



Acheron Gorge

Acheron

Acheron is one of the most famous rivers of antiquity due to the widespread belief in ancient times that its waters traversed the Underworld. The Giants quenched their thirst in its waters during their harrowing fight with the Gods of Olympus. After the defeat of the Giants, Zeus cursed the river so that its water turned black and could no longer satisfy the thirst of anyone. Acheron thus became known as “Black River” for centuries until St. Donatos slew the monster which had been polluting the river water with its poison. Following this event, the river was renamed “Sweet” which continues to this day.

Throughout antiquity, many pilgrims travelled on long journeys to visit the Oracle of the Dead which was situated on the banks of Acheron. It was there that the resourceful and guileful priests administered vision-inducing herbs to the pilgrims which allowed them to learn their future from the spirit idols of the dead.

Long before the traveling days of the pilgrims who were thirsty for knowledge, however, Hercules and Theseus, who were Mycenaean heroes, wrestled Aidoneas, the Thesprotian King, in order to be able to descend into the Underworld ... or perhaps it was to conquer the fertile lands on behalf of new settlers.

In the *Odyssey*, Ulysses, the great wanderer of the world, visited the land of Acheron to seek advice from the dead. His opponents, the suitors of his wife Penelope, were terrified by the lethal poisons of Efyra which Ulysses acquired there.

In the centuries that followed, people continued to honor the river. When the new religion came thus burying the old



The cave of St. Arseni in Gorila



Footpath at Gorila's summit

religion in the ruins of their temples, new churches and cities blossomed adjacent to the ancient river.

The **Virgin Mary of Paramythia** (Solace) embraced all of the inhabitants of the area in her protection, while the **castle of St. Donatos** protected them during challenging times. The strong castle walls of **Elaia** on the **Gorila** plateau have become part of the farming landscape next to the **Monastery of St. John**. Further down the banks of **Kokytyos**, the **Monastery of the Virgin Mary** in **Kamini**, **St. Kyriaki** (Sunday) in **Gardiki**, the early Christian temple in **Glyki** (Sweet), the glorious **Monastery of St. Dimitri** in **Tourkopalouko** and finally the **Monastery of St. John** on the hill of the ancient **Oracle of the Dead** were all built next to the legendary



Tourists in the gorge



Springs in the gorge

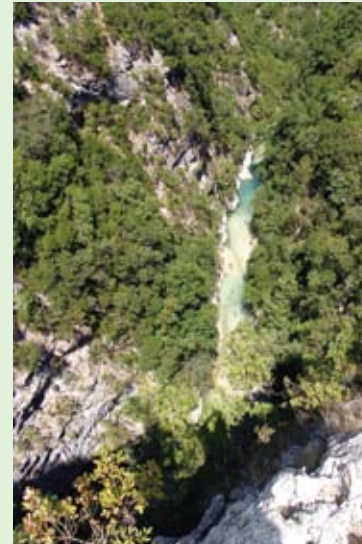
river. Dozens of stone built bridges connected the banks of Acheron. The peaceful river in the summer becomes a wild beast in winter destroying all that tries to stand in its way. During the recent era in which the former inhabitants of Souli resided in the region, the ruins of the large collapsed bridge of Glyki destroyed the bridge of Dala in Tsagkariotiko. The bridges in the valley were destroyed long ago and only old photographs remind us of their former presence anymore.

In Kokyts, some bridges over the river bed survived while others suffer under the ascendancy of a modern bridge



