

Pope Alexander V (1339?-1410)

A Nisyrian Pope ?

The research that follows is about the origin of Pope Alexander V (mundane name Petros Philargis or Philargos). About his personality the following information has been gathered from Wikipedia internet:

He made his studies at the University of Venice and went on studying theology at the universities of Padova, Oxford and Paris, where he received his PhD.

His compiling work comprises comments in the Sententiae of Peter of Lombard and texts Greek language.

He abandoned his academic career, when in 1378 the great schism had burst out in the Catholic Church and all the followers of the Pope Urban VI were ousted from the University of Paris. In 1384 he went to Pavia, in 1386 he was proclaimed Bishop Piacenza, in 1388 Bishop of Vicenza, and in 1389 Bishop of Novarra. At the same time he was acquainted with Gian Galeazzo Visconti and became his political counselor, participating in a diplomatic mission in Prague.

Being supporting by Visconti, he was proclaimed Archbishop of Mediolano (Milan) in 1402. Though closely connected with the Court in France (because of the great schism in it) the Visconti Family had always been on good terms with the pontiff of Rome. Benedict XIII was Pope in Avignon, while the Pope of Rome Innocent VII required the friendship of Visconti and Peter Philargi. Since that time the Philargi became a very significant personality in the court of the Pope. In 1405 he became a Cardinal and was sent as a representative to Northern Italy, where he formed a coalition with the other cardinals paving the way for a convention aiming at the unification of the Catholic Church.

In 25 of March 1409 he inaugurating the Piza Convention during which Peter Philargis proved particularly active and efficient. In 26 of June 1409 he was proclaimed Pope having acquired for him the two thirds of the conclave. He was given the name Alexander V and had the duty to warrant the peace of Catholicism, the good faction of the power of the Pope, and the vision of the Union of the Orthodox with the Catholic Church. He was triumphantly welcomed in the Cathedral of Piza, and the Catholic congregation prepared for him a favourable reception, wising the New Pope to purge the catholic church ramshackle by quarrels and scandals.

As a Franciscan he promoted privileges in favour of his order, in hope that Franciscans would renew the ecclesiastic corps. Alexander V desired to put an end to the schism between Avinion and Rome. He enjoyed recognition by many Italian cities, by France, England, a part of Germany and Bohemia. His most significant opponent of course was Rome. After eight months, in 1-5-1410, Rome collapsed and Alexander V, could have been established as the leader of the Popedom by the use of arms. However finally he was unable to get into Rome. He became ill in Bologna and died on 4th of May 1410, buried in the cemetery of the Franciscans.

Many cities contest the origin of the Pope (pore accurately in place of Pope) Alexander V. From the Greek point of view there are two views. The first one believes that Philargis came from Argos, Nisyros, where Franciscan monks found him pure and destitute, brought him to their Order whereas the second view believes that he was born in Crete. Moreover, certain people believe that his name Philargis or Philargos, is derived from his birthplace Argos.

We quote here below two of the mainly completed and documented studies on this subject by Zacharias Tsirpanlis, prof. at the Aristotle

University in Salonica and the *Italian Archaeologist Lucilla Donati-Kourouni*.

(1). Explanatory notes at the texts of Dr. Tsirpanlis and Mrs. Kourouni had been taken away from this dissertation for technical reasons.

1. Professor Dr. Z. Tsirpanlis in his dissertation "Rhodos and the South Sporades* in the years of Joanite Knights (14th-16th cent.)" in the Chapter, Pages from the Medieval History of Nisyros (1306-1453) published in "Dodecanissiaca", states:

"I would like to refer to a problem which hasn't been studied so far, and our relative sources, cause some uncertainty as to the exactness of their information. That's why it will be sufficient for me just to refer to it, in order to help any future research. It refers to the origin of Franciscan monk Peter Philargis who was elected Pope (rather in place of Pope, because he was not elected according to the regular procedures) Alexander V by the Piza Synod in June 1409, and kept his pope office until May 1410, when he died.

