the cultivated area that stretches from Soúda bay at sea-level, right up to the main Selliá-(Hóra) Sfakiá road. In front of you there is a gully, the boundary between cultivation and the steep, scrubby hillside beyond. There is a stream in the gully, but before you reach it, the track turns to the right, uphill, then right again to the monastery church. Beyond the church a path leads into the ruins of the main part of the monastery. Note the roofed well in the old courtyard. The main track continues diagonally up from the church to further ruined buildings (*and then on to the asphalt road*), but you return downhill.

Leaving the monastery, retrace your steps down through the olives. First Plakiás Bay comes into view, then Selliá. There is a large, split lump of rock on the left. The track levels out for a short while with a small stream running into a drain on the left-hand side. After a few minutes there is a distinct turning area on the left and a faint path on the right. Do not take this path. About 50 paces beyond the turning point you should see

a clear, sinuous path heading downhill. If you miss this path, the track turns fairly sharply left very soon after. Follow the path down.

Dotted around the hillside, mostly marking small watercourses, are trees of the Cretan date palm, *Phoenix theophrasti*. Palmtree, in Greek, is *Finikas*. As you descend you should see palmtrees a little way in front of you to the left. The path squeezes between shrubs and you emerge by a long, narrow concrete water tank. Continue from the water tank and the path splits distinctly with one fork going down to the right. Do not take this one. Go to the left, level, with a curved fence on your left, towards some palmtrees and a track. At the end of the level section, the track dips down into the gully and climbs the other side. At the following junction go back to the right, downhill. The track swings down and curves to the left after a large palmtree. Keep with it to the left, and approach another dried- up streambed full of palmtrees. The path goes between them. These palms are an endangered and supposedly protected species.

On the far side of the streambed turn immediately right, and look for a well-worn footpath that continues among scattered olives. Stay with the path which, after a while, descends among boulders. A little further on there is a large prickly-pear cactus to your left. The path runs on through an opening in a fence, with some large reeds on your left, and a view of the stone mill channel, but at this point you should take the path coming in from your right. The somewhat overgrown path goes along the top of a low shelf, with olives on the left. Turn left onto a track, which runs down to the right of the grounds of the Finikas chimney-mill. The mill was once owned by the monastery, but has now been turned into a private dwelling. Use the concrete-walled bridge to cross the stream in front of you, then follow the track which rises steeply.

Go with the track eastwards, branching right between two small outcrops of rock. The track drops and joins another track at a T-junction.

The track to the left loops up to pass the old *Geronimos'* taverna. The track continues eastwards for a while, then a turning to the right drops down towards the coastal track. It is possible that new side-tracks will be cut in this area, but the correct one has wonderful views to Plakiás Bay and Kakomouri. It also has metal posts to the right of the final steep, straight, section. At the bottom of this track*, turn right, loop down to the left, and then continue left on asphalt.

(Alternatively, from the T-junction above, take the right track which goes down to Souída Bay (known as Sweetwater Beach). There are two cafés to the right, at the western end of the beach. Sweetwater Beach is part sand, part shingle, and pleasant for nude (or clothed) swimming or sunbathing, weather permitting.

The asphalt road along the back of the beach follows the coastline closely most of the way back towards Plakiás. As a result of the road surfacing, there has been tourist accommodation development at Souída, although not yet on the scale of that which has disfigured Damnóni. The track passes the *Finikas Hotel*, then a tiny, shingly cove (reputedly the only windless place at Plakiás in high summer), before heading upwards to join the above mentioned track*.)

From there it is a straightforward walk back along the road to Plakiás (45-60 min), entering the village at the Skínos Beach end. *Skínos* is the Greek name of *Pistacia lentiscus*, one of the shrubs at the back of the beach.

6. Walk to Lefkóyia

This walk follows an irrigation channel and is therefore level much of the way to the village of Lefkóyia. 2-3 hours. If you are intending to walk beyond Lefkóyia, for example to Préveli, Giannioú or Tímeos Stavrós, then you may prefer to follow the asphalt road (see Walk 8), since this is the quickest route - 50-60 minutes. However, this road is increasingly busy with traffic. If you are just going to Lefkóyia, then Walk 6 is a quieter and more relaxed, though longer route.