The gorge viewed from Tzavelena's Skala

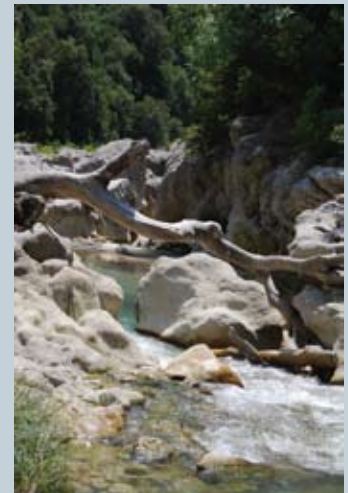
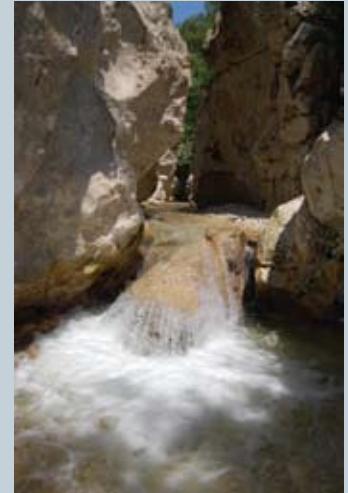
which was thoughtlessly built over them. These stone bridges connected the walking paths and cobbled roads that traversed the difficult mountains and the flooded valleys. The best known walking path of “Tzavelaina’s Skala” begins at Glyki and guides the visitor to the ruins of proud Souli. The old stone built houses and water cisterns of these resilient people as well as the memory of their bravery still touch the heart of the world, and thousands of pilgrims climb the rough mountains to honor their memory. The castle of Kiafa steeped in history dominates the gorge while the humble church of St. Donatos and the proud Kougki naturally elicit feelings of eminent respect from the visitor. Thousands of visitors discover Acheron during the summer months. Tourism has changed the area’s landscape and disturbed the rare ecosystem of the river which is protected as Natura 2000 site. Information about the flora and fauna of the greater Acheron catchment area can be obtained at the Information Centres of Ammoudia and Glyki.



Acheron Straits

Glyki is built on the bank of Acheron, which is the border of the Prefectures of Thesprotia and Preveza, and is a calm base from which to venture out and explore the villages of Souli and the greater Acheron area. You can ascend to Souli from Glyki either by car or on foot.

Leave the car next to the restaurant which is situated next to the river on the dirt road which commences at the village and guides you to the river's springs. Walk through the plane tree forest to the springs, where potable clear water gushes forth into the light. You don't have to get your feet wet until you reach this point. From this point on though, you will have to walk in water against the river current. In some spots you will have to swim in the crystal clear waters of Acheron. You will enter its gorge, which is one of the most beautiful Greek landscapes. Walk in the river until you reach the Dala Stream tributary where there once stood





