The Fortifications of Nafplio

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Aetos Press

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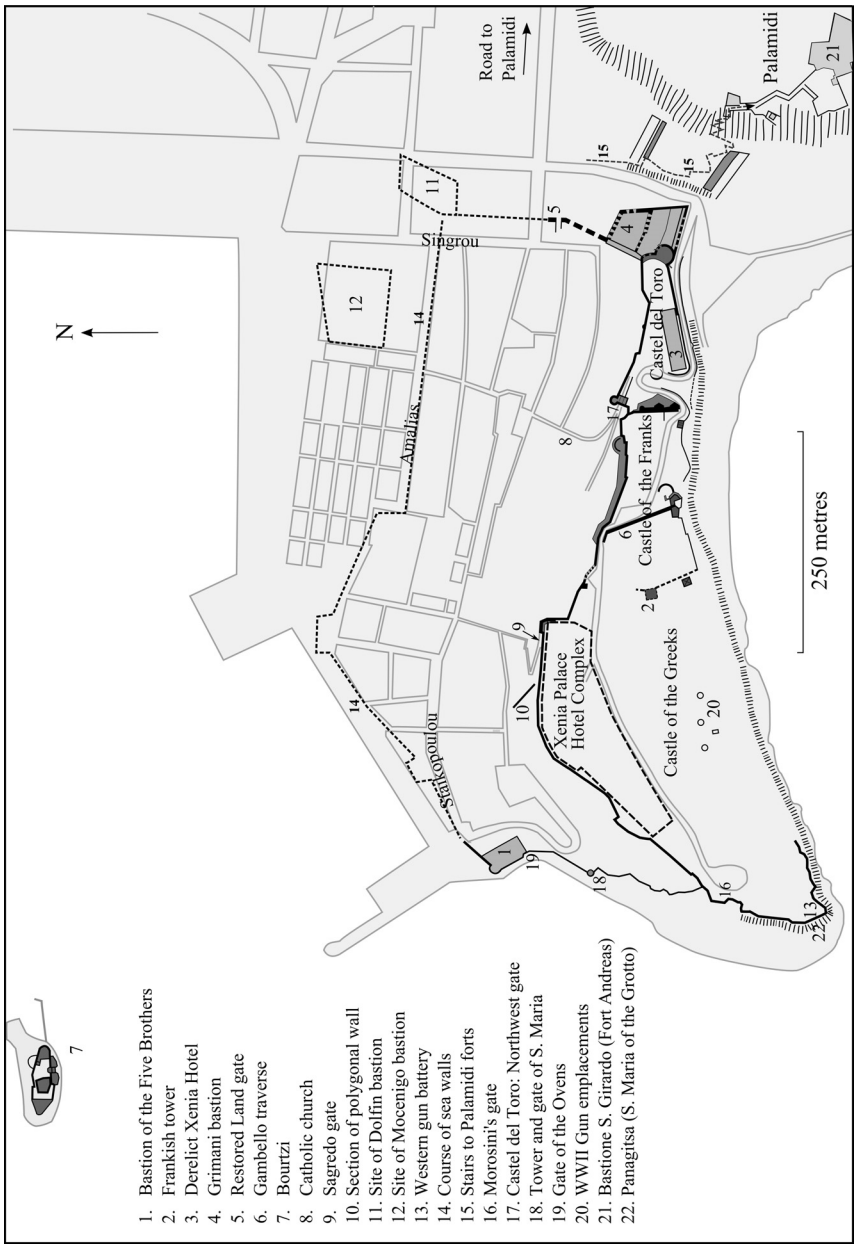
Introduction

Nafplio lies near the head of the Gulf of Argos on its eastern side. The rocky peninsula of Acronauplia, the acropolis of the earliest settlement, projects westwards into the bay forming a sheltered anchorage to the north. Much of the peninsula is over 60m in height with near vertical cliffs to the south and west, originally falling directly into the sea. On the northern side the western cliffs give way to steep slopes that descend to the shoreline. Until the late 15C there was only a narrow strip of flat land between the acropolis slope and the shore but this has widened considerably over the centuries through a combination of the natural silting of the bay and human intervention. This level area is now occupied by the old town. The eastern end of the acropolis hill descends in series of terraces to a narrow defile that separates it from the mass of the hill of Palamidi to the southeast. This peak rises to over 200m and dominates the town. It too has high cliffs on its seaward, southwestern flank. Originally access to Nafplio from the plain to the north was via a narrow approach between the steep northern slopes of Palamidi and the marshes at the head of the bay.

