

The derivation of the name of Sfakia

by George K. Dalidakis*

Over the years people have been searching for the derivation of the name of Sfakia and various theories have been promoted and published in a number of books and articles. This article summarises these theories and adds some more views on a topic that is unlikely to ever reach to a firm conclusion.



Chora Sfakion

Papadopetrakis: History of Sfakia:

The Sfakian Papadopetrakis, Abbott and later Bishop of Sitia, in his book, the History of Sfakia of 1888, presents the following theories about the name's derivation:

1. “Sfikies”: The name comes from the Greek word for wasps. Sfakians were called “sfikies” by the people of other districts because they would descent from the high mountains of Lefka Ori upon the people of the lower lying areas and attack them like wasps. He also mentions that there was a settlement in Cyprus from people who came from Crete, also called the “Sfikes”, i.e. the wasps, for the same reason.
2. “Sfageia”: Papadopetrakis writes about a story from an old document that tells of a battle between the people of Lefka Ori and the Kourites who lived in the area between Lefka Ori and the Ida Mountain. The people from Lefka Ori initially defeated the Kourites, but the Kourites together with other allies fought back and eventually managed to defeat the people of Lefka Ori, killing all of them. Since then the area was named “Sfageia”, slaughterhouse, and from there comes the name Sfakia.

3. “Sfakes”. Papadopetrakis dismisses the above two theories and argues that the name of the village of Chora came from the many flowering plants known today in Greek as pikrodafnes or rododaphnes and in English as oleanders. In Sfakia they were known and still are known as “Sfakes”.

In his book he also writes that the name of Sfakia did not appear in any documents before the Venetian occupation era. He tells us that the first reference to it was by the Genoan priest Buondelmonte early in the 15th century where in his book about his travels around Crete he mentions passing by a destroyed village in the southwest of the island, which he names “Sfichium”. Papadopetrakis goes on to say that the name of the village was given to the whole district when the three baronies that covered the area were folded into one administrative district by the Venetians in the 14th century.

Stavros Kelaidis: Enas Gero-papas

The Sfakian lawyer and historian, Stavros Kelaidis, in his book “Enas Gero-Papas” (One old Priest) of 1960 discusses the above three theories about the name derivation of Sfakia (Sfikes-Sfageia-Sfakes) and he then adds another one. That the name derives from a town in Tunis in the north of Africa which is called Sfax and that Sfakia was named after that town because its people came from there. He then rejects all these theories and presents a fifth theory that the name derives from the ancient Greek word “sfax” that means chasm, gap in the earth’s surface and that the district’s name comes from the many gorges of the area and it means land of the gorges.

(here I would like to inform the reader that the northern Africa name derivation was promoted by Ishmael Pasha who was governor of Crete in 1861 and wanted to convince the population that the Sfakians were of Saracen origin!)

Stergios Spanakis: Kriti, Tourismos-Istoria-Archaiologia

In his 1964 book Spanakis, a Cretan historian, comments on the various theories about the name derivation and he provides us with one more; that the name comes from the herb sfakos or faskomilia (sage) but which he does not support.

He mentions then the Venetians’ use of the name, firstly by Buondelmonte in 1417 and later in the 16th and 17th centuries where the name appeared as Sfakia and Sfachia. He then hypothesises that the name must have existed from earlier times, before the Venetian era.

Finally, he indicates that he favours the theory of the German linguist and archaeologist Deffner who believed that the name came from the ancient Greek “sfax” and “diasfax”, Sfakia meaning the land of the gorges.

Venetian sources.

The first reference that we come across the name of Sfakia in Venetian records appears in a 1323 report by the Duca di Candia where he mentions of a person Nichiforus Sfachiotti. The second part of the name could indicate either “from Sfakia” or had been adopted by that person as surname, indicating his ancestry, something quite common in later times (Sfakiotis, Sfakianos, Sfakianakis, etc, are names quite common today).

As we mentioned earlier, the name Sfakia appears in Buondelmonte’s travel book of 1417 where he describes the ruins of an old village that he passed before reaching Anopoli and reports its name as

“Sfichium”. In subsequent Venetian reports from the 16th and 17th centuries we come across the name variously as Sfacchia, Sfakia and Sfachia. The use of “ch” in the name instead of “k” indicates the Italian spelling convention where a “c” before an “i” is written as “ch” but still pronounced as “k” (e.g. chianti) and not the Sfakian pronunciation where a “k” before the letter “i” is pronounced as “ch” which developed much later.¹

Two documents from the second Byzantine era.

There are two documents from the second byzantine period of Crete (961-1204 BC) where it would have been expected that the name Sfakia would have appeared. The first document is known as a “Chrisovoulo” (document having a golden seal authenticating the signature of a byzantine emperor) which was supposedly written by the Emperor Alexios Cominos II. In this document the emperor divides Crete into twelve districts which he grants to 12 byzantine royal families, known in Cretan history as the “Archontopoula” that he sent to Crete to settle there during the later part of the 12th century. The copies of documents in existence today are believed to be forgeries prepared by members of these families who wanted to convince the new island conquerors, the Venetians, that they had land rights given to them by the byzantine emperors. Although forgeries, these are still documents from the late pre Venetian era and have many place names from the area that we are interested in. The border of the district given to the Skordilis family, today’s region of Sfakia, is quoted as being from Askyfou, up to Anopolis, Agia Roumeli and up to Koustogerako. There is no mention of Sfakia in these documents.

The second document known as the “Prevelegion” (Document setting out the privileges, and land rights, of the Skordilis family) that the Duke of Crete gave to the Skordili family in 1183 outlines their land area given to them by the emperor previously. The document names the area as the district of “Ano-Polis” and provides 41 place names that define the border of their territory. Many of those names are recognizable even today, but there are no names of villages included in the document other than that of Agia Roumeli (and Anopoli of course). The absence of any reference to Sfakia is rather strange.

Current Linguistic opinion regarding the word sfax.

Researching the ancient Greek use of the word “sfax” in its many forms one comes across usages that might be translated into wasp, slaughter or cut apart. A compound of the word such as in “diasfax” can have the meaning of any opening made by violence, especially a gorge.²

Conclusion

From this brief coverage of the various theories and opinions about the derivation of the name Sfakia we can see that many support the derivation from the “Sfaka”, the oleander plant. Many others believe into the derivation from the ancient Greek word, “sfax” and the meaning of the name Sfakia as the land of the gorges. If indeed the name derives from the Greek “sfax”, we still don’t know whether it emerged during the Hellenistic period of the district or it was given to it later on during the early Venetian occupation era by either byzantine aristocracy living on the island or by a Venetian with knowledge of the ancient Greek language.

¹ Advice from Professor Peter Trudgill.

² Advice from Professor Brian Joseph.



Sfakes, oleanders in Greek



Aradena gorge, Sfakia

February, 2010.

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