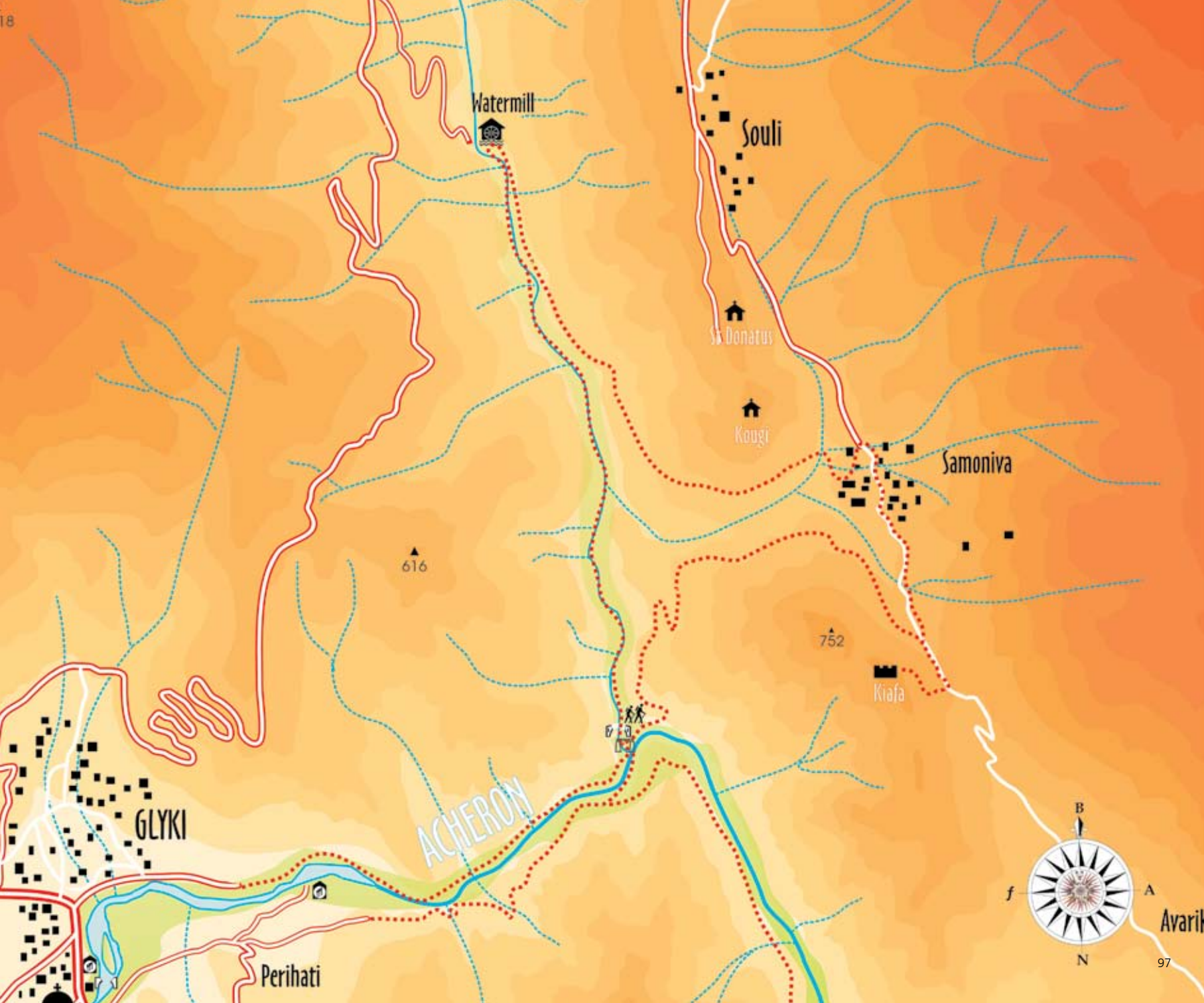
The watermills of Souli

a stone bridge that has since collapsed. The stream originates from the mountains of Souli. In its springs within a landscape of startling beauty, stands a refurbished watermill. For those who cannot tolerate the water or in the event of inclement weather, one can also reach this point by following the old refurbished walking path of the people of Souli which is called “Tzavelaina’s Skala”.

We recommend that you continue to ascend the stream until you reach the springs and the refurbished watermill. This is where the walking path towards Souli begins. Once you get there, you should visit St. Donatos and Kougi as well as the chiefs’ houses and the numerous wells. If you continue, you can climb to the imposing castle of Kiafa. In the coffee shops of Souli you can taste simple dishes of the local cuisine. If you desire to taste the most sophisticated dishes of the area, return to Glyki. In its restaurants, next to the river under the plane trees, you will find all that you could possibly desire.



- Dalmatian Algyroides (*Algyroides nigro-unctatus*)
- The springs
- Common Ivy (*Hedera helix*) on an oriental plane tree (*Platanus orientalis*)



The Castle of Kiafa in Souli



The gorge's exit



On one of the most inaccessible mountain tops of Souli, the impressive castle of Kiafa was built in a leveled area with large multi-edged bastions which fortified the defense capabilities of the entire complex. Gun-
nery holes for light and heavy arms were positioned to cover the entire castle exterior. In the interior, apart from the luxurious seraglios which have not survived the test of time, large material and supply warehouses existed which were useful during periods of long sieges. Kiafa was the refuge of the people of Souli in their struggles, but the fortifications were built by Ali Pasha to defend the castle against the return of the people of Souli.

The Monastery of Virgin Mary of Paramythia (Solace)



The Epitaph in Paramythia

Built during the 13th – 14th centuries, the Grande Church of Paramythia gave its name to the town and offered solace and security to the weary inhabitants of the area. The church of the monastery built in the circular Byzantine style is impressive with its architectural beauty! A large epitaph which was embroidered in gold on a red silk cloth in 1587-1588 by Monk Arsenios from Meteora is found in the relics of the monastery.



The Castle of Elea (Velliani)

The Paramythia Valley, where the “Oracle of the Dead” was situated, was inhabited in antiquity by the Thesprotian tribe of Eleates. The town of Elea, with its fortified castle on top of the Gorila plateau, was the administrative and military center of the area. It was founded at the end of the 5th century BC, and it remained the Thesprotian administrative center until 335 BC at which time the center was moved to Gitani. Elea was destroyed in 167 BC by the Romans, together with the rest of the Thesprotian cities, and it became farming land. The Greek Archaeological Service has excavated and maintained the city.



Gorila covered in snow

The Oracle of the Dead



Aidoneus, hear, O hear!
By a gentle, tearless doom
Speed this stranger to the gloom,
Let him enter without pain
The all-shrouding Stygian plain.

(Sophocles, Oedipus at Colonus)

The two most significant Holy Places for Thesprotians and the rest of Greeks were Dodona and the Oracle of the Dead. Dodona was the worship site for the sacred couple of Zeus and Dione and the Oracle of the Dead in the area of Acheron the respective one for Aidoneus and Persephone. From these two sites, Greeks obtained oracles from the holy oak tree and the dead, with the intervention of priests.

Professor S. Dakaris locates the site that the Oracle of the Dead used to stand on the ruins near the village of Mesopotamos.