Nafplio has been settled since the early Bronze Age and evidence of Mycenaean occupation has been found. Although the place is not mentioned by Homer, Euripides does refer to Menelaos's ships riding at anchor in the harbour on his return from Troy. The city must have been of some importance by the 7C BC, when it was an ally of Sparta, but its independence was curtailed when it was destroyed by Damokratidas of Argos and its inhabitants were expelled. Thereafter it became the port for the territory of Argos and around 300 BC the acropolis was fortified. Substantial traces of these first walls can still be seen beneath the later Byzantine, Frankish and Venetian work. It was still known as the naval base of Argos in Strabo's time but by the 2C AD Pausanias described Nafplio as abandoned with its walls in ruins although he still mentions its harbours. Nafplio was re-established in the early Byzantine period possibly as a result of population shift



Plan 2 Modern Nafplio: The surviving fortifications of the acropolis and the lower town showing the line of the demolished sea walls and land front.

eastwards following Slav incursions into the Peloponnese. In subsequent centuries it appears sporadically in the historical record but it must have been of real commercial importance by 1082 when a treaty was concluded between Venice and the Byzantines. In exchange for naval assistance Venice was granted free trade rights in a long list of Byzantine towns including Nafplio.[1]

There is no record of the date at which Nafplio was refortified by the Byzantines but at some point new walls were built upon the ruins of the old. Possible dates range from the 3C to the late 12C, when, in 1180, Theodore Sgouros was appointed archon of the Nafplio area and given a Byzantine fleet to protect the coast against piracy.[2] Towards the end of the century his son, Leon, inherited the title and by 1203 he had also established control over Argos and Corinth. His expansionary policy was halted by the arrival of the Franks in mainland Greece in 1204 following the fall of Constantinople. Argos and Corinth held out against Frankish sieges until 1210. Sgouros may have died in Nafplio in 1208 but he is generally supposed to have committed suicide by riding his horse over the cliffs of Acrocorinth.[3] With the help of four Venetian galleys Geoffrey I de Villehardouin then besieged Nafplio and it fell to the Franks in 1212.[4] They occupied the acropolis and subsequently created a separate enclosure in the eastern part of the original enceinte. This became known as the Castle of the Franks. The remainder, to the west, was called the Castle of the Greeks.

Argos and Nafplio were given by Villehardouin to Otho de la Roche. He and his descendants held them from 1212 until 1308 when Guy II died without issue. Title to the territory passed to his cousin, Walter de Brienne, his son, and then by marriage to the d'Enghien family in 1356.[5] Venetian control came almost voluntarily in 1377 when Marie, the last surviving member of the d'Enghien family, sought Venetian protection and cemented the arrangement by marriage to the Venetian Pietro Cornaro.[6] When he died in 1388 Marie sold Nafplio and Argos to Venice. Before the Republic could assert control the area was seized by the Despot, Theodore. The Venetians occupied Nafplio but the remainder of the territory, Argos, Thermisi and Kiveri, did not fall into their hands until 1394.[7]

