

## IV

## AGIOS ANASTASIOS OF NAUPLION

Across the very small plateia at our door us was the Church of the Mother of God, called Panagia, built by the Venetians in 1700 to replace an earlier church. Shading the north side of Panagia, is an olive tree, of no great distinction where olive trees are concerned, but of the utmost distinction in matters of martyrdom.

On a branch of that very olive tree was Anastasios martyred, and three enormous nails in a branch offer proof of the event which the gilded shrine below commemorates. Daily, fathers can be seen pointing out the nails to their children, boys to their girlfriends, or guides to their note-taking tourists, and heads nod and cameras click. The nails appears to be hand-made, and it is more pleasant to believe them the accompaniment of martyrdom than to prove the contrary.

Proximity to the shrine and the church generates a set of gestures which often appear more random than the original intent should suggest. Every Greek Orthodox who passes by is supposed to reverence Panagia, and the shrine, each with a triple sign of the cross, right to left, top to bottom, with three fingers in honour of the Trinity. This makes six crossings in a very short distance. Elderly women in black pause before each and go through the homage with great devotion. Young people whisk their fingers through the patterns, gazing off somewhere in the distance. Women who have given up the traditional black manage to combine the crossings with a motion that adjusts a neckline or a shoulder strap. Men usually appear oblivious to the existence of either shrine or tree.

The most interesting thing about this Anastasios who was born and bred here, and who died in Nauplion on the first day of February in 1655, is the almost total absence of information about him. Perhaps the fragility of his claim to sainthood is intuited, for in the selection of icons, the faithful have apparently chosen to remember him as a rather near-sighted, tender young man: a young man who must have had an overpowering sort of mother who raised him so that she would have a son on whose sensitivity other mothers would compliment her, and so a son who inevitably had to choose disastrously when he came to fall in love.

Anastasios is said to have been a painter, although it is not remembered whether he painted icons or frescos or the sentimental wreaths and flowers which the wealthier Turks and Greeks were pleased to have painted on their ceilings. During his short life, before and after, Nauplion was known as a center of icon and fresco painting, even though it was under Moslem rule which, characteristically, managed to be both extremely legalistic and extremely indulgent.

Anastasios fell in love with a Moslem girl. Local tradition says that she and her mother, witches both, had cast a spell on him. The girl might have been Greek: numerous Greeks found that conversion to Islam coincided with a lower tax rate. Anastasios would not have been the first young person to confuse the surgings of immature sexuality with those of religious fervour, but however it happened, under the influence of this spell, Anastasios abjured his Christianity, and announced his conversion to Islam by putting on the turban. The turban, by law either white or green, was restricted to Moslem: merely

wearing a turban was accepted as evidence of his changed status. Two hundred years earlier, he would have gone before a Muslim priest, raised his right forefinger, and said, "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammed is his Prophet," the priest would have put a turban on him, and then there would have been general public celebration and a parade surrounding a circumcision ceremony. It is not known if Anastasios enjoyed this kind of attention, or if the Moslem community in Nauplion took special note of conversions.

Eventually he discovered that, in the gentle expression of Nauplion's guidebook, "she was not faultless in her morals," and he became insane. A variant of the legend says that the local authorities, seeing he was unwell, shipped him off to an island reserved for the insane. Either on the island or in Nauplion, he came, miraculously, to his senses, stripped off the turban, and ran about the streets shouting, "I am a Christian, I was a Christian, I will always be a Christian."

Whereupon he was seized by an outraged mob and lynched. It was, in fact, a capital crime for a Moslem to convert to Christianity, regardless of his spiritual heritage: accusation alone was adequate for execution, but it is to be hoped that he was passed through the proper judicial procedures before being executed by strangling. His body was left to hang in chains from the olive tree to encourage the others. From shame at its role in the martyrdom, the olive tree refused to bear any more fruit. It must be admitted that this part of the legend does not hold up under examination from any neighboring balcony: out of reach of the pious, there are olives, few and wizened, but definitely olives. Anastasios, or what was left of him, was buried in the town cemetery, outside the town wall and across from the silted-up moat, close to the present train station.

Forty years later, around 1700, Nauplion had come under the brief and uncomfortable period of Venetian rule during which the present Panagia was built. In Greece it has always been the custom to clear out graves every three years, or whenever space is needed. When the bones of Anastasios were dug up in their turn, it was noticed that they gave off the odor characteristic of saints and of sweet basil, and that, taken in connection with the circumstances of his death, made someone think them worth saving. They were put in a box in a corner of the new Venetian church and forgotten.