Markos Renieris, who has especially dealt with the greek Pope, states that Petros Philargis was born by poor parents at Kares, a small village of Merabelou region, (division of Lasithi in Crete), in about 1340 and the Franciscans cared for him and gave him very sound education. Moreover Renieris as well as the other researchers, like Stavrakis and Zoudianos, who happened to deal with Alexander V, are quite certain that Philargis was from Crete, and they have never mentioned the possibility that he came from Nisyros. Only Gerola and Hofmann write that Philargis was probably from Nisyrian, without having examined their sources critically.

However, let us see how they have grounded their opinions. The former, who held that Alexander V was from Crete, acquire their information from a book by Cornelius (1755), who, in his turn, grounds his view, based on a notice commemorated by Nickolaos Comninos Papadopoulos and furthermore, at what was written in the still unedited work of the chronicler Andreas Cornaros, about the history of Crete. However, we must take into consideration that, both, Cornaros and Papadopoulos wrote two or three centuries after the time that Alexander lived. The former, about 1630-1635 and the later at the beginning of the 18th century. In addition two or three points of the work have been proved far from creditable.

Nevertheless, the historian Bosio, it must be added, whose testimony is older than those of Cornaros and Papadopoulos, since he writes towards the end 16th century (1594), informs us that in June 1409, Pietro Filareto, of greek nationality, was elected was elected Pope in Piza, and was born in the island of Crete. It is also noticeable that Venice had recognized right away the election of Philargis and informed accordingly the Venician authorities in Crete, in the hope that he would rather guarantee the sympathy of the Cretan Orthodox towards the compatriot Pope and the Catholic Church as well.

As a matter of fact, as far as I know, with regard to the nisyrian origin of Peter Philargis, there is a descriptive travelling text by Francesco Suriano. He was born in Venice, by noble parents, and a noble family in about 1445, and travelled to East during the second half of the 15th century. He belonged to the religious Order of the Franciscans. Therefore he lived at almost the same time with Alexander V, while the fact that he was a Franciscan monk, like Philargis, makes us believe that he is more aware of what was going on the Franciscans Order and at least we are confident in his

information about Philargis. Moreover his confidence is strongly based on the fact that although Suriano is referring to the Franciscans coenobium in Crete, and the general description of this island, he underlines that Pope Alexander V, who brighten the Cretan Franciscan Order came from Nisyros. This is exactly what he writes: Despite they call Cretan, Alexander comes from Nisyros (Nixoro), from where he was taken under the protection of a professor of theology. From another publication of the same text of travelling by Suriano, we find out that this point of view changes. The extract goes like this: The coenobium we have in the city of Handakas was made by Pope Alexander IV because he came from Crete, a member of our Order, though some people say that he comes from Nisyros, an island which belonged to the Rodians (the knights of Saint John) in the Archipelago.

This testimony proves that even in the years of Suriano (second half of 15th cent.), it had not be found out yet with certainty if Alexander V came from Crete or from Nisyros.

More probable is that he was born in Nisyros and at a very young age he was taken to Crete, where he grew up among Franciscan monks. Perhaps newer data from documents of Italian archives, provide us with more details, which will enable us to find the final answer to the question concerning Peter Philargis' origin.

2. At the 8th International Cretan Congress (Heraklion September 1996), the Italian archaeologist Lucilla Donati-Kourouni addressed the following introduction (in translation), referring to the origin of the Pope Alexander V:

"Beyond the political and ecclesiastical interest of this election to the Pope's throne, it is our desire to stress the importance of those monuments which are closely connected with his life in Crete: Heraklion, in Italy, Naples, Piza, Assisi, Rome, Bologna and finally,

let's cast a quick glance at the island of Sporades where according to some historians, Alexander was born, in Nisyros, in the first half of XIV century. Meeting with this personality came at two different times, and at two different scientific researches.

The first time was at the beginning of 1990', when as we were going on with the study that had started concerning Crete of the Byzantine period, and Crete of the Venetian period, regarding the scientific works of Giuseppe Gerola and being guided by the studies that he himself had been occupied with: "Franciscans in Crete", "Topography of the city of Candia during the Venetian period", and "Checking the frescoes of the island of Crete", we, professor Kourouni and me, began to take considerable interest in the architectural monuments of the "Order of poor" especially of the Franciscans and take down how many of those monuments had still remained.