Initially the colony of Nafplio was of secondary importance to the twin ports of Methoni and Koroni in Messenia and the island of Negroponte (Euboia), Venetian possessions since the early 13C. The Venetians were slow to repair or improve the fortifications of the town despite the threat of Turkish incursions into the Morea.[8] These attacks began in 1397 when Argos was sacked and held briefly by the Turks.[9] Sultan Murad II's commander, Turahan, invaded the Morea in 1423

and again in 1446 causing much destruction before withdrawing.[10] In 1453 Mehmet II seized Constantinople. The Venetians' initial response to this threat was to improve the fortifications of Negroponte.[11] However Mehmet's forces crossed the Isthmus of Corinth into the Morea in 1458 and by 1461 the entire peninsula, with the exception of the Venetian colonies, was in his hands.[12] Again Nafplio was ignored during 1461 and 1462 in favour of improvements to the defences of Methoni.[13] The Turks then occupied Argos in 1462 and the following year the first Venetian-Turkish war began. The Venetian counter-attack under Bertoldo D'Este was initially successful. Argos was re-taken, the Hexamilion wall across the Isthmus was re-built and Acro-corinth besieged. However during this siege D'Este was killed. The Turks advanced, the Venetians abandoned their siege and the Hexamilion, retreating to Nafplio. The Hexamilion was destroyed with the Turks taking permanent possession of Argos. The Venetians held out in Nafplio while the war continued. The Republic had limited success elsewhere, sacking Athens in 1466, but a siege of Patras was a failure and the Venetians were defeated at Kalamata.[14] Then in 1470 Negroponte fell.

At last an urgent programme of re-fortification began at Nafplio. Later the same year Vettore Pasqualigo arrived from Venice with the military engineer, Antonio Gambello, together with the resources and manpower needed to modernise the town's defences. This work was to include new fortifications on the acropolis including a third enclosure (Castel del Toro) to the east of the Castle of the Franks, a fort on a rocky islet in the harbour and new walls around the developing lower town.[15] Although much was completed over the next three years, construction slowed down as the war dragged to a close. Peace with the Turks was agreed in 1479 but agreement on the exact boundary of the reduced Venetian enclave was only reached in 1482.[16] Work on the sea and land walls of the lower town continued in a sporadic fashion until the close of the century.[17]

In 1499 the Turks began a second war with the Venetians, moving first against Lepanto (modern Nafpaktos, purchased by Venice in 1407) which fell the same year. Bayezid II then built a pair of gun forts, known as the Castle of the Morea and the Castle of Roumeli, on either side of the Gulf of Corinth at the Rio narrows, thus preventing Venetian galleys entering the Gulf. The following year Bayezid marched against Nafplio with a large army. This led to a feverish resumption of work on both the land and sea walls.[18] The attack was repelled, although Thermisi was taken briefly, and the Turks moved their forces south to besiege Methoni. The fall of Methoni to the Turks in 1500 led

to the surrender of first Navarino (modern Pylos) and then Koroni. When peace was agreed in 1503 the only surviving Venetian colonies in the Peloponnese were Nafplio and Monemvasia. The peace treaty of 1503 was renewed in 1513 and again in 1521 but in 1537 Suleiman I once more declared war on Venice. In this third war Nafplio was again besieged and bombarded by Turkish cannon from the heights of Palamidi. The outlying castles of Thermisi and Kastri were taken but, despite the bombardment, Nafplio held out.[19] However in 1538 the defeat of the joint fleet of the Holy League (comprising Genoa, Venice, Spain and the Papacy) at the naval battle of Preveza forced Venice to seek peace. The terms concluded in 1540 forced the Republic to cede Nafplio and Monemvasia.

