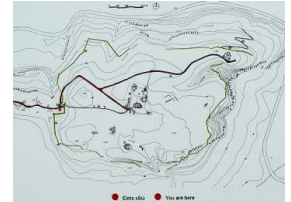


**Information about the Environment and for travellers in Crete:****Aptera: stony witnesses of Crete's history***(Aptera probably was one of the most important communal estates!)*An article from our NLUK members *Diana P. Bailey* and *Maria Eleftheria*, Crete

The ruins of the antique city *Aptera* (Ἀπτέρα), at the entrance of the Souda bay in the northwest of Crete, are reached from Chania in few driving minutes on the coastal motorway toward the east. About 7 miles behind Chania follow the signpost on the right. A well constructed road leads uphill to the village *Megala Chorafia* which since some years confusingly enough calls itself *Aptera*. It is worthwhile to drive slowly through the village and to look at the house walls because here and there stones from the close ruins have obviously been used.

Just before the end of the village is on the right the former (west) cemetery of the old *Aptera*. This was nearly completely opened in the past years. Funeral places and funerary goods were found at this expanded area, those were dated into the period of the 8th century before our common era and the 3rd century after Christ. The area is fenced and locked.

The second cemetery is located further above, in the southwest of the plateau. The graves there are classified to the period of the first four hundred years of the roman occupation of Crete (from approx. 67 BC); the place of discovery is also locked for visitors. Therefore see also our leaflet No. 154-06E at: [<http://www.kreta-umweltforum.de/Merkblaetter/154-06E.pdf>].

If you turn left at the end of the village you will recognize right above the road a fenced excavation area. A part of the approximately 3.480 meter long town wall of *Aptera* has been restored here. Funds of the European Union made it possible to bring back in original position some of the large stone blocks at the place of the former gate. Two settlement remainders were opened outside of the wall, where, as already mentioned, the western cemetery follows.



The building of the wall, which possessed several angular towers and gates in the west, the south and the east, begun in the 2nd half of the 4th century BC. Two earthquakes heavily damaged the verge in the 4th and 7th after-Christian century. It is remarkable that the wall on the west and southwest side was build from accurately hewn stones while the south- and east side was build with many undressed stones (cyclopean wall). The stone balls (see fig.) were used as missiles, which could be shot with catapults on the aggressors in the case of a siege.

A narrow, asphalted road leads further up the hill. The widespread plateau is reached after about 1 mile. You will get to the parking area and the entrance of the excavation terrain if you keep right at the bifurcation.

Recommendation: Drive left and further on for another 500 meters to the Turk fortress *Koule* at the edge of the plateau. The fortress has been restored in the years 2000 – 2006. The European Union participated in 80% of the cost. The bastion (see fig.) unfortunately is locked since the reconditioning.



The strategically favorable location of the fortress *Koule* grants a unique prospect over the gulf and the *Akrotiri*, the archaeological place, surrounding fields and Olive groves, up to the White Mountains. Open Air events and concerts take place during the summer in the bastion with its round corner towers and the well-preserved crenellations (see fig. below left).



The fortress *Izzedin*, at the edge of the small village *Kalami*, which is good to be seen from here, originates likewise from the time of the Turk occupation. After the departure of the Turks the bastion was used as a prison. Subsequently the plant at the Souda Bay served military purposes. Only the coastal strip behind the fortress is militarily used since some years. Also the fortress *Izzedin* is locked (see fig. above right). The castle is opened only for cultural meetings.

A first reference of a settlement *Aptera* as A-pa-ta-wa was found on a Linear B plate at Knossos, which was dated into the 14th – 13th century BC. The ideal position above the gulf benefited the ascent of *Aptera* to an important shipping and trading town. Its two harbors' were *Minoa* (close to today's Marathi) and *Kissamos* (close to today's *Kalami*).

These as brilliant bowmen feared warriors of *Aptera* fought as mercenaries in different countries of the Mediterranean area. The city state had its large prime age toward the end of the 4th and in the 3rd pre-Christian century. Own coins were shaped, on those the goddess *Artemis*, the supposed founder of the city, the myth king *Pteras* or *Apteras*, *Hera*, *Jupiter*, *Apollo*, or also bees are shown.