The first results of this research had first been presented at Rethymnon in 1991, during the 3rd Cretan Congress.

The second time occurred, always the critical repetition of certain notes of Gerola's works, such as: "Medieval monuments", "Circumnavigation", "Women's garments", "Il Codice Classense di Buondelmonti", "The preserved bucklers of the monuments in Sporades,* belonging to the knights of Rodos" and "The Italian tradition in Dodecanese" all works relating to 13 islands of Sporades, our attention was drawn by Nisyros.

Renowned for a few monuments, a prehistoric old castle, a classical tomb inscription, a knight's tower, various thermal natural sources and mainly a volcano. Nisyros is known as the island of multitude of architectural evidences of artistic and historic value, which because of being abandoned or even worse because of an insane tendency

for renovation, they are in danger of being completely and definitely lost.

As far as Pope Alexander V is concerned, there is a complete lack of evidences regarding his family and a great uncertain as to the place he was born.

A Pope's diadem, which lingers between excommunication and legality and a death surrounded by dubious fact, consist the main as well as dark characteristics of the life of Peter's from Crete.

On the other hand, no hints are missing about moral and professional achievements that characterize his personality, such as a PhD in theology an appointment of Archbishop in Milan, a triumphant entrance as Pope Alexander V in the cathedral of Piza, one pore fervent and hearty reception by the people of Bologna, during the last years of his life on earth.

Concerning the birth of Peter's Philargis round the year 1340, there is much confused and contradictory information. Italian and Greek historians have a dispute for his birthplace. Italian historians insist that Peter Philargos was supposed to be born:

- In Candia, a small village in the province of Pavia in Lombardia.
- In Candia, a region of Moncrivello in Verceli Piemonte.
- In Candia Canavese. In this village near the church of San Michele, at No 19 of the central avenue, exists according to the priest of the church, a commemorative plaque devoted to its bishop, with the notice: "La casa natale del fanciullo Pietro". The house where Peter was born. Moreover, Peter could have been born in Bologna, at a house on 62 Saragosa str. Opposite the church of Santa Caterina, where there is also an inscription engraved on the wall which states: «DOM ALESSANDRO V» was born in this house.

On the contrary, Tiraboschi as well as Malvezzi, Giacomo, Gersonio, believe not only in his greek origin but that he was born in Crete as well.

The greek historians believe that two are the probable birthplaces where the Pope might have been born: Kares (Neapoli), Mirabellou Crete and Nisyros.

Papadopoulos, Tiraboschi, Malvezzi, Giacomo, Gersonio, Renier and Comer consider Crete, as his birth place.

Gerola, Hofman and recently Tsirpanlis mention as his birthplace again Nisyros, because they believe in Suriano', the Franciscan monk missionary of the Holy Land reassurances, which come from the travelling diary of the middle of the xv CENTURY.

The Franciscan tradition of the island of Crete, which takes back to the beginning of 1300, the scientific work of Pietro Lombardo in the greek language with the title : "Comments on the maxims", the donation to the church of San Francesco Heraklion, all these facts indicate, if not exactly, the natural birth, at least with certainty the Cretan (Cretesi), intellectual and religious birth of Peter Philargos in Crete.

Besides, the existence of a Franciscan church at Kares, devoted to Saint' Antonio, where Peter lived and studied since 1350, and where most probably was tonsured as monk , before his journey to Venice, prove and justify absolutely his address as "Cretese de Candia".

Today, as well as during the time of Gerola's visit of the monastery, the church is ruined and totally abandoned.

After a personal research, it is proved that the church at Cares, consisted a monastery complex. On a small chapel with arcades lies another building at a lower level, without arcades, within which has entered a tomb.

Both these buildings are located in front of a kind of “di martece”, which attempts to unify constructively and practically the whole complex. This building was located in the middle of a wide perimeter and was joined to other buildings, which with the lapse of time have become a private farmhouse.

The Order of the Joanites knights is stationed in Rodos since 1316. The Great Magister Folques de Villaret conceded this island “ in feudi et jure feudi” to the brothers Giovanni and Bonavita Assanti to various Feudalists until 1470, when it was completely possessed by the Great Magister.