Nafplio became the Ottoman capital of the Morea and prospered as the seat of the Turkish Pasha. Although another war with Venice began in 1570 when the Turks invaded Cyprus, Nafplio, along with the rest of mainland Greece, was left largely untroubled. Even the momentous defeat of the Ottoman fleet at Lepanto in 1571 had little impact in the Morea. Nafplio did not see conflict again until 1647 when, as part of diversionary attacks during the long war for the possession of Crete, the Venetian Admiral Grimani briefly blockaded the Turkish fleet within the harbour.[20] However in 1684 Venice joined a new Holy League of the Papacy, the Holy Roman Empire and Poland in a concerted attempt to drive the Turks from southeast Europe. The Venetian contribution was to be the re-conquest of the Morea. By the summer of 1686 Venetian forces led by Francesco Morosini had recovered all the main castles in Messenia including Koroni, Methoni and Navarino. They then moved against Nafplio. Morosini's land force, led by the Swedish Field Marshal Königsmark, landed on the beach at Tolon, seven kilometres to the southeast of the town. They immediately occupied the undefended heights of Palamidi and from there they were able to bombard Acronauplia and the lower town.[21] The Turks had added little, if anything, to the town's fortifications during their long tenure yet the old Venetian defences were still capable of resisting a siege. The garrison did not surrender until the Venetian forces had defeated two Turkish relief expeditions from Argos and Corinth. By the end of 1687 the whole of the Peloponnese with the single exception of Monemvasia (taken in 1690) was in Venetian hands. Hostilities with the Turks continued elsewhere. Venetian forces recovered Lepanto and took the Castles of the Morea and Roumeli but further territorial gains were short-lived. Athens was taken in 1687 but abandoned the following year. In 1688 a campaign to recover Negroponte collapsed after four months. An attempt to take Chania on Crete

in 1692 was also quickly abandoned. Finally in 1694 the island of Chios was seized only for it to be retaken by the Turks the following year. These setbacks left the Venetians in a weak bargaining position when a peace agreement was finally negotiated at Karlowitz in 1699. The Republic was forced to give up its conquests north of the Gulf of Corinth but its possession of the entire Morea was confirmed.[22]

Nafplio became the capital of Venice's new possession and they began a massive building programme designed both to transform the town into a worthy capital and to address the weaknesses in its defences. New barracks, magazines and warehouses were constructed both on Acronauplia and in the lower town. New churches were erected and an entire new suburb developed on reclaimed land to the north of the existing sea walls. A huge, new bastioned land front was constructed between 1702 and 1711 to protect the lower town. Finally Palamidi, the key to Nafplio's security, was fortified with an elaborate complex of artillery works built between 1711 and 1714. Yet all this effort was insufficient to prevent the Turkish re-conquest the following year. The Ottoman army, said to number between seventy thousand and a hundred thousand men supported by a large fleet, crossed the Isthmus in the summer of 1715 and besieged Acrocorinth.[23] The Venetians' weakness was a chronic lack of manpower. The entire Venetian military force in the Morea numbered only eight thousand men. The garrison at Corinth was a mere four hundred strong and capitulated after only five days.[24] The Turks moved on to Nafplio, defended by a larger force of two thousand troops.[25] Their campaign began with attacks on the outworks of the Palamidi forts. After only eight days they succeeded in creating a breach in one of these outworks. The Palamidi complex was designed to provide defence in depth. If one part of the work was taken it could be fired on from the others. However the Venetians' nerve failed with this first assault and they abandoned the entire fortress, retreating into the lower town. The Turks pursued them and the town capitulated. By the end of the summer of 1715 the Turks had retaken the entire Morea. Once again Nafplio became the Ottoman capital and the town prospered for the next few decades. However by 1770 the capital had effectively moved to Tripolitsa (modern Tripoli) and Nafplio entered a long period of decline.[26] By the time William Leake visited the town in 1806 many of the houses were in ruins, the bay had silted up and the port was filled with mud and rubbish. However he was still impressed by the grandeur of the Venetian military installations.[27]

This was the state of Nafplio when it fell to Greek forces in 1822. The town remained in Greek hands throughout the protracted strug-

gles of the War of Independence and became the capital of the new state in 1828. It remained so until 1834 when the capital was transferred to Athens. The slow modernisation and expansion that took place in the 19C led to the progressive demolition of the Venetian walls of the lower town. The northern sea walls were largely demolished in 1867. On the eastern land front the walls between the Grimani and Dolfin bastions were removed in 1894-5 together with the monumental land gate (re-erected in the late 1990s). The wet ditch beyond the walls was also filled in at this time.[28] A second period of demolition began in 1928 with the total removal of the Dolfin bastion. The destruction of the Mocenigo bastion followed after 1932. Only the Grimani bastion now survives.[29]