They remained forgotten for two hundred years. In the early part of the twentieth century, Nauplion was suffering a cholera epidemic, and all hope had been abandoned. When it seemed as if the city might perish within its crumbling walls, a priest remembered something about old bones, and suggested that there would be no harm in trying them. There was a procession around the walls of the town, with priests and chanting and incense, and the bones, and of course, the cholera vanished. This is true: I had it from the nephew of a man who saw the whole thing.

Ever since that time, Anastasios has been regarded as one of the New Martyrs, a term which refers to Orthodox saints of Turkish manufacture. His Feastday is observed on the anniversary of his martyrdom, February 1, and that day is the high point of the whole Nauplion year.

Two days before, the streets around Panagia were cleared of cars and swept, the neighboring buildings and the Hotel Otto hung with Greek flags and blue and white bunting. The day before, an old man from the country arrived with a donkey and a mule laden with laurel branches, or oleander, which he strewed on the streets and the little Plateia Anastasiou before the shrine. On the Eve of the Feastday, the Liturgy of Agios Anastasios was celebrated: four or five visiting bishops were enthroned on a dais, looking for all the world like Amahl's night visitors; the seats in the church were filled with the

town officials and their wives, and all the fur coats owned in Nauplion.

The Feastday itself began at seven in the morning with the firemen's band marching through the streets of the old town making a splendid racket. Troops from the local army base -- inductees serve their first three months in Nauplion -- were trucked in much too early and shouted into lines outside Panagia by a small man with the chest of a pouter pigeon who stomps up and down. The service in Panagia finished. Huge baskets of bread blessed in the service were distributed to the gathering crowd; each piece had been wrapped in pastel-coloured paper so the impression was of enormous baskets of angular Easter eggs. Several gypsy girls with identically-withered hands pushed through the crowd, asking for money in a peculiar droning whine, "Drachmi, se parakalo, drachmi." Miraculously, the hands always healed at the touch of a coin. All the balconies around the Panagia and plateia were jammed. The procession began to form.

Altar boys in peach brocade carried poles with hanging lamps which no one remembered to light; no one remembered to light them last year, either. The local clergy wore brocades and samites: combinations of green and gold, blue and pink, red and gold, blue and gold, white and gold, blue and red and gold; gold with towering black hats. The Bishops of Nauplion and Argos and Corinth and Patras, and the Metropolitan from Athens, head of the Orthodox Church in Greece, all with jewelled dragon-headed staves, and jewelled onion-dome crowns, grouped together, each offering precedence to the others.

The Fire Department, wearing shining helmets and white gloves, carried out the great gilded icon of Agios Anastasios, a sort of Ark of the Covenant, supported on poles; the four most senior priests held ribbons that trail from the upper corners of the icon which provided a Maypole effect. A monk followed behind the icon bearing against his breast a silver reliquary with all that is mortal of the little painter. The chanters followed, just ahead of the firemen's band. There was a military unit with Sam Brown belts and shining helmets and the newest in American bazookas, then several groups of soldiers with distinctive sets of weapons, and the army band. The army band played something quite different from the firemen's band, and all proceeded from the Panagia to the waterfront.

The bells rang from Panagia's Venetian tower where half a dozen small boys had been slugging each other for the past hour to work out who should have the honor of ringing. The ships in harbour blew their whistles; both bands played different tunes as loudly as possible; bells from all the other churches in town pealed out; the bells in the clock tower on the hill joined in; all was magnificent cacophony, and obviously the little painter was quite a saint indeed to have generated such a gloriously satisfying moment.

The procession curved along the waterfront, turned right past the high school -- following the city walls of 1472 which stood until the 1930s -- turned right again to follow the main street up to the central square with the bank and the museum. The main street was one person narrower than the official procession: the banners waved and ducked to avoid the balconies. Looking headlong into the procession from the vantage of the square, there was a fore-shortened jumble of hundreds of flag-draped balconies where people stood with lighted candles and bowed heads, of waving flags and poles and banners and swaying crosses and icons and jiggling bayonets, and the glorious din of chanting and bells and brass reverberating in the narrow street.

At the square, the procession paused for prayers, and for the girls' choir; the Bishop of Nauplion in turquoise satin delivered a homily. Going back to the Panagia, the

procession deteriorated completely, snaking around the museum to end up at the shrine of Agios Anastasios for closing prayers, and an abrupt dissolution of the crowd. The little plateia that had been so jubilant an hour before was nearly empty, strewn with trampled laurel and field flowers, and a thousand pastel-coloured wrappers drifting in the breeze under the olive tree.