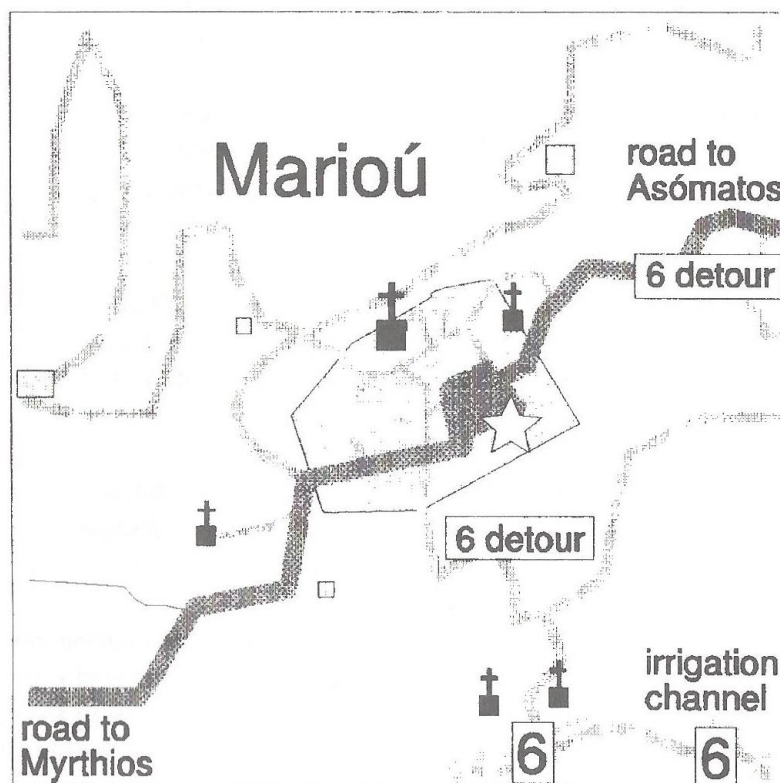
(You could extend Walk 6 by following Walk 1, the Mýrthios quick route, as far as the narrow concrete water channel described. Then turn right and follow the track alongside the water channel, around several curves of the hillside, until the track goes straight on to an asphalt road, but the channel turns right. Stay with the track, turn right onto the main road, go downhill a short way, then cross over to a track where the water channel reappears from under the road. Follow this track eastwards, staying with the water channel.)

Walk 6 starts in Plakiás. The route is along the main road eastward out of the village, for 15-20 minutes, until you reach the junction just before the Shell garage. Turn left here and follow the asphalt uphill. There is a sharp climbing zigzag, passing a couple of houses on the right. On your left is a small hill with the ruins of a building on top, sometimes said to be a castle, but possibly a villa from the Turkish era. The cliff below the summit, on the eastern side, shows the action of waves at some time in the past, before land movements raised it well above the sea. An irrigation channel, partly covered with concrete blocks, passes under the road from left to right. Follow the track that accompanies this channel to the right, and stay with the channel.

The track meanders its way along the northern side of the cultivated valley towards Lefkóyia. It passes two adjacent chapels up on the left, one old, one new. The uphill track between them leads to Marioú village.

(You can detour to look at the village. If you do so, leave the village by the huge main square on the asphalt road eastwards. This passes a church set under an outcrop of rock, and steps down to a spring. After the church, walk a little further along the asphalt, then turn down on a concrete track to the right. Follow this descending track through a series of loops, passing several houses. The lowest house has distinctive brown woodwork. Turn right below this house and onto the water channel track. Turn left.)

From the water channel track there are numerous turnings off to the right, into the olive groves and to plastic greenhouses, and some off to the left. After several kilometres, you will be heading generally (though turning with the contours of the hillside in various directions) towards Lefkóyia village and the bulk of Tímeos Stavrós behind it. After a solitary chapel back on the left and a skewed cross-tracks on a flatter piece of



ground, an overturned van is ahead of you. Turn right onto the track which does not have a water channel, but which for a few minutes stays close to the one that does. At a junction, take the left fork ahead, into the back of Lefkóyia village. This leads past the bakery and down to the main road, where if you turn right, you will see the village centre in front of you. See Walk 8 for more details about Lefkóyia.