The sovereignty of the knights in Nisyros at last at the beginning, was characterized by a strong military presence in antithesis to the sovereignty in Crete which was marked by the transfer of whole families of venetians immigrants to the island.

The relations between the Latin conquerors and the greek natives, couldn't be considered as the best. The Bishops in Nisyros were Franciscans tight from the start. The first years of the knights' sovereignty meant for Nisyros the beginning of the construction of reinforced castles, to roof and protect the military Authorities that already lived on the island.

Having a circular shape of four kilometers' diameter, the island exist under the power of a volcano that has never been extinct. It is always active, and has designating its inhabitants life, their economy and its renown as well. The most interesting castle that has been built on the island is in Mandraki, official premises of the feudalists, stuck on the slopes of an Old castle with walls made of huge stones and which inside has a small church dug within the rock with two altars and an icon of Virgin Mary the sweet-kissing (glikofilousa), on the back side of which, saint Nicolas the sea protector, was depicted. This castle on the rocky coast is turned to

the island of Kos, protects the island and it's one of its most strategic points.

The other castle at Emporio, is located at the brim of the volcano in a zone which domineers the island of Kos and the Turkoeastern coast.

A third castle which has completely disappeared, at Argos location, was oriented to the Rodos side, *to prevent any onslaught by Saint Irene, a relatively flat terrain sloping towards the sea as opposed to the rest of the island with steep slopes. Today the area retains the same name, and the monastery of Cross (Stavros) is the only remarkable monument in the area. If, as suspected, Peter was born in Nisyros, he could have been born, in my opinion, at the village of Argos, while from the place name could come and the name of him. Filargos more likely an adjective, and it should not be associated with the family of origin. Fiilargos comes from Argos, the current region and once village, fortified by the Knights.*

The parents of Peter are to us unknown. Nikola Martoni in 1394 wrote about the Archipelago Rodos, "sunt Greci et fidem Grecam tenet" , "they are Greeks and keep the greek faith". It seems to me impossible, how a greek family, no matter how poor it was, was could have forsaken their child in favor of the Latins. It is most possible, in my opinion, that he was born by two parents of a different nationality and a different religion. One Greek and the other Latin. And because the Greek probably died, the Latin was obliged to protect him, till the age of 10, when the boy, according to the words of Suriano: "Da nixoro fu tolto piccolo da un Magistro in Theologia, per aver ingegno divento dottissimo" from Nisyros he was taken by a Master (magister) theologian and because was endowed with cleverness, he became a wise man. The Franciscan monk, leaving for a religious mission to the Holy Land, a few years

after Peter's death, he should that he knew very well the story of the Pope's life. "E per bence se chiami credence, tamen (tutavia) fu da Nixoro, insula del archipelago di Rodi", and despite the fact that his name was Kritikos, (Cretan), he came from Nisyros, an island of the Rodos archipelago. Suriano's absolute credibility and the certainty with which he transfers this oral tradition, despite the lack of inscriptions and other written texts, doesn't let any margin for disputing his allegations. In reality, Peter's name is Kritikos (Cretan), but nevertheless he was born in Nisyros.

He made his studies in Padova, Oxford, Paris, he was appointed professor of theology, he wrote different works mainly in the greek language. He became bishop in Piacenza in 1386, in Vicenza in 1388, in Navara in 1389 and Archbishop in Milan, in 1402. Serene, mild, generous, tending to the philosophical research, he always desired to persuade with the strength of the dialogue and argumentation rather than by force, power and weapons. Endowed with pure intentions he has never been a usurper or an extortionate not having any greed for riches, nor the desire of earthy power. Wise, pious, compassionate, he was fond of a quiet life and good food as well, a habit which malignant people attributed to his greek origin.

He was fond of saying about himself that he had been " a wealthy Bishop, a poor Cardinal and an even poorer Pope".

*Sporades was another name for Dodecanese on those years.

In place of Pope Alexander V'



Birth	1339 Nisyros (?)
Death	May 3, 1410 Bologna
Citizenship	Italian
Capacity	Catholic priest
School of studies	Universities of Paris, Padova and Oxon
Dignity	Archbishop, Cardinal, in place of Pope



The grave of Alexander V at the
Franciscans' cemetery
in Bologna.