After 1828 Acronauplia became a military base. Between 1829 and 1834 the old Venetian barracks were renovated and Greece's first military hospital was built within the precinct of the Castle of the Franks. In 1884 a military prison was opened on Acronauplia and this later expanded to house first ordinary criminals then, after 1935, political prisoners. The prisons were closed in 1966.[30] The character of Acronauplia had already begun to change by that date with a new emphasis on tourism. A Xenia hotel, opened in 1961, was built on the terrace of the Castel del Toro destroying much of its surviving Venetian fortifications. After 1970 virtually every other structure on Acronauplia was demolished including the prison buildings and the old military hospital. A further hotel, the Xenia Palace, was built within the precinct of the Castle of the Greeks on the site of the demolished prisons. It opened in 1979 and remains in operation.

Notes

1. Peter Lock, *The Franks in the Aegean,* pp. 137-138. However the first commercial agreement between the Venice and the Byzantine Empire dates from 992. See Diana Wright, *Bartolomeo Minio: Venetian Administration in 15th Century Nauplion*, p. 4.
2. Kevin Andrews, *Castles of the Morea,* p. 90.
3. Lock, *The Franks in the Aegean,* p. 71.
4. Harold Lurier, *Crusaders as Conquerors: the Chronicle of the Morea*, p. 155.
5. Lock, *The Franks in the Aegean,* pp. 88 and 104.
6. Andrews, *Castles of the Morea,* p. 91.
7. Andrews, *Castles of the Morea*, pp. 91-92, William Miller, *Latins in the Levant*, pp. 339-342. The territory of Nafplio and Argos en-

compassed the plain of Argos and the western side of the Argolid peninsula as far as Thermisi. Although the still imposing castle of Argos was in Venetian hands from 1394 to 1463 and again from 1686 to 1715 it was never of strategic importance to the Republic and its fabric shows no trace of these two periods of occupation. See Andrews, *Castles of the Morea*, pp. 106 to 115. The castle of Thermisi survives and is described in Chapter 6. Kiveri lay at the western end of the bay of Nafplio. The ruins of its Frankish castle still stand on the summit of a hill above the modern seaside village of Myloi, the site of ancient Lerna. The castle guarded the approach to the plain of Argos from the south. See Wallace E. Mcleod, *Kiveri and Thermisi,* pp. 378-386.

8. Guiseppe Gerola, *Le Fortificazioni di Napoli di Romania*, p. 355.
9. William Miller, *Latins in the Levant,* p. 358.
10. Miller, *Latins in the Levant,* pp. 397 and 412-414.
11. Simon Pepper, *Fortress and Fleet: The Defence of Venice's Mainland Greek Colonies in the Late Fifteenth Century,* p 30.
12. Miller, *Latins in the Levant,* p. 432ff.
13. Pepper, *Fortress and Fleet,* p. 34.
14. Miller, *Latins in the Levant*, pp. 465-470.
15. Gerola, *Fortificazioni,* p. 356.
16. The new border ran in an arc around the bay of Nafplio from Kiveri in the west to Thermisi excluding the greater part of the plain of Argos. The Frankish castle of Kiveri was abandoned at this time and a tower on the shore below seems to have taken over the function of border post. The base of the tower can still be seen built into a WWII gun emplacement. See Diana Wright and John Melville Jones, *The Greek Correspondence of Bartolomeo Minio Volume 1: Dispacci from Nauplion*, pp. 239-243.
17. When Bartolomeo Minio arrived in Nafplio in November 1479 as provveditor he reported that the construction work was in poor condition, that neither the land walls nor the sea walls were complete as had been thought, and that the work could not be finished in the absence of anyone with the knowledge of how to build foundations on piles. See Diana Wright and John Melville Jones, *Dispacci from Nauplion, 1479-1483*, pp. 5-9.
    Eventually Minio was able to complete a substantial part of the sea walls but work was still in progress in the first decade of the next century. See Gerola, *Fortificazioni,* pp. 372-373.
18. Gerola states that work proceeded day and night and that even provveditor Marzo Zen took part in the construction work. *Fortificazioni,* p. 373.

