



Information about the Environment and for travellers in Crete:

Ayios Panteleimon – Byzantine Church at Pigi/Kastelli
Giant fennel, *Ferula communis*



Directions: The church is located about 37 km (~23 miles) southeast from *Iraklion* and is reached best by taking the National Road towards East. At *Chersonissos* turn right towards South towards *Kastelli*. The church is also within reach of the village *Pigi* [= spring] (located left of the route), about 3 km (1.8 miles) ahead of Kastelli but it is easier about 900 m ahead of the village. Here a sign refers to the branch (left) to the church. From here it's about 1 km over a gravel road (through Olive groves) up to the destination.

The church is not located in the village *Pigi*, but outside, lonely in the shade of large trees and possesses as “sacred place” a long tradition. The springy area is probably settled since the Minoan time. The church probably originates from the 2nd Byzantine epoch (961-1204). The used building material (from earlier buildings), above all at the southern external wall processed, points to material from the 1st Byzantine epoch (395-826). The church was originally established as cross-in-square church and was probably reconstructed then later as three-aisled basilica. The last restoration took place in 1962. Here the three differently high and with pointed arches curved naves received their own gabled roof. The frescoes on the inside originate from that 13./14. Century and are kept only fragmentary. An “abutment” in the northern nave is particularly remarkable, which is composed of four Corinthian capitals ¹⁾. A tavern is in sight distance (somewhat below) of the church, where the key (and a companion) is to be received for the usually locked church.

¹⁾ The ornamented heads of pillars within antique buildings are called capitals. Here there are different styles.

The following illustrations show the church seen by the northern side view as well as the front and back, laterally. Among them individual ornamentation blocks and writing boards of the external walls as well as the “abutment” from capitals inside.



Giant fennel, *Ferula communis*

The Giant fennels, with its up to 3 m high inflorescences and seed heads conspicuous, have probably been noticed by every visitor on Crete. This plant belonging to the umbellifers occurs here usually at edges of roads and prefers calcareous ground. The Giant fennel forms a strong forb with thick, weakly sulcate stalks and multiple pinnate bald sheets. The fennel alike, finely dismembered sheets possess remarkably large, leathery leaf sheath, which wrap the recent inflorescences. The large, yellow inflorescences are richly brachiate; the fructiferous umbels are briefly petiolate, surrounded by long petiolate, barren side umbels. The elliptical fruits are about 1.5 cm long, squeezed together, with lateral wings. The bloom time is from April to June. The culm of the inflorescences have been used (e.g. as a “walking aid”) since the antiquity; the loose mark conducted as tinder when making fire and for the transport of glow. The mythology refers to this use, while PROMETHEUS, helper of humans and opponent of gods, rob the fire within a *Ferula* stems from latter’s and brought to humans. PROMETHEUS paid hard for this act - Zeus let him forge at rock, where an eagle picks daily his liver alive, which regenerated at night again. The thyrsus, assigned to the bacchants, the retainers of BACCHUS, was a pine cone (as symbol of fertility and the maleness), which at the



head of a stems of the Giant fennel, entwine with ivy and wine leaves, was fastened. The use of the Giant fennel as spice or medicine is not known; however others of the approximately 170 well-known species of this genus are important suppliers of medicine materials and vegetable rubber. Sometimes in the literature the Giant fennel is mentioned also as the plant related with the antique *Silphium* (rosinweeds). The antique spice *Silphium* originally originates from North Africa. North African city states (Carthage, Cyrene) controlled the trade and created their wealth on it. With the establishment of Cyrene (7th Century) *Silphium* was probably discovered for the Greek kitchen; the Greek name Silphion (or *Sylphion*) is probably taken from a Semitic language.



The text illustration (top right) shows a motive on a Greek vase (around 500 B.C.): “Woman with Thyrsus; top left: a Cyrene coin from Greek time with “fennel forb”. The pictures above show right: Mountain-slope at a road, overgrown with innumerable Giant fennel forbs; besides a single forb and a bloom in detail.

Pictures: (7) U. Kluge / (4) H. Eikamp (05-09/2003)