

**Informationen zur Umwelt und für Naturreisende auf Kreta:**
Information about the Environment and for travellers in Crete:**Animal blessing in Asi Gonia, Prefecture Chania**An article from our NLUK members *Diana P. Bailey & Maria Eleftheria*, Crete]

If you visit Crete in the spring and are interested in the tradition on this beautiful island, you can celebrate the day of Agios Giorgos in a small town in Western Crete, together with about 800 villagers, many attending visitors, two pastor's, many shepherds, and countless sheep and goats.

The day of the patron saint of shepherds and flocks is the 23rd of April, but is celebrated only after Easter. The reason is the pre-eastern Lenten period. If so the "movable" feast of resurrection falls after the 23rd of April, the celebration is held on Easter Monday.

In Greece many Shepherd drive their flocks to those churches that are dedicated to St. George to solicit the blessing of God for themselves and their animals on this day.



Well worth seeing is this ceremony in the Sfakia, in the pretty village of Asi Gonia, which is located nestled at the foot of the mountain Livadhi, in the southern corner of the Valley on the river Mouselas (see picture left). Gonia in Greek means "angle", the Turkish word Asi means "Rebel". The population of the town revolted, as many other residents of the Cretan mountains, constantly against the hated Turkish rule (1669-1898). It is said that the invaders never made it to the village since it was easy for the defenders to defend the narrow gorge, the only access to the site. Like they used to do people in the "rebel angle" also today still live from stock-breeding. You preserve their stone houses and keep up the old customs.

It is advisable to start this trip early in the morning. You should arrive in Asi Gonia preferably before 9 am before big crowds make roads impassable and a quiet sightseeing of the place is impossible.

Also plan a delay in the arrival, because you will meet shepherds with their herds on your way through the mountains. With lamb and kid it goes down steep slopes for the purpose of a shortcut (see fig.) and rushing ahead animals as well as scattered latecomers are expected. **From the North**, Asi Gonia (Ασή Γωνιά) is to be reached over the expressway (New Road Rethymno – Chania). Halfway from Rethymno to Vrisses, take the branch to Episkopi, which brings you over Argiroupoli through a scenic landscape to the destination.



Form the South: In the South of Crete, near the village Frangokastello in the village Kapsodhasos leads the winding road uphill to Kallikratis. Short before the village take the right branch towards Miriokefala and follow after about 1.5 miles left the street towards Asi Gonia.



You are advised to park your car at the end of the village from where you later want to continue because the village will be locked for passing during the morning.

In Asi Gonia on the day of Saint George everyone is on their feet, from the youngest to the oldest, and every available Grill is situated to host the hungry visitors of the place with Souvlaki. Resellers offer the typical shepherd's crook's and bells of all sizes as a souvenir at the roadside.



In the chapel of Agios Giorgos, decorated with mural paintings, the religious service begins early in the morning. Religiously visitors kiss the icon of Saint George in front of the prayer house (see fig. left). Two clergymen work together at this festival; one gives the church services in the Chapel, while the second blesses the herdsmen and their animals outdoors. It is dusty and noisy when the herds trot through the village (see figure below). The whistles and shouts of the shepherds mingle with the bleating of goats and the multi-voiced bleating of sheep.



After a flock reached the village, it must go through a narrow street which leads to the church. Multiple Shepherds at the same time – without a break - milked at a bottleneck (see fig. left).

When all Ewe of herd are milked, it goes to the adjacent space. The clergyman blesses the shepherds, goes to the herd and sprinkles the animals also with consecrated water (see fig. right). Where at these react quite differently.



Shepherds, whose herds are too far away from Asi Gonia to deal the track back and forth in one day, bring the milk of the animals in the place to donate and receive blessings for themselves and their herd. All milk is collected, a part is heated locally and offered free of charge as a drink by young women in costume (see fig. left). The other milk is filled in bottles and distributed at around 11 a.m. If you want to snag one of these, you should be strong and free of apprehensions in the rudely hustle. Also free blessed bread is distributed in front of the prayer house (see fig. right).



The animals connected to the fence are donations to the Church. The composition of herds is different. Everything is represented, pure sheep or goat herds as well as variegated. The animals go around quite individually with the events of the day; some seem more bored, some are up and running, and then there's still some which are irritated and anxious. And some of the beautiful animals seem to be very aware of her good looks. (see fig. left).

Latest at noon the asphalt in the whole village is covered with excrement. The streets are full of parked cars and busses from all over Crete. The impressive and unforgettable celebration of the animal blessing goes to its end.

If you want to take the afternoon to further explore of the surroundings, there are some attractive destinations: Towards North you can visit the sources of Argiroupoli (therefore see our leaflet No. 224-07/E at: [http://www.kreta-umweltforum.de/Merkblaetter_en/224-07E.pdf]) and/or the ancient graves and the church of “the five virgins” (therefore see our leaflet No 125-05/E at: [http://www.kreta-umweltforum.de/Merkblaetter_en/125-05E.pdf]

For nature lovers the return towards South over Kallikratis to Imbros volunteer to do, an excursion that is described in our info leaflet No. 277-08/E (therefore see at: [http://www.kreta-umweltforum.de/Merkblaetter_en/277-08E.pdf]); and for those interested in caves can find a sight from the Neolithic age on this router at Asfendou; therefore see our leaflet 310-09/E at: [http://www.kreta-umweltforum.de/Merkblaetter_en/310-09E.pdf].

Finally some images of the animal blessing in Asi Gonia.



Translated by Michael Bloechinger-Daeumling

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