

THE PROTECTION OF THE AGRIMI

REPORT ON A MISSION TO CRETE

By HUGH FARMAR

Preliminary.

From information gathered from officers who had fought with the partisans in Crete in the last war and others it had become clear that the agrimi, or wild goat of Crete, *Capra hircus aegarus*, was in danger of extinction.

The Fauna Preservation Society, the American Committee for International Wild Life Protection, the Conseil International de la Chasse and the International Union for the Protection of Nature were active in their interest in the animal, and I was asked to visit Crete to investigate the agrimi's status and to set in motion measures that would lead to its preservation. I am indebted to the two first-named societies and to Major Rufus Clarke, Vice-President of the Chasseurs de Montagnes (a section of the C.I.C.) for financial assistance towards the expenses of my journey, also to the Duke of Bedford and the Hon. Lewis Palmer for generous grants. I also wish to put on record my gratitude to M. J-P. Harroy, Secretary-General of the I.U.P.N. who put me in touch with the Hellenic Society for the Protection of Nature and, not least, to Major A. Fielding, D.S.O., who, for most of my stay in Crete, was my companion, guide, and interpreter.

Former Distribution of the Agrimi.

In ancient times the agrimi seems to have been common throughout the Ægean. There is a reference to the beast in the Odyssey (Odyssey 9.154). Odysseus, being short of food, landed on an island and "the nymphs of the island" organized a drive for the visitors who killed the agrimi with bows and spears and roasted them on the beach. Representations of the agrimi appear in early Minoan seals and drawings.

In the eighteen-thirties Pashley reported the agrimi as common. Twenty years later Captain Spratt saw a herd of forty on Mount Ida (in the eastern half of Crete) and it seems probable that the animals could easily keep out of range of the muzzle-loading guns which were then the only weapons possessed by the inhabitants. In 1897, however, the long series of revolts against Turkish rule culminated in a serious rising and the Great Powers sent forces to occupy various zones of the island. During this occupation modern rifles were obtained by the Cretans, and the agrimi's fate was virtually sealed. In 1913,

a year after the Allied trusteeship had ended with the cession of Crete to Greece, Trevor-Battye could find no trace of the animal on Mount Ida, and the only specimens which he saw alive were two kids which he bought at Samariá in the White Mountains. So far as I am aware only one living foreigner, Major Fielding, has seen the animal in a wild state. During the three years he spent leading the partisans in the mountains and on subsequent visits he has seen the animal twice.

Since the war of 1939–1945, nearly every mountaineer in Sphakiá, the province which contains the White Mountains, has become possessed of a modern rifle or tommy gun of British or German make and of a pair of good field glasses. Accustomed to the use of firearms for personal protection and in blood feuds from boyhood, they are excellent marksmen.

Visit to Crete.