St. Dimitrios Kypselis



The church of the splendid Monastery of St. Dimitrios. It is located northeast of the village of Tourkopalouko (modernly known as Kypseli) on the right bank of the Kokytos tributary of Acheron. It was built in 1242 by Bishop Michael B., the Duke of Epirus, with two chapels and a cross-shaped roof. The Monastery's architecture, ceramic decorations and the multiplicity of roof styles that accord the static structure the perception of visual movement make it truly impressive. It has been maintained by the Greek Archaeological Service.

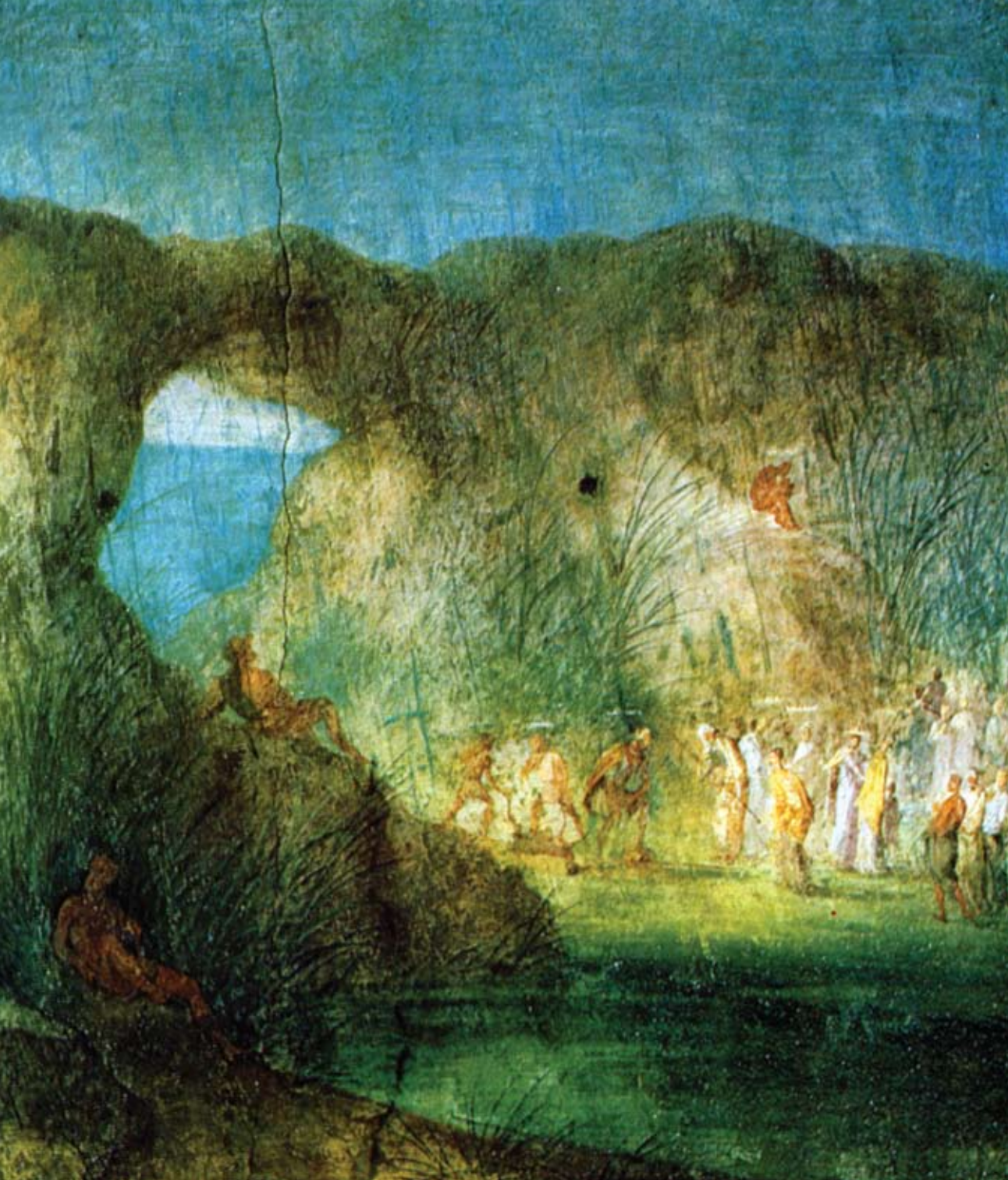


The Acheron Gorge
Photo by S. Meletzis 1938



