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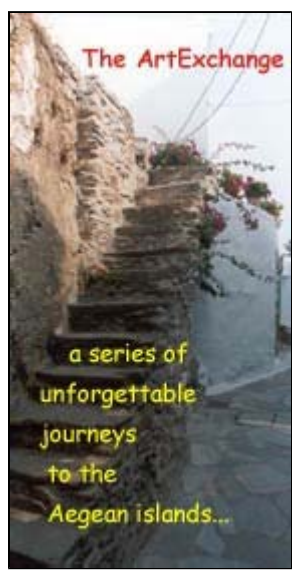
Naxos: The Kástro of Ano Hóra

By Caterina Pizanias, Director, [The ArtExchange](#)



Naxos, the largest and most fertile of the Cycladic islands, sits almost at the center of the Aegean. Its location and natural wealth are probably why the island has played such an important role in the mythology and history of Greek culture throughout the millennia.

One of the many primordial Greek myths is that Zeus, the god of all gods, grew up on Naxos – one of the island's oldest recorded names was "Dia" and the name of its highest peak is Mount Zas, also a derivative of Zeus. Naxos is also closely associated with the god of agriculture and viticulture, Dionysos. Dionysos is supposed to have spent his early years there but Naxos is mostly associated with his marriage to Ariadne and the birth of their three children.



You will probably remember Ariadne, the princess from Knossos who helped Theseus kill the Minotaur. Theseus took Ariadne with him but during the trip back to Athens decided (or was forced, as other versions of the myth claim) to abandon her on Naxos. There she was seen by Dionysos who fell madly in love with her, married her and produced three kids: Oinopion (Winemaker), Stáfylos (Grape) and Evánthi (Beautiful Flower).

Naxos was not only found attractive by the gods of antiquity and their occasional cohorts, but was a favorite of mortals. One of these, the Venetian Marco Sanudo, came to play a pivotal role in its subsequent history and culture. Sanudo was one of the Latin leaders of the Fourth Crusade (the one that brought down the Byzantine Empire in 1207 A.D.). He made Naxos the administrative center of his Duchy of the Aegean and it was that state's nerve center until its fall to the Ottomans in 1566 A.D.

With the help of trained engineers, Sanudo built a magnificent specimen of medieval architecture, one of the best preserved medieval walled cities in Greece. The *Kástro* is a "must" visit for all architecture buffs because it is an excellent example of western ingenuity coupled with local craftsmanship and use of materials (Naxians were among the first Aegean cultures to use marble in building and art).

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Sanudo's great walled city

When Marco Sanudo conquered the island (and many more across the Aegean Archipelago), he divided the islands into 56 fiefdoms that he distributed among those who helped him in the crusade, and others who were imported from Venice or Genoa to fulfill various administrative and other needs as they arose in protecting his duchy.

In building his Kástro, Sanudo was interested first and foremost in making evident the twin sources of his duchy's power: the Roman Catholic Church and his secular authority to both control and distribute wealth. By most accounts he hired talented engineers to design the Kástro, a walled city situated within a pentagon-shaped defensive wall. He chose the highest point above sea level, a location which already was the site of an ancient acropolis/citadel. As was the habit of building at the time, much of the ancient acropolis ended up in the walls of Sanudo's urban experiment.

At the center and highest point he built the Catholic cathedral and the *Cagellaria* or administrative tower. Then, he invited his officials and other nobility to come and build their houses according to his plans and specifications. The Kástro's walls were the same as the outer walls of the mansions, built with very thick walls, windows high, one next to the other, so as to form a solid wall. On the interior side the houses all faced onto a street that ran the whole length of the Kástro. They were connected to each other with secret passageways, as well as vaulted arches and stepped stone streets that would make it confusing for an intruder to the city.

Originally there were five "lookout" towers, without canons and other medieval weaponry; today only one of them still stands, that of the Glezos family. It had also three entrances/gates, with its most famous at the time still standing in very good condition, the *Traní Pórta*, or Grand Entrance, at the north side of the Kástro. The other two are the *Parapórta*, or Side Entrance, at the south side and the *Micró Parapórta*, or Small Side Entrance, to the east of the wall. There is a saying in Naxos that goes like this: "It is easier to walk through fire than walk through the *Traní Pórta*."

Sanudo's descendants invited Greeks to come and build homes just outside the Kástro, including farmers, fishermen and crafts folk. A new neighborhood was established, known as *Bourgos*, the Italian word for borough. Much later as the needs of the Duchy expanded, so did the invitations to non-Latins to come and build new neighborhoods on the outside perimeter of the Kástro's walls, which remained the focal point of an ever expanding urban sprawl. New arrivals included Jews, Armenians and Greeks from other islands, such as Crete.

How to walk the town

During your next stop in Naxos, curious traveler, start your walk though Naxos Town or *Hóra*, and enter the Kástro though the *Traní Pórta*. Before you enter, take a minute to check the right-side marble frame, where you will notice a groove it, one meter in length. This groove was used to measure cloth that merchants brought to the Kástro. The merchants were not allowed to enter, so as to avoid creating even the thought of sullyng the reputations of the noble women who lived there. Tradition has it that these women were most pious, dividing their time between looking after their households, visits to the church and the occasional walk sown to the *Traní Pórta* to purchase some silk and other material for clothing – no wonder why they were also known as best dressed women of that time!

Continue on through the Kástro's streets, visiting especially its grand buildings such as the *Cagellaria* and the cathedral (where the tombs of the dukes line its floors), all found at the center of the city and reminding inhabitants of Naxos's twin sources of power, the palace and the church.

Next, visit the Convent of the Ursulines that was later used to house a school for Catholic girls, the Monastery of the Capuchins, the Capela Casanza, the French School of Trade (famous in the 19th and early 20th century as a prep school for the wealthy – author Nikos Kazantzakis is its most

famous alumnus – and the home of the Archaeological Museum since 1973).

There many more grand houses, which belonged to some of the wealthiest families of the time, such as the Cripis, the Sommarippas, the Dellaroccas and the Maragos-Lorentanos, just to name a few. While walking through the cobblestone streets underneath the archways, pay attention to the elaborate coats of arms, the fan lights and grand entrances of the old mansions. There is also a small Greek Orthodox Church within the Kástro, the Church of *Theosképasti*, or The God Protected Virgin.

Then, exiting from the Parapórta you can meander through the Bourgo, the neighborhood of the Greeks who worked for the conquerors. It is an equally interesting, if not as grand an architectural experience as walking past the houses of the rich, that will let you experience the grand neighborhoods and urban complexes that grew out of Sanudo's exemplary medieval walled city.

Then, keep walking on to *Nió Horió*, New Village, and the *Grótta*, and find a nice table at one of the harbor's *ouzeris* for a well deserved respite of grilled octopus, Naxian cheese (some of the best in Greece) and, of course, a glass of *ouzo*.

As one early French visitor said: "Naxos, an eternity. . ."



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