



St. Demetrius church.

EARS TO HEAR, EYES TO SEE

Kythira's Byzantine Heritage: The Church of St. Demetrius in Pourko

Sergei P. Brun

Just a few miles to the south of Peloponnesus, washed by waters of the Aegean Sea, lies the isle of Kythira, the southernmost of the Ionian islands. It doesn't attract as many tourists as better known destinations, such as Corfu or Zakynthos; it is a quiet (thus a bit rugged) resort popular among the Greeks, with very few foreigners—mainly Australians, since many Greek immigrants embarked from this particular island in the late nineteenth century to seek a better life Down Under. Yet the island is a wonderful place—not only because of the clean, sky-blue beaches, the friendly people, the great local wines—but also because it retains beautiful monuments of Byzantine art—most notably twelfth–fourteenth-century churches and frescoes. Here are a few photos taken this summer at the Church of St. Demetrius, perhaps

the most unique and exquisite of Kythira's Byzantine era shrines. The Church of St. Demetrius lies in the village of Pourko, in the southwestern part of the island. A thirteenth century building, it consists of several vaulted chambers and two domes, fused into a single temple complex. The first and largest church—built in the early thirteenth century was consecrated in honor of St. Demetrius. To the north of that another chamber and apse with an altar dedicated to the Theotokos was soon added. In the following decades two more adjoining churches were built, awkwardly facing north, not east. These were consecrated in honor of St. Nicholas and St. Basil the Great. This unparalleled deviation from the canon, and a rare example of a four-church cluster, finds only one close analogy—the Church of Panagia Drossiani on the



island of Naxos. Another canonical deviation—unique to Kythira—is the tradition of decorating the conch of the altar apse not with the images of Christ or the Theotokos (which traditionally evoke either the eschatological or Old Testament themes), but with depictions of the patron saint of that particular church or altar. For example in the island’s Byzantine Museum in Kato Livadi (an incredible collection and a “must see” for anyone visiting Kythira) one may find a preserved conch with a thirteenth century fresco of St. Andrew, transferred to the museum from St. Andrew’s church in the nearby town of Livadi. Andrew’s brother—St. Peter—is similarly depicted in a thirteenth century church dedicated to him in the village of Arei. In the Church at

Pourko such depictions still exist in the apses of St. Demetrius’s altar and the side altar of St. Nicholas—representing the warrior saint and the Archbishop of Myra respectively. The Church of St. Demetrius preserves four layers of frescoes, from the early thirteenth to the sixteenth century. The earlier layers have been uncovered by restoration artists in the past years. The thirteenth century murals in the side altar of St. Nicholas preserve the iconographer’s autograph, naming a certain deacon Demetrios. Hagios Demetrios in indeed one of the most striking Byzantine churches in the Ionian Islands. And like the island of Kythira itself, it deserves far more attention than it has so far received. These photographs were taken in September of 2016. *

(left) Meeting of Our Lord in the Temple

Chapel of St. Demetrios







Chapel of St. Demetrios, details
of the Crucifixion



Chapel of St. Nicholas.



Chapel of the Theotokos.- general view.



Chapel of St. Demetrios.



Chapel of the Theotokos.



Chapel of St. Demetrios, Apostle Paul.



Chapel of St. Demetrios.



Apse of the Chapel of St. Demetrios.



Chapel of St. Nicholas.



Church of St. Demetrios: chapels of St. Basil and St. Nicholas.

© 2016 THE WHEEL.
May be distributed for
noncommercial use.
www.wheeljournal.com



Sergei P. Brun is a Russian historian specializing in the history of the Latin East and the author of several articles, papers, and translations, as well as the two-volume monograph *The Byzantines and the Franks in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia* (Moscow, 2015). Currently he is a research fellow and lecturer at the Museum of the Russian Icon in Moscow.