19. Miller, *Latins in the Levant,* p. 507.
20. William Miller, *Essays on the Latin Orient,* p. 383.
21. George Finlay, *The History of Greece under Othoman and Venetian Domination,* p. 217.
22. The treaty established the border of Venice's new realm at the western end of the Isthmus of Corinth. The Venetian negotiator at Karlowitz, Carlo Ruzzini, had attempted, without success, to establish a more defensible border to the east of the Isthmus beyond the pass of Megara. See Peter Topping, *Venice's Last Imperial Venture*, p. 163.
23. The Venetians went to considerable effort and expense to fortify their new border and overcome its weaknesses. They rebuilt the Castle of the Morea on the southern shore of the Gulf of Corinth at the Rio narrows in an attempt to control naval access from the west. They restored and extended the fortifications of Acrocorinth intending it to house a garrison that could be deployed to defend the Isthmus. Remarkably they also attempted to build a new land barrier to invasion both north and east of Acrocorinth. To the north they built a line of earthworks between the foot of the plateau of ancient Corinth and the coast. To the east they planned further earthworks to deny the route between Acrocorinth and Mount Oneion. The passes through the ridge of the mountain were blocked with simple walls and towers. Little of the earthworks that were completed survives, although the masonry walls of Oneion still exist. See Antoine Bon, *The Medieval Fortifications of Acrocorith and Vicinity,* pp. 268-271, and William R. Caraher and Timothy E. Gregory, *Fortifications of Mount Oneion, Corinthia*, pp. 347-354.
24. Finlay, *History of Greece*, pp. 265-266.
25. Andrews, *Castles of the Morea*, p. 105, gives the total garrison in Nafplio as 1,269.
26. William Miller, *The Turkish Restoration in Greece, 1718 - 1797*, p. 29. He states that Tripolitsa formally became the capital in 1786.
27. W.M. Leake, *Travels in the Morea, Vol.II,* p. 359. Leake also gives 1790 as the date when Tripolitsa became the capital.
28. Α. Βασιλείου and Κ. Μπουντούρης, *Ναυπλιο: Σημείωμα για την εξέλιξη της πόλης*.
29. Alexander Zäh, *Venezianische Baugeschichte von Nauplia 1685-1715*, p. 144.
30. Αντωνιάδης Μπάμπης, *«Ημερολόγια» φυλακών της πόλης του Ναυπλίου*.