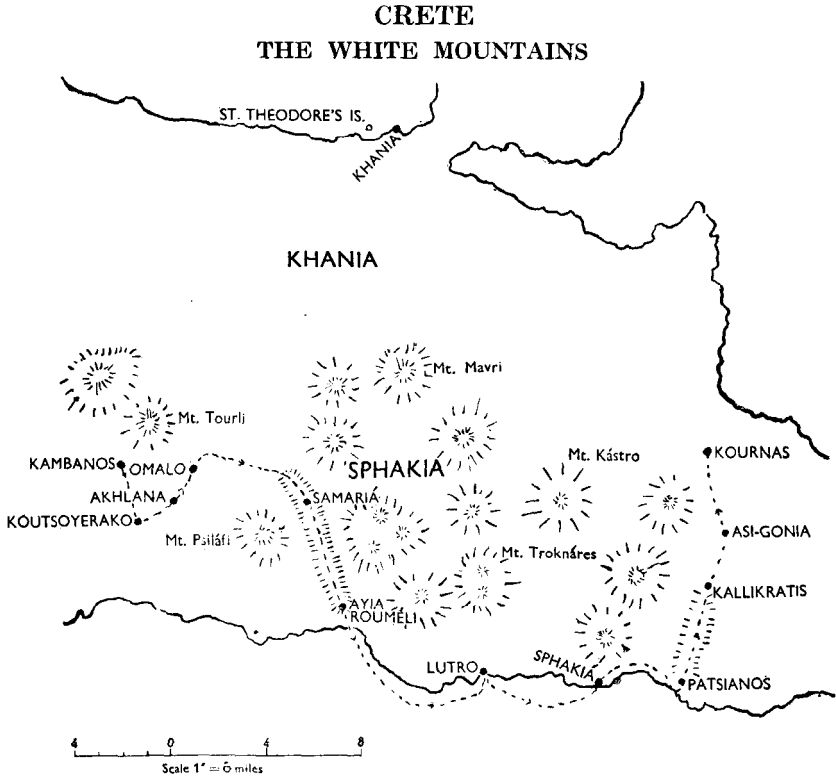
Major Fielding and I arrived at Khania (Canea), the capital of Crete, on the 16th May, 1952. Before I left Athens, where I stopped *en route*, I had got in touch with M. Santorineos, the Secretary-General of the Hellenic Society for the Protection of Nature, and explained my plans to him. He had already been told of my mission by M. Harroy. In Khania Major Fielding arranged a meeting with the chairman and members of the committee of the Khania Hunting Society. Of the members of this committee M. Manoussos Manoussakis, who has travelled abroad, has the most constructive ideas. Unfortunately I was unable to visit Dr. Diamalakis at Heraklion who is extremely interested in the agrimi and who has several tame ones.

I spent seven days travelling in the mountains and had for most of this time Major Fielding as my guide.

My first stop was the village of Koutsoyerako, where live the Paterakis, a family most of whose members were notable partisans during the war. Manoli Paterakis helped Major Leigh-Fermor, D.S.O., to kidnap the German C.-in-C., General Kreipe, an exploit recorded in the book "Ill met by Moonlight". His brother, Kosti Paterakis, acted as my guide up the mountains and down the Gorge of Samariá to the sea at Ayia Roumeli.

On the 18th May we climbed from Koutsoyerako to a sheep-fold called Akhlana on the shoulder of the mountains above the remarkable "raised plain" of Omalo (3,000 feet) at a height of between 5,000 and 6,000 feet. We stayed two nights in the shepherd's bothy and explored the neighbouring heights and gullies by day. We were not fortunate enough to see an agrimi, or signs of one, though animals were said to be about.

Akhlana is about two hours' climb from the head of the Gorge of Samariá which runs from the centre of the mountain chain down to the sea; and there are other smaller gorges radiating from the central massif whose heights exceed 8,000 feet. It is in the peaks at the head of these gorges, in the crags and caves and particularly in a series of enormous cliffs (estimated



at up to 3,000 feet sheer) called the "Untrodden" owing to the treacherous character of the limestone that the agrimi has its last refuge. In this tremendously precipitous country it would be very difficult to make anything like a census without a prolonged stay and the employment of a number of watchers. My guide pointed out a mountainside on which he was certain there were four agrimi although prolonged spying did not reveal one. However, there are so many caves that this was perhaps not surprising. Persecution has made the animals extremely wary and nocturnal in their habits.

On the 20th May we climbed over the shoulder above Akhlana and down to the head of the Gorge of Samariá, and from there we followed the precipitous track down to the end of the gorge at Ayia Rouméli. The gorge is some eight miles long as the crow flies, but the path is probably three times as long. Two-thirds of the way down is the tiny hamlet of Samariá, and it is in the cliffs near this place that agrimi are also found.

Below Samariá the gorge narrows from a width of perhaps over a mile at its widest, to 15 feet at a place called "The Gates", where the torrent rushes between cliffs which are said to be 1,500 feet high. Passing through this chasm at nightfall was an eerie experience and it was here that I had my only hint of the presence of an agrimi when a shower of stones dislodged from far above narrowly missed us.

