

The curious miniature ravelin of Neo Kastro, Pylos.

On a recent visit to Pylos, I was able for the first time to examine in a little more detail the strange pentagonal ravelin built by the Venetians shortly after their capture of Pylos from the Ottomans in 1686. Neo Kastro, built in 1573 by the Ottoman Turks was not highly regarded by the Venetians, who regarded it as being very vulnerable to attack from the southeast, where there is slightly higher ground.

One fascinating fact about the outworks to many of the Venetian and Turkish fortresses of Greece is that they are rarely considered in any detail by the guidebooks or indeed by some of the more detailed volumes, such as Karpodini-Dimitriadis' 'Castles of the Peloponnesus'ⁱ. At first thought this appears rather strange, but actually it reflects the paucity of academic study of these structures. Greece must have more castles and fortresses than many countries in the world. Add to this the vast number of classical sites (some of vast size) and it is little wonder that a small (and currently impoverished) nation has few resources to look in detail at its fortresses. In fact it is a minor miracle that there is any study at all.

In 1690 Giacomo Corner (successor to Francesco Morosini as Captain General of the Armies of the Holy League) referred to the vulnerability of Neo Kastro to attack from higher ground and the lack of a ditch or even a palisade. Three years later Antonio Molin (Proveditori Estraordinario in Morea) stated that the place was of little use in a bay too large to be defended, except that the aqueduct which supplied the fortress could provide a years' worth of waterⁱⁱ. The Venetians' attempt to correct the defects of the original Turkish design were unsurprisingly concentrated on the area to the southeast. A large crownwork was designed for Francesco Grimani (Venetian Governor [Proveditori Generali] of the Morea 1698 – 1701) by Francois Levasseur (Engineer of the Holy League) to dominate this area but for some reason was not constructed.

Andrews, in his 'Castles of the Morea' refers to the actual works undertaken and the curious miniature ravelin as follows;-

*'The plan was realised only in small part. A shallow ditch, 40' wide, was dug around the southern sector of the hexagonal citadel, to enclose its three outer bastions. The counterscarp is vertical and measures 8-20 feet high, forming salient and re-entrant angles in conformation with the indentations of the trace. At two points, opposite the south and southeast curtains of the fort, the covered way is projected forward by miniature pentagonal ravelins (Fig. 60), of a form similar to those proposed on Plate XII [Plan drawn by Levasseur for Francesco Grimani] in another sector. Part of the ditch is walled off into a small compartment by the two interior flanks adjacent to the counterscarp, each pierced by three loopholes, and the inner face of the work, which admits entry through a low door. The inner corner is flanked by a domed sentry-box.'*ⁱⁱⁱ

Andrews's justifiably famous book, still referred to today, is very correct in referring to the counterscarp wall forming salient and re-entrant angles in conformation with the indentations of the trace. However, the covered way, while it too generally conforms to the indentations of the trace, is not continuous, as the ground falls away to the east. The covered way also projects out around the ravelin, which is clearly visible from the

citadel of the fortress below its south curtain wall and is the subject of this article. I could find no extant evidence of another miniature ravelin to the southeast of the citadel, but the structures in and around the fortress are rather complex to comprehend.

The intriguing feature of this ravelin is that it has some of the characteristics of a caponier, a feature which generally appears more widely much later in the history of fortification and is of course common in many Victorian fortresses. As John Harris has pointed out, there is far older caponier, quite well developed, at Rhodes, dating from 1514, designed by one Fabrizio del Carretto^{iv}. The purpose of the caponier was to sweep the ditch with musketry fire at right angles to the line of assault. The difference here is that the ravelin at Nea Kastro is not accessed from the adjacent citadel as caponiers usually are, but from the ravelin itself; in other words it was independent from the main fortress.