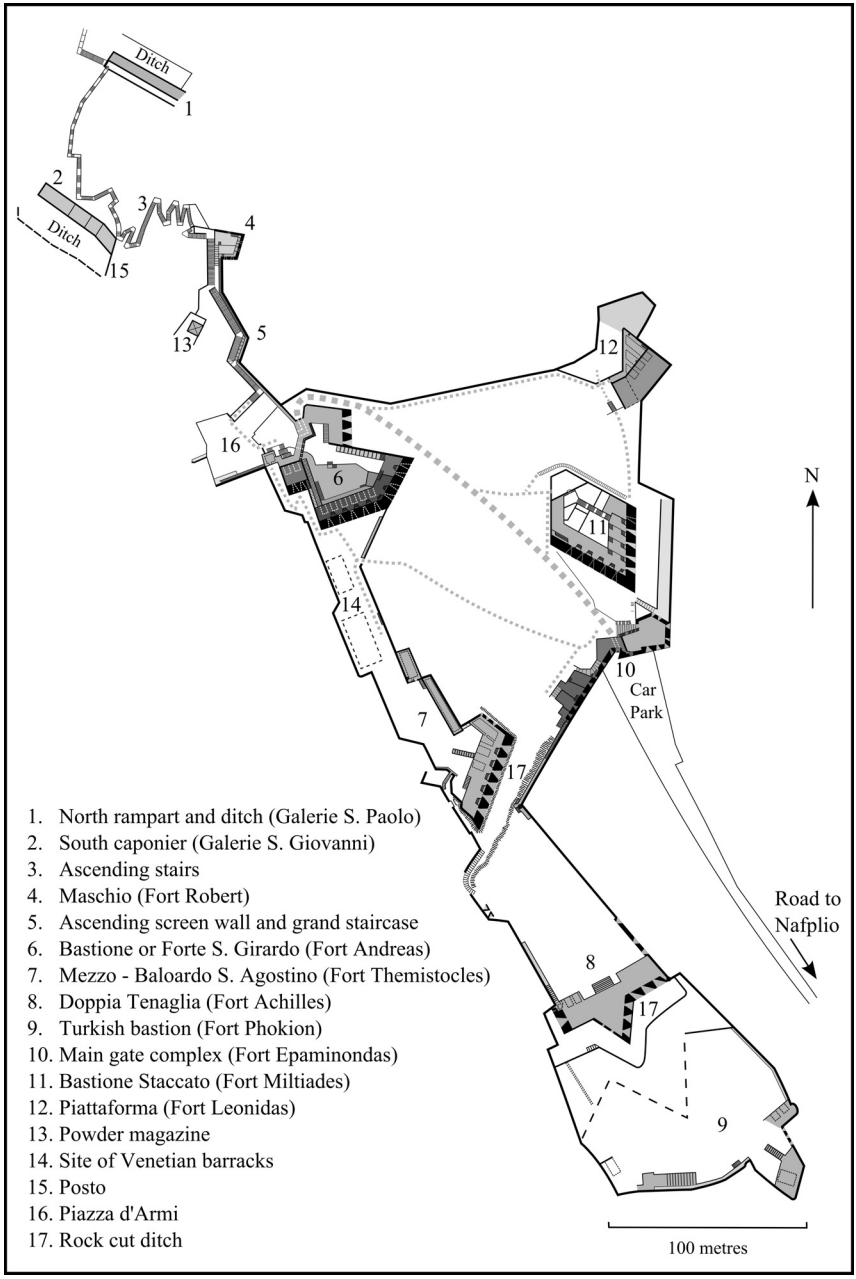
4

The Palamidi Fortifications

The Venetians were never in any doubt about the strategic importance of the Palamidi heights. In 1686 Morosini himself had bombarded the Turks in the town below from this position and control of the mountain top was clearly essential for Nafplio's future security. Unfortunately the scale of the fortifications required to secure the whole ridge meant that plans to carry out the work were repeatedly deferred as too expensive. A detailed design for a network of artillery bastions or forts covering the hill was drawn up for Francesco Grimani by the military engineer Giaxich in 1707 but the only work actually carried out was the erection of the rampart and caponier built on the lower slopes opposite the Grimani bastion[1] (see p.20 above). Construction based on Giaxich's designs finally began in 1711 on the initiative of Agostino Sagredo. Progress was rapid and the works were substantially complete by the end of 1714.[2] Despite this monumental effort the entire complex of forts fell to the invading Ottoman forces in July 1715 after a brief bombardment.[3] The Turks later completed the few unfinished sections of the defences following the original Venetian plans. They also added yet another outwork which extended the fortifications a further 100M southwards along the ridge. After the War of Independence sections of the fortress were converted into prisons, initially Forts Miltiades and Andreas, and later the Venetian barrack blocks within Fort Themistocles. The prisons closed in 1923 and the barrack blocks were demolished in the 1950s.[4]

Overview of the fortifications

By the early 18C the bastioned trace had become the standard form for any major works of fortification. With polygonal bastions connected by broad curtain walls the system provided near perfect flanking protection. The bastions and walls were typically massive earthworks



Plan 10 Overview of the Palamidi fortification complex. Derived from *Schaefer*, Neue Untersuchungen, Fig. 3.

with masonry revetments protected by a wide ditch, usually dry, with a sloping glacis beyond. Outworks were employed to keep attacking artillery further from the main line of the fortifications and became increasingly elaborate as the science of fortification developed.