The following nights 20th and 21st May were spent at the village of Ayia Rouméli, and I was able to explore the lower end of the gorge and the surrounding hillsides by daylight. At Ayia Rouméli a family had a tame agrimi kid of about two months old captured in March. It was an extremely attractive and friendly little animal of tremendous activity. I was also offered, but declined, the gift of a fine pair of horns of a ram stated to have been seven years of age, shot three or four years ago.

I made inquiries about the agrimi of the shepherds of Akhlana and the people of Samariá and Ayia Rouméli. Everyone said that there are "plenty"; but I came to the conclusion that this means no more than that some exist in the two regions at the head of the gorge and in the cliffs lower down.

Kosti Paterakis told me that there were three or four hundred in all in the region. I find this extremely difficult to believe. While I am quite unable to make an accurate estimate I should be surprised if 100 still existed. The numbers may be as low as 50.¹

The agrimi has long "enjoyed complete protection" by law; but the law is a dead letter. In the White Mountains the animals are shot irrespective of age or sex when opportunity offers. I doubt whether the gendarmerie at Ayia Rouméli make any attempt to prevent this poaching. There are however, owing to the extremely sparse population, at most six men who hunt. I think it probable that the females go apart to drop their kids in the early months of the year and that this is the time when

¹ The people of Sphakia will tell you that there are "plenty" of red-legged partridges. By European standards I found them extremely scarce, though during the war, when shooting was difficult, they were very plentiful.

the most damage to the stock is done. The agrimi kids occasionally found in captivity are likely for the most part to be orphans.

Hunting, which is extremely hazardous owing to the dangerous state of most of the rock surface, takes the forms of bolting the agrimi with dogs or by shooting into the caves, giving a running shot, waiting for the animals to come down to the bottom of the cliffs to scratch among the stones for water, or stalking in the accepted sense. So far as I know the last foreigner to hunt the animal was Mr. Buxton about 1890.

I did not succeed in getting convincing data as to the number of agrimi shot annually. Manoli Paterakis, however, told me that he shot 40 during a period of eighteen months to two years; and his brother has shot four in one day. I gathered, however, that these exploits took place soon after the end of the war, and they cannot therefore be regarded as typical. I have no doubt that while the hunters were busy fighting the Germans, the agrimi increased. By now, although the hunters remember comparative plenty a few years ago, the animals are probably reduced owing to the more accurate weapons now available, to as small if not a smaller stock than existed before the war.

On the 22nd May I hired a caique and sailed along the coast to Sphakiá where I rejoined Major Fielding. From there we walked to Patsianos, also on the coast, and stayed two nights. On the 24th we climbed the Kallikratis gorge to the village of that name which is only occupied during the summer. From there we climbed on into the mountains to stay the night in a shepherd's bothy on a shoulder from which one could see Mt. Ida about eighty miles away to the east.¹ The next day we walked down to the foothills and reached Asi Gonia, a village on a road, where we got a lift in a lorry to Khania.

At Sphakiá, Patsianos and Kallikratis I continued to make inquiries about the agrimi. However I always received the same answer, that the animal abounded "at Samariá", but did not exist elsewhere. It seems clear that it is extinct except in that neighbourhood.

On my return to Khania I had further meetings with members of the Hunting Club and we made two attempts to visit the uninhabited St. Theodore's Island nearby, where the Club released some agrimi before the war and where something

¹ I do not give the locality of this place. Our host, a most delightful man, was "in retirement" while the question of two homicides, the latest of a series of six to which he owns, is being settled.

over a dozen are said to exist. However the boatmen refused to put out owing to the roughness of the sea ; it did not appear to me to be very serious by English standards.