It is believed that the settlement was destroyed by an earthquake to a large extent in the 7th century and consequently given up by the inhabitants. A plundering of the settlement by the Arabs in the year 823 brought further devastations.

Only in the 19th Century identified the English traveler *Robert Pashley* based on found coins the ruins on the hill as remnants of the antique *Aptera*

Its name, so reported by legend, owes the city a music competition between sirens and muses. Latter won. The sirens, mixing natures, which were to the half bird and to the half woman, removed thereupon their wings (*pteros*: Greek: Wing, *apteros*: wingless) and threw them in the sea. The small islands within the bay of Souda are supposed to arose from.

Another tradition will know that *Eulimene*, a great-granddaughter of Minos, should be given as wife to *Apteros* (founder of the neighboring *Aptera*) by her father *Kydon*, the founder of *Kydonias* (today Chania). *Eulimene* however retarded the marriage and get secretly involved with *Lykastos*. When war between the cities broke out, *Kydon* asked the Oracle, which advised, to sacrifice a virgin. The lot fell on its own daughter, the unfaithful *Eulimene*. After her sacrificial death it transpired that she was pregnant from *Lykastos*. He was thereupon beat to death by *Apteros*, who then fled after this bloody beat.

For this trip into the past I recommend firm footwear, hardwearing clothes, sun protection, and sufficient provisions, above all water. Visit *Aptera* best early in the morning, and if possible in spring. Then you move here in a sea of blossoms, which will, if you have a view for it, inspire you with its surprising diversity of species (see fig. right).



Take care of wild artichokes and Marian thistle if you explore the ruins and move offside the paved paths. Sooner or later this is what you will do. Interested visitors can move cross country; the buildings put free so far by the excavation are spread over the plateau. Also outside the barrier, in the Olive groves and fields of the closer environment, are ruins to be found, like for example the remains of a former roman mansion, which is to be seen on the photo (below left). The ruin is to be reached via a trampling path, which branches to the right from the parking lot in a sharp angle.



It is to be assumed, that at this settled for a long time place, still some undiscovered is hidden in the earth. Since momentarily the money for a further extensive excavation is missing, only isolate and timely limited archaeological work is done.

The mobile treasures found so far, among more than 70 different coins which were shaped here in long past times and show the earlier economic importance of this city state, are to a large extend at the museum in Chania.

When entering the fenced main excavation area the foundation walls of a two-room building from the 5th pre-Christian century will catch your eye (see fig. left). Left of it is a huge cistern (fig. right) which originates from the time of the Roman occupation of the island. Bathhouses have been excavated east of it.



The partial renovated, Byzantine monastery Agios Ioannis Theologos (see fig.), which originates from the 12th century, was a branch of the eponymous large monastery at Patmos. The chapel of the seminary is believed to be established on the remains of a Greek temple of the Muses. Comprehensive and richly illustrated information's about the discoveries in *Aptera* are arranged at the ground floor of the two-story building opposite to the church. South the monastery building the soil of a early Christian place of worship was opened, under which Christian graves are situated.

Also the impressive three-aisled cistern with domed roof, which fills with water during winter, but is accessible in summer, originates from the Roman epoch (see fig. left at next page).

A completely special atmosphere prevails within the monumental building. The acoustic is surely interesting for “ear people” within the high rooms (see fig. right at next page).

The partial with lichens and moss overgrown walls, where also birds nest here and there, breathe so to speak centuries.

The ruins below the building are former bathes, which were feed with the water from the large cistern.



Impressing are the remnants of a theatre (see fig.) from the Roman epoch, which are accessible since lately. Although strongly damages, nevertheless the fundamentals of the building and some the stony seat rows are remain. The theatre, which was established on the foundation walls of an older building, is located in the south of the plateau. A wider path leads from the parking lot there. From here you have a magnificent prospect on the White Mountains; you even can see the summit of the Psiloritis on clear days.



The excavation area is usually opened between 8:30 a.m. and 3:00 p.m. for visitors. The antique place is closed on Mondays. Unfortunately **no guidance** is offered. Admission is free.