The Neo Kastro ravelin was designed as a self-contained fortlet, capable of being reinforced, presumably at some considerable risk, by troops from the citadel traversing the ditch. The extant structures suggest that the two longer 'V' shaped walls of the ravelin projecting into the covered way over the counterscarp wall was perhaps 1.8 – 2.0m high. As no trace of a banquette is in evidence, it is possible that these walls were loop-holed, but unfortunately the extant masonry does not extend high enough to be sure.

The fighting platform formed by the ravelin over the counterscarp wall extended back towards the citadel through the use of a decked roof over the lower section of the ravelin. The perimeter wall of the ravelin clearly extended all-round the decked section at the same height as on the covered way, allowing further flank fire to be directed into the ditch as well as the covered way above the counterscarp wall. The vulnerability of the decked section of the ravelin is clear, there would have been little protection against mortar fire. In addition, the longevity of the decked section of the ravelin would have been decidedly short compared to the masonry

The lower section of the ravelin in the ditch has, as reported by Andrews, three loopholes on each flank, but none facing the citadel. The access door into the lower ravelin is very small and would have difficult for both attackers and relieving defenders to enter at any speed. A short flight of internal steps gave access from the lower ravelin to the upper deck / covered way section of the ravelin, presumably protected originally by a heavy trapdoor.

The domed sentry-box (Gueritte) described by Andrews is by virtue of its location, another peculiar feature to Neo Kastro. A detached feature standing in the ditch in front of the rear wall of the ravelin, its entrance faces the citadel. Quite what its function was is somewhat difficult to assess, but my assumption is that it was placed in such a way that its occupant could scan the main ramparts of the citadel in case of some secret escalade by attackers. Given the large numbers of irregular mountain troops in the Ottoman armies of the period – especially Albanians – such a risk would have been very real.

Neo Kastro was besieged several times, once by the Venetians in 1686 when they captured the fortress, subsequently building the ravelin referred to. In 1770 the Russian Count Orloff with an army of insurgent Greeks took the fortress, but it was re-occupied by the Ottomans shortly afterwards. In 1821 more Greek insurgents took the fort after a severe struggle and occupied it, but in 1825 a large Ottoman army attacked and retook the fortress, occupying it until 1828^v, when they surrendered to the French. The 1825 siege was undertaken at the same time as a large Ottoman/Egyptian fleet anchored in Navarino Bay and was destroyed by a French, British and Russian fleet. How the ravelin performed under siege is not recorded, but there is evidence of damage to the fortress from fire from the south (the vulnerable area identified by the Venetians). After the Battle of Navarino, Neo Kastro was occupied by the French under General Maison (who built a large barrack block inside the fortress, recently refurbished)^{vi} and some extensive repairs were carried out by them in 1829.

The citadel was used as a state prison between 1864 and 1951, the interior being divided up with high walls and it may be during this period that a building which could have been a guardroom was built on the covered way adjacent to the ravelin.

In 1984 repairs commenced on the citadel and all internal evidence of its previous use as a prison were completely expunged.

Paul Beckmann.



The miniature ravelin viewed from the south face of the citadel, clearly showing the v-shaped 'notch' in the covered way corresponding, the deck/floor level in the flank wall of the ravelin and the access door. The building to the left is a later construction, possibly a blockhouse or more likely a guard room from when the citadel was a prison.



The miniature ravelin viewed from the southwest face of the citadel, showing how far into the main ditch the ravelin projects. The building directly behind the ravelin clearly has no function as a piece of fortification.



ⁱ Karpodini-Dimitriadis 1990 'Castles of the Peloponnesus' (in Greek).

ⁱⁱ Andrews, K. 1953 Revised 2006 'Castles of the Morea' Pub. The American School of Classical Studies at Athens ISBN 978-0-87661-406-8

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid

^{iv} Migos, A. 1990 'Rhodes the Knights' battleground' in 'FORT' Vol 18.

^v Paradissis, A. 1973 'Fortresses and Castles of Greece' Vol.II ISBN 9602262907

^{vi} Papathanassopoulos, G. and T. 2000 'Pylos-Pylia A journey through space and time' ISBN 960-214-278-2