

St. Nicholas' Tiny Perfect Chapel

by P.Y. Forsyth

Students of Greco-Roman history are painfully aware of how few buildings have survived intact from antiquity. Sometimes, as in the case of the Parthenon in Athens, a mere shell of the original structure remains; more commonly, as in the case of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, only the foundations remain to attest to the existence of what was once a magnificent monument, the rest having been destroyed either by nature or by human activity (or by both). In a few rare cases, however, an ancient building does indeed stand virtually intact today—for example, the Pantheon in Rome, which owes its preservation to the fact that it was converted into a Christian church during late antiquity. A similar example of a well-preserved ancient structure (though of much smaller scale than the Pantheon) can be found today in the Chapel of Hagios Nikolaos Marmarenios ("The Marbled Saint Nicholas") on the island of Thera (also known as Santorini), about 100 kms north of Crete in the Aegean Sea.

As one travels along the modern road to the town of Emporeion, it is easy to speed by a small stone chapel that appears to sit in the middle of nowhere. But, for the student of antiquity, this is a "must" stop, for the Chapel of Hagios Nikolaos Marmarenios is one of the best preserved ancient buildings to be found in all of Greece. Now a Christian chapel (the fact which has prevented its destruction), Hagios Nikolaos Marmarenios is an almost square (4.18 x 3.59 m) building, 3 m high, that even has its ancient roof intact. It gets its name from the fact that it is made of finely cut marble blocks, which indicates that when it was originally built (probably in the first century BC) it was a very important structure.

Peering through a small window in the door (located on the south wall), one can just make out the interior, which features a niche in the back (north) wall framed by Ionic columns which support a Doric-style gable. Fortunately for historians, there is an inscription just below this niche which gives us a hint of the building's original purpose; it reads "Epsilonchos and Kritarista—a thank-offering to Thea Basileia". Thus we can be reasonably sure that two inhabitants of Thera (Epsilonchos and Kritarista) had this structure erected, at their own expense, to the goddess known as Thea Basileia, who probably had granted them some special favour. Such private "thank-offerings" were not uncommon in the ancient Greco-Roman world, but the fine quality of this particular one ensured its survival when Christianity made Thea Basileia obsolete.

We don't know much about this goddess, and she may well have been a purely local divinity (although some scholars have suggested that she was either Aphrodite or Cybele). Whatever her exact nature, it is likely that Epsilonchos and Kritarista (and their family) had rites of worship performed for her here on a regular basis; in fact, there is a small round cavity in the floor of the niche where offerings could have been left for the goddess.

While this structure is small and, in the grand scheme of things, relatively unimportant, it provides us with much insight into the religious life of the inhabitants of the island. When taken together with the many inscriptions on Thera which mention a divinity or a ritual structure, it paints a vivid portrait of a people who lived close to their gods, expecting them to offer assistance in times of need. (As time passed, however, some Therans got even closer to the gods: on their death, they had themselves declared to be "heroes" who would be worshipped by their descendants; for an example see S.L. Ager's "A Woman of Substance: Epikteta of Thera" in *Labyrinth* 52.

In antiquity, the landscape of Greece must have been dotted with buildings like that of Hagios Nikolaos Marmarenios, though most would have been built of less monumental materials. So we, in our turn, might provide a thank-offering to Epsilon and Kritarista for allowing us a brief glimpse into the religious life of their time; may Thea Basileia, whoever she may be, continue to smile down on them!