7. Walk to Damnóni and Amoúdi Beaches (and Lefkóyia)

This walk takes you southeast from Plakiás to Damnóni Beach (30-45 min.), and then on to Amoúdi Beach (15-20 min.). It is an alternative route to Lefkóyia (75-90min).

Starting at the Plakiás Bridge, follow the main road east out of Plakiás. After passing the new church on your right, at the crest of the first hill you will reach a junction where two side-roads from the right join the main road. Take the left hand of the two roads and follow this through the olive groves. Just before the end of the ridge of the Kakomoúri headland (the southeastern headland of Plakiás Bay), the road curves left and joins the asphalt road to the *Calypso* hotel. There are actually six tracks/roads at this junction. Take the 2nd anticlockwise. This passes immediately to the right of a never-completed building of unsupported breeze-blocks. Ignore the misleading signs that suggest that Damnóni Bay and the beach are in different directions.

Follow the track, which soon gives views down to Damnóni bay. This once beautiful bay has been invaded by three large hotel complexes that have changed its character completely. The track continues past two of them: a smaller one on the right and the huge *Hapimag* time-share complex on the left. Just beyond the far end of the *Hapimag*, a side track at the left leads you down towards the beach. *Do not follow the main onward track since this continues around the south of the Kakomoúri headland, then ends unexpectedly and abruptly at a cliff above the sea.* Walk a short way along the back of the beach, in front of the *Hapimag*'s beach exit, then cross the recently straightened Katsári river by a little bridge.

Damnóni has two tavernas and the large beach is popular for swimming. East along the coastline from here are Damnóni Cove, Amoúdi Beach, Skinéria Beach and Préveli Beach, with increasing incidence of nudity.

Our track runs eastward from the Damnóni tavernas, along the back of and parallel with the beach, passing an abandoned, uncompleted hotel that is a monument to someone's bad taste. The track then loops inland before crossing the eastern ridge of the bay. However, before it runs to the left (inland) there are a couple of much shorter (but fairly rocky) footpaths that cut around the cliffs above the sea, that you can take to meet the track behind Damnóni Cove.

Damnóni Cove is small, surrounded by dark rock walls, and in season usually full of naked sunbathers. The locals sometimes call this the *Bay of Pigs*. Just beyond it, though not so visible from the track, is a very tiny beach, accessible only by climbing down the rocks. You would need to get there early to find a place in the sun. The next big beach is at Amoúdi, which is also accessible by an asphalt side road direct from the main Plakiás-Lefkóyia road (Route 6), so there are sometimes coach picnic-parties from other parts of the island. Amoúdi is good for sunbathing but perhaps not for swimming, since the wind can funnel the sea quite strongly into the bay, and the rapidly shifting arrangement of the foreshore suggests powerful currents. Some way behind the beach, but almost out of sight from it, there is a large taverna and accommodation block.

Take the road leading back inland from Amoúdi. This road climbs, goes above a tiny gorge down on your right, follows the Ellinikó stream for a while, then leads through into the main Plakiás valley to join the Plakiás-Lefkóyia road. Turn left for Plakiás. From here to Plakiás is about 45 minutes walk along the main road, but you may well prefer to continue, to the right, into nearby Lefkóyia village.

From Amoúdi, it is also possible to get along the coast to the next beach, Skinéria, but it involves going over sharp-edged rocks, with a path that although marked with cairns is not always obvious. It is only for the reasonably fit, with good footwear. Skinéria is more easily accessible by road, mostly asphalt, alongside a water channel for part of the way, though it is a long, interminably winding walk from Lefkóyia village. The café behind Skinéria is not open at the beginning or end of the season, so take your own refreshments, particularly on hot days, when it is a long walk back to anywhere with drinks.

8. Walk to Lefkóyia, Giannioú and Préveli Monastery

Lefkóyia is a small village set in the agricultural valley east of Plakiás, and sheltered by the nearby 1420ft/433m Tímeos Stavrós, or Lefkóyia Mountain (see Walk 7). Giannioú is a very small mountain village at 590ft/180m, en route (on foot) to the Préveli Monastery. To walk from Plakiás to Préveli takes at least two hours, so check the opening hours beforehand if you are planning to go into the monastery. Buses go in season. Discreet clothing is requested by the monastery for entry.