While the land front of the lower town constructed between 1702 and 1711 largely conformed to this schema, the topography and geology of the Palamidi hill and the absence of virtually any level area precluded a design involving a symmetrical bastioned layout. In addition the rocky terrain made the construction of an extensive system of ditches virtually impossible. The solution adopted by Giaxich was to abandon the concept of a continuous trace and utilise instead a network of individual artillery redoubts located to command each of the vulnerable areas of the mountain, both the main north-south ridge and the gentler slopes to the east and northeast. The inner components of the fortifications would command and protect those beyond to produce a system of defence in depth.

The centrepiece of the system is Bastione S. Girardo (Fort Andreas). The main body of this work is an irregular pentagon, built on a slope at the northwestern extremity of the ridge overlooking the town below. Although the highest point of the ridge is almost 200m further south, the towering proportions of this bastion allows its main battery to command the entire length of the Mezzo-baloardo S. Agostino (Fort Themistokles) to the south. S. Agostino functions as a major outwork to S. Girardo. Its walls enclose the long slope of the ridge and terminate at a large gun platform commanding the southern approaches and the interior of the original final outwork, the Doppia Tenaglia, the double pincer, now known as Fort Achilles. This hornwork, separated from Agostino by a rock-cut ditch, extends the line of fortifications a further 100m to the south and terminates in another large gun platform, in this case with a triangular beak at its centre. A further rock cut ditch separated it from the remainder of the ridge. However the relatively level ground to the south was still regarded as a weakness in the defences. The Venetians had started to build a type of ravelin, or bonnet, beyond the ditch,[5] but it was the Turks after 1715 who added the outwork now known as Fort Phokion. This large irregular structure is again designed to support gun batteries at its southern end to cover the country beyond. Each of these successive outworks is open at the rear so that if overrun by an enemy it provided no protection from fire from the inner works.

To the west of this long line of fortifications the ground falls steeply down to the sea and needed no further defences. However the northern and eastern flanks of the mountain slope more gently and further

fortifications were required to deny these approaches to an attacking force. The Bastione Staccato (Fort Miltiades) is a freestanding artillery tower, or bastion, standing on sloping ground below and to the east of the main ridge. One of its two main gun batteries faces east along the flank of the hill and the other faces southwest enfilading the rock cut ditch between S. Girardo and Agostino. To the north of Miltiades is the Piattaforma, grandly renamed Fort Leonidas. As its Venetian name, the Platform, suggests this is a relatively simple two level gun platform standing on the northeast shoulder of the hill. Its gun batteries, now demolished, consisted of four embrasures facing southeast and two firing northeast over the narrow approach to the town below. Both of these works are protected by the eastern batteries of S. Girardo. Screen walls connect the Piattaforma to both S. Girardo and the gate complex now known as Fort Epaminondas but these cannot be considered to be part of a conventional curtain wall.

The successive flights of steps that form the direct route from the lower town to the Palamidi heights are protected first by the artillery tower known to the Venetians as the Maschio and then by the massive screen wall that climbs the slope from this tower to the rear of S. Girardo. The Maschio tower is equipped with gun embrasures covering both the north flank of the hill towards the Piattaforma and the outer face of the screen wall.

The Maschio (Fort Robert) and the approach from the town

The stepped path from the lower town to the upper fortress now starts at street level close to the northeastern tip of the Grimani bastion. It runs south before making a right angle turn east, uphill. This section is part of the original stairway, built before the construction of the Palamidi forts, leading to the entrance to the north rampart, Galerie S. Paolo (Plan 10, 1). Originally it ran directly from the dry ditch below the east face of the Grimani bastion but the lower section was destroyed when the modern road was constructed. The steps reach an arched opening in the battered wall that blocks off the western end of the rampart. Through the arch the stepped path turns south towards the southern caponier, Galerie S. Giovanni (Plan 10, 2), before turning east again to follow a zig-zag course directly uphill. Another lost stepped path that ran a little below its modern counterpart led to the arched lower entrance of S. Giovanni. The stairway, now relatively narrow, continues past the top of the caponier. From this point it is built against the cliff face with several sections carried on arches over the