I did not have the opportunity of meeting the Governor-General of Crete, to whom I had an introduction from Sir Charles Peake, the British Ambassador at Athens. He was on tour throughout my visit. The Governor-General is interested in the agrimi and has released some on the uninhabited All Saints' Island on the extreme eastern coast of Crete. Mr. Vedova, the British Consul at Khania, told me that there are now eleven on that island. I was sorry not to be able to meet the Governor-General ; but he would probably, had he known of my journey, have insisted on sending a police escort with me into the mountains, which I should have found embarrassing in my dealings with the people.

At Athens.

On my return to Athens I again saw M. Santorineos. I also had a long interview with Air Marshal Potamianos, private secretary and A.D.C. to the King and a member of the Committee of the Hellenic Society for the Protection of Nature, and Sir Charles Peake kindly arranged for me to be presented to the King. Finally, I met the Committee of the Hellenic Society under the chairmanship of Professor Pantazis, reported the results of my journey and submitted my recommendations.

I found Air Marshal Potamianos extremely sympathetic and appreciative of the problems involved. He knows Crete and the Cretans well. I mention here that he agreed that a warden, when appointed, might be given special prestige, possibly by some mark of royal patronage. He promised to discuss this point with the King. (The Air Marshal has the reputation of "getting things done".) He also volunteered that he would try to arrange for the Alpine Club to visit the White Mountains each summer and to keep in touch with the inhabitants.

The King appeared to be very interested in the agrimi and seemed to like the idea of a special warden being appointed. He mentioned that he had successfully appointed a notorious poacher as gamekeeper at Tatoi, his country home.

Professor Pantazis told me that, as a result of my journey, M. Santorineos would go to Crete and visit the various people whom I recommended. M. Santorineos is a good alpinist as well as a great enthusiast for the protection of nature ; he should be liked by the Cretans for his sporting qualities.

I mention here that both in Crete and at Athens I was very much struck by the very great impression which appeared to have been made by the visit of someone from abroad to investigate the status of the agrimi. This was particularly evident in Crete where members of the Hunting Club stated that my visit was the first sign of any interest from "outside", let alone Athens.¹ I do not suggest that there was any personal element in this interest, though my task was undoubtedly greatly helped in Crete by the friendship and presence of Major Fielding. By his pseudonym of "Alekos", under which he organized the "Underground" during the war, he is universally known and beloved. I had only to mention his name or that of "Mihali" (Major Leigh-Fermor) to be overwhelmed with kindness.

Present Status of the Agrimi.

I can perhaps best summarize this as follows:—

(a) *Crete.*

- (i) In the White Mountains. I have dealt with this above. Numbers perhaps as high as 100.
- (ii) St. Theodore's Island. Numbers about 12 (introduced).
- (iii) All Saints' Island. Numbers 11 (introduced).

(b) *Ægean Islands.*

- (i) Antimilos (informant M. Santorineos). The agrimi on this island, at one time distinguished as *Capra ægarus var picta*, were numerous before the war. The German garrison of Milos and the inhabitants of that island, all of whom were starving at the end of the war, however practically wiped them out. M. Santorineos lately visited the island and saw two agrimi.
- (ii) Ghyaros (Ghiura) in the Cyclades (informant M. Santorineos). I have very little information. The agrimi formerly existed here, but may have interbred with feral goats. The island is now a prison.
- (iii) Ghyaros (Ghiura) in the Sporades, a royal possession. I heard an uncorroborated rumour that agrimi existed there.

Conclusions.

While the presence of agrimi on St. Theodore's and All Saints' Islands is interesting, the introduced animals cannot be regarded

¹ This is not quite correct. There has been considerable interest in the U.S.A. owing to the presentation of an agrimi to President Truman. And the Greek authorities are certainly interested, if inactive.

as more than analogous to emparked deer. St. Theodore's Island, which is not more than a very large rock, is not big enough to hold more than a limited stock. It is very vulnerable to poachers by reason of the short distance from the coast. Members of the Khania Hunting Club expressed doubts as to whether there is sufficient water. Animals may die of thirst during the summer. One or more of these arguments may apply to All Saints' Island.