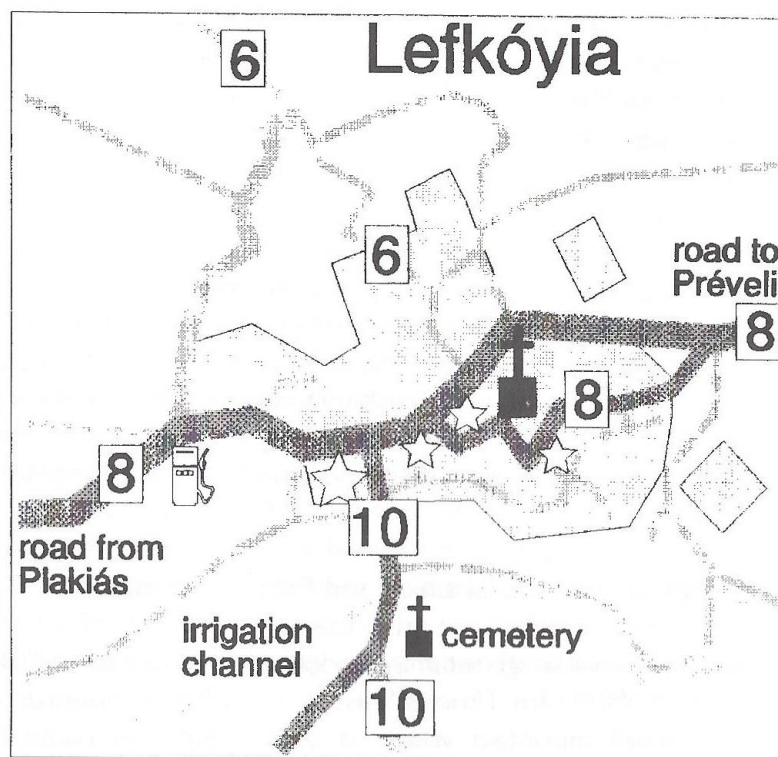
Leave Plakiás by the main road eastwards, until there is a junction of that road. Take the main asphalt road to the right, in front of the Shell garage and Oasis pension. (*Do not take the smaller, sharper right turning that leads to the Calypso hotel/naturist complex on the south face of the Kakomoúri headland, and to Damnóni Beach.*)

Continue along the Lefkóyia road, and go past a right turn signposted Damnóni Beach. Shortly after this turning the road becomes remarkably wide as it curves to the right to bridge a stream, then curves left again by a petrol station. To the left of this big S-bend is a row of huge, spiny-edged succulents, *Agave americana*. These plants were introduced from central America in the 17th century. They, or related species, are cultivated in East Africa and Mexico for the production of the fibre *sisal* and the drink *tequila*. The plants flower once, after ten to thirty years' growth, and then die. The huge flower-spike, up to 30ft/9m high, is produced in a couple of months in the summer, and completely exhausts the plant.

Now just follow the main road. The high mountain in front of you, with a white chapel on its summit, is Tímeos Stavrós. Just beyond a slight incline in the road, there is a sharp side-turning asphalt road back to the right that leads to Amoúdi Beach.

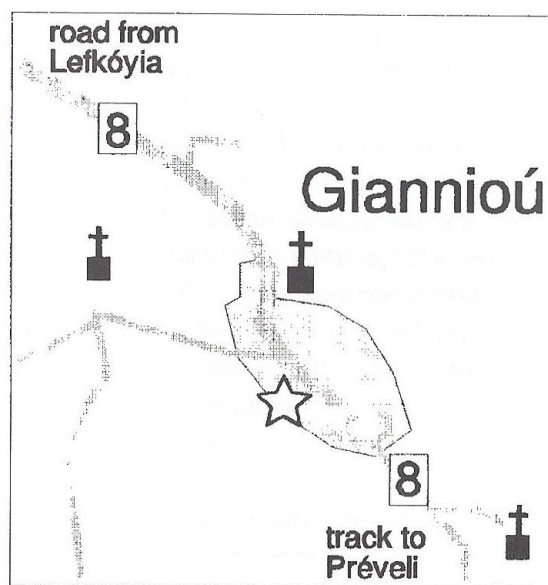
At the beginning of Lefkóyia village, the road divides. Take the right-hand road into the centre. There are two tavernas in the village. The first, run by the hospitable Stelios, and usually with at least one David Brown tractor parked outside, is on your right. (Walk 10 starts to the right, immediately past here.) Pass several *kafeneíons* and small shops. The road divides again. Take the right-hand turn and follow the road, past the main church on

your left, through the village. Most buses from Réthymnon go through Lefkóyia en route to Plakiás, but they will not always stop if full!



Head east out of the village, and rejoin the main road. The plastic greenhouses down the dip to your right are used for growing early season vegetables such as cucumbers, aubergines and peppers. They use sophisticated hi-tech automated watering, and olive-press residue as a fuel for heating. If you go for a closer look at any of these greenhouses, beware the guard dogs.

Continue a short way along the main road to a right turn signposted Giannioú (pronounced *Yan-You*). Take this asphalt road up to the isolated little village. There is a tiny *kafeneío*/shop that sells drinks. Because of their experiences in 1941-44, there is some anti-German



feeling in this village. The elders may tell you about being dive-bombed by Stukas based in Kárpáthos.

Go through Giannioú and join the track on the far side. This continues uphill, past an open-air laundry, to a ridge overlooking the sea. The monastery is not visible yet, but follow the track over the ridge and down the slope and fairly soon it will be. Look out for traces of the original footpath down. They cut off some corners of the track and shorten your route.

Préveli Monastery has variable opening hours. The church and the museum tend only to open when coach parties are visiting. The exhibits in the museum include gifts from the British in recognition of the assistance given by the monks to Allied troops escaping after the Battle of Crete in 1941. The monastery had also been a centre of resistance in earlier centuries, during the Turkish occupation. The monastery prefers visitors to wear discreet clothing. Prices at the seasonal mobile canteen can be steep.

It is possible to walk back from the monastery by the road, but this is considerably further than the direct footpath via Giannioú. To do so, follow the road as it curves around the hillside (see Walk 9 for an alternative extension to Préveli beach/Lower Kourtaliótis Gorge). To the right are some lovely views, out over the Megapótamós valley, to a ruined subsidiary monastery on the far side, and up to the huge rocky slab of Xirón Óros (Dry Mountain). After passing an attractive small chapel on the left, the road drops to river-level as it skirts another ancient and partly-ruined subsidiary monastery. Just beyond this monastery is an attractive old bridge over the Megapótamós river, next to a modern concrete ford. The building of this bridge was financed by Préveli Monastery in 1850-52 at an equivalent cost of US\$ 60,000.

Keep to the left of the river, and follow the road as it climbs to the left and winds uphill to join the asphalt Asómatos-Lefkóyia road. Turn left at this junction, to walk back into Lefkóyia.

In season, there are buses to and from Préveli Monastery. Check for this year's details in Plakiás, at the office between the *Livikon Hotel* and the *Plakias Market* shop. Most of the other bus services to Réthymnon go via Lefkóyia and the Asómatos-Lefkóyia road, and will stop at the junction above (ask for *Préveli*).

9. Préveli Beach/Lower Kourtaliótis Gorge

From the asphalt Préveli road, going east from the monastery, it is possible to get down to the spectacular Lower Kourtaliótis Gorge, where the Megapótamós river reaches the sea. There are several tracks and paths, and much bulldozing, across the coastal plain/plateau below the road, mostly made since the Greek government's declaration

of the area as a protected one. The most obvious track is an almost straight one, usually with some cars and motor cycles parked at the top, main road end. Take this and head towards the sea. From the seaward end of the track, at a proper car park there is a side path to the left leading to a point overlooking the gorge mouth, but the main footpath descends the cliff by steep zigzags to the beach at the gorge mouth. The path is much fractured, but follow the general trend downwards, and then to the left around to the beach. The walking time from the monastery to here varies because of the steepness of the last section. 40-80 min, probably longer in reverse.