M. Santorineos has reported fully on Antimilos to the International Union for the Protection of Nature. Information about the two islands called Ghyaros is, as I have mentioned, extremely vague.

The remaining stock of agrimi in the White Mountains of Crete is to my mind much the most important. It is an integral part of a remarkable fauna and flora in surroundings of astonishingly fine natural beauty which do not exist elsewhere. (I deal with the terrain and its fauna and flora at paragraph 8.)

For various reasons the people in Crete who are interested in the animals have not attempted to effect protection in the mountains but have concentrated on trying to establish the animal elsewhere. The reasons for this attitude are partly physical, partly political. Sphakiá and the Sphakians have been always a country and a people apart, remote from the rest of Crete and feared for their qualities, a country of "trackless" mountains and a warlike people. There is an analogy between these highlands and highlanders and those of Scotland before 1745. No overlord, Venetian, Turk, or German has ever succeeded in subduing Sphakiá. It is noteworthy that only one educated man to whom I spoke in Khania, M. Manoussakis, had visited the White Mountains.

Recommendations.

It will have been observed that the remaining agrimi in Sphakiá are concentrated at the head of and along the Gorge of Samariá. They are hunted by not more than half a dozen men. The area concerned is not more than 10 miles long by 4 miles wide and it could easily be patrolled by one man who should be well-known and respected by the inhabitants. I recommend that a member of the Paterakis family, preferably Manoli Paterakis, should be appointed as warden and that he should be given some special mark of status to enhance his prestige; it would be useless to appoint a stranger. The influence of the gendarmerie is very limited; I have the impression that, unless a party is sent out

to make an arrest, they keep for the most part to the neighbourhood of the villages. In any event they are often metropolitan Greeks by origin and as such are despised by the Sphakians, who are apt to talk of "the other Greeks".

The warden would need to be appointed by the Government and paid out of Government funds. I gathered from Air Marshal Potamianos that this would not present great difficulties. Members of the Khanian Hunting Club made the point that only a small proportion of the dues from hunting licences is spent in Crete: these dues might be drawn upon. However it seems to me that the appointment and payment of a warden is a domestic matter, whatever influence may be brought to bear upon the Greek Government from abroad.

The mere appointment of a warden will not *ipso facto* solve the problem. There must be effective liaison with him from both Athens and Khania, and I suggest that, as an additional link, the Hon. Mrs. Seiradakis (Bella Vista, Khalepa, Khania), an Englishwoman married to a Cretan, who is incidentally related to the Paterakis family, should be asked by the interested societies abroad to act as correspondent.

The chain of liaison should, I feel, otherwise consist of the Hellenic Society for the Protection of Nature which should act in close concert with the Khania Hunting Society through M. Manoussou Manoussakis (96, Venizelos Street, Khania), members of which should be asked to visit the warden in the White Mountains from time to time. It might, I think, be regarded as interference in Greek affairs to suggest what part the Governor-General should take; but naturally his goodwill would be most useful.

I would suggest that the representative in Athens of the Conseil International de la Chasse, M. Skouses, should support the work of the Hellenic society in this matter rather than act independently. That society, although of comparatively recent origin, appears to have some semi-official support and seems to me best qualified to deal with the authorities. I did not have the pleasure of meeting M. Skouses who was at his home in Italy.

The International Union for the Protection of Nature is in constant communication with the Hellenic society through M. Santorineos. Although he would not, I am sure, object to keeping the other interested societies informed, I suggest that, in the main, I.U.P.N. could most conveniently act for the foreign interests.

I may add that I did not, advisedly, attempt to approach the Ministry of Agriculture at Athens, which is the department

concerned, partly on the score that I might have been accused of interfering with Greek affairs and partly because the Greeks concerned are much more likely to be able successfully to deal with their own officials than is a foreigner.