In the final part of the gorge, the river widens into a shallow canal bordered on either side by the native palmtrees, *Phoenix theophrasti*, and then enters the sea around a long sandbar. The gorge behind was once the rather secluded home to some semi-resident naturist hippies. Nowadays however, there are daily boat-trippers from Plakiás, walkers, and people from the cars parked above. There are also refreshment stalls, sunloungers, beach umbrellas and litter. It is an important environmental site, because of the trees, so care should be taken not to start fires. The easily embarrassed should be warned that there can be plenty of anatomy on display around this beach.

There is a curiously-shaped, eroded rock rising from the sea, to the east side of the beach. From this end of the beach a path zigzags up among the hillside boulders and then runs eastwards along the coast, above cliffs, to the next beach, Drimiskianós. The path is a narrow rock-ledge in places towards the end, with a home-made ladder to assist at one place, so not for vertigo-sufferers. Drimiskianós Beach has a small taverna, and access by a rough but driveable track to the Préveli bridge, or to Drimiskos village to the east. The beach is not as sheltered as Préveli Beach, but it continues quite a way eastwards, where it is usually completely empty.

It is possible to get back inland through the gorge, from Préveli Beach, to join the road to the north, emerging at a point quite near to the 19th Century bridge mentioned in Walk 8. This does, however, involve wading deep pools and climbing over boulders, and can be somewhat risky, particularly in spring when the water is at its highest and strongest.

10. Walk to the Summit of Tímeos Stavrós (Lefkóyia Mountain)

The name Tímeos Stavrós is a common one for summits in Greece and means Holy Cross. 45-90 min to the top, from Lefkóyia. Return can be made by the same route, or by an onward circular route to Lefkóyia via Giannioú village (an extra 50-80 min).

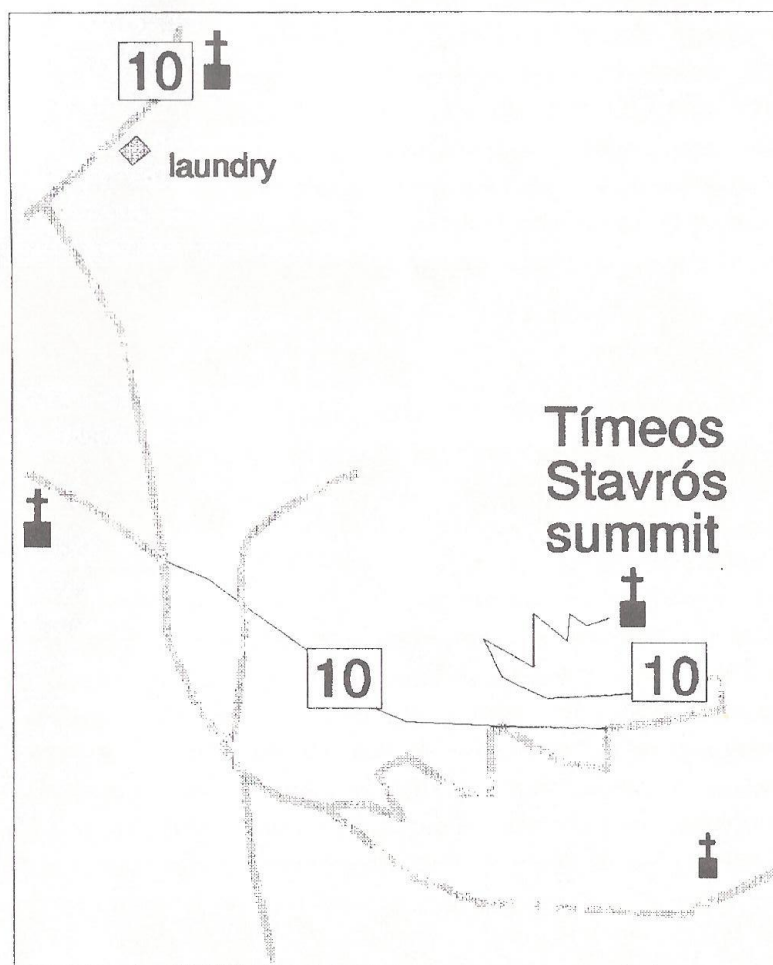
Follow Walk 6 as far as the *Stelios* taverna in Lefkóyia (on your right), then turn right beside it along a street that may still be signposted to Skinéria Beach. The asphalt road heads towards the western flank of Tímeos Stavrós. On the left, just beyond some

upright (but recently dying) cypress trees and a small aqueduct, is an attractive little cemetery. Here the road forks. The water channel follows the right turn, which eventually reaches Skinéria Beach. However to approach Tímeos Stavrós, take the uphill, straight-on track past an old laundry, recently badly renovated. After a couple of minutes, take a left turn up onto a steeper track that leads up to a cross-tracks by a clump of rocks on a ridge overlooking the sea. To your right, on a low hill, are a small chapel and television aerial. On your left is the Tímeos Stavrós summit route.

If you have had any problems getting this far, do not attempt the mountain summit since the path is more difficult ahead. You should also be cautious about going further uphill on this path in wet or very windy weather. An alternative is to continue on the level track around the southern side of the mountain. See 4th paragraph following.

The steep stony track, now becoming overgrown with low, spiny shrubs, leads up the western shoulder of the mountain then curves around the south side. This is the original track. A further track that was cut more recently, zigzags up the southern side of Tímeos Stavrós, partly overlaying and partly obliterating the original. Both will get you there. To stay with the original route as much as possible, scramble up loose earth to join the corner of the new track where the tracks first meet. Shortly beyond, at the top of a bank on the left, you can see the continuation of the original upward track. Climb up to it, and follow it to and beyond the next meeting of tracks.

When the track ends, continue on the original, final path up through jumbled rocks



towards the summit. Once on the path, it is simply a matter of following it to the top at 1420ft/433m. A small chapel on the summit provides (the only) welcome shade on a sunny day. Inside, look for the embossed metal offerings to the saint, specifying the part of the body (mostly eyes) to be cured.

On a clear day, the Paximádia islands and the coastline around Mátala are visible to the southeast, with Frangokástello castle, and the White Mountains visible to the west. In exceptional conditions, the village of Livanianá can also be seen to the west. This is the tiny white village on the hillside just to the east of the Arádhena Gorge, seen from the boat between Hóra Sfakiá and Aghía Roumeli (at the mouth of the Samariá Gorge).

Descend from the mountain by the same route as far as the cross-tracks. Turn left and follow the level track around the southern side of the mountain. Ignore both a track towards the sea to the left, and the start of the recent zigzag track up Tímeos Stavrós. The track climbs a little and passes, on your left, a partly walled-in cave and then a small chapel half-buried in the rocks. It then curves upwards and leftwards. The track heads towards the steep cliffs of the huge, rocky outcrop above Giannioú, and then rises to the left to skirt these. It climbs to the ridge that comes from the eastern shoulder of Tímeos Stavrós, and then cuts through a small col. The views change radically and you are looking out over the Lefkóyia plain. The small valley down to your right leads to Giannioú, but the village is not really visible yet. Stay with the main track downwards and ignore a left turn. At a T-junction, there is a chapel immediately in front of you. Turn right, down into Giannioú village, and follow the asphalt road to the left. (Walk 8 goes right towards Préveli.) This takes you to the main Lefkóyia-Asómatos road. Turn left into Lefkóyia.

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Also available from Marengo Publications, 17 Bernard Crescent, Hunstanton PE36 6ER England: A further book of Plakias walks "*Seven More and More Challenging Walks in the Plakias Area*" and the colour map; Walk guides and maps for Georgioupolis (Crete), Aghios Georgious North (Corfu), Stoupa (Peloponnisos), Lindos/Pefkos (Rhodes), Kokkari (Samos), Akamas (Cyprus) and La Gomera (Canary Islands). Walk guides for N. Lesvos and NE. Thasos Plant-lists for Plakias, Georgioupolis, Aghios Georgious North, Stoupa, Lindos/Pefkos, Kokkari and Akamas; plant-lists for the islands of Corfu, Crete, Karpathos, Kos, Rhodes, Samos, Symi, Thasos, Cyprus, individual Canary Islands and Madeira. Lance Chilton leads botanical and countryside walks overseas, including Greece, Cyprus and the Canaries. Please write for a price list and further details.