I left Athens feeling that at least the ground had been prepared for arrangements to be made for the protection of the agrimi and that a warden will eventually be appointed. That societies abroad are interested has, as I have already mentioned, undoubtedly impressed the people I met in Athens and Crete; but it will be necessary for their intervention to be followed up. The young Hellenic Society for the Protection of Nature needs all the support that it can get both at home and from abroad; for the conception that wild animals need to be protected is quite a new one in Greece.

It was noticeable that no one in Crete had yet heard of the society, and there seemed in Athens to be little idea that anyone in Crete was interested in the subject. I hope that in this respect my visit will have served to establish relations between the Society at Athens and the people best calculated to be helpful in Crete.

The White Mountains.

In the course of my journey I crossed this range twice. So rarely are these mountains visited by foreigners, that I feel that this report would be incomplete without a brief description of this extraordinary beautiful and interesting region and its fauna and flora.

The mountain chain runs along the whole of the southern coast of the westerly half of Crete and, on the south, drops precipitously to the sea. The rock is limestone except in a few places, where conglomerate is found. Traces of iron must be responsible for the pink and umber colouring of some of the rocks which adds so much to their beauty. The most notable features are the gorges which sometimes run up from sea-level into the central massif; of these that of Samariá is much the largest and most important. It was this gorge and the surrounding country which Atchley, the botanist, considered the most beautiful area in the world.

On the "tops" the griffon vulture is common. Once I saw nine together. There are golden eagles and I saw a smaller bird that may have been Bonelli's eagle. "Cornish" or red-billed choughs are common and I saw the alpine accentor, rock martins, and an occasional alpine swift. The blue rock thrush is common in the gorges. (It was amusing to see and hear many of these

birds at the same time as the blackbirds, chaffinches, and blue tits, familiar in Northern Europe, or their close counterparts, and to see my first griffon vulture just as a wren had burst into song on a rock a few yards away.)

The most interesting of the birds was the lammergeier, which I saw twice. It is familiar to the people who call it the "bone breaker". It is not molested and is probably as plentiful as it ever was. I was glad to be able to identify it because, except for a verbal report from Mr. Mark Ogilvie-Forbes (a member of the Fauna Preservation Society), the bird has not been reported from Crete, at least by an Englishman, since 1913. Crete and Spain may be the only remaining habitats in Europe of this extraordinary and impressive bird.

The flowers are of great interest. By pure good luck I found and collected the Cretan tulip which, so far as I know, has been found only three times in this century. The white Cretan peony *Paeonia clusii* grows in the Gorge of Samariá and elsewhere and there are numerous other notable plants and shrubs, for instance the sweet-scented *Daphne sericea*, which grows on the heights.

A very important feature of the Gorge of Samariá is the scattered natural forest which is the sole remnant of the primeval forests of Crete. It is composed of the horizontal cypress, the Mediterranean pine, the oriental plane, and the Cretan maple. Some of the cypresses are very large and of great age, resembling in habit well-grown cedars of Lebanon. I am not qualified to say to what extent natural regeneration is being prevented by roaming herds of domestic goats or whether the tapping for resin and burning down of trees are here, as elsewhere in Greece, a serious danger; but I am inclined to think that the forest is on the decline.

The people of these mountains are of wonderfully fine physique and often of noble appearance. The conditions in which they live, their habits of the blood-feud, sheep-stealing and smuggling and their custom of keeping open house to the stranger reminded me of accounts of the Highlanders of Scotland as they lived over a century and a half ago. The manners of the people fit their appearance. Except for an occasional communal wireless set (usually presented by the American D.C.A.) there are no modernities, no roads, no sanitation, no inns.

I am deeply grateful to have been helped to visit this most remarkable corner of Europe which, combining as it does landscapes of sea, mountains, and forests of the wildest and most romantic loveliness, is the most beautiful and interesting country that it has been my very good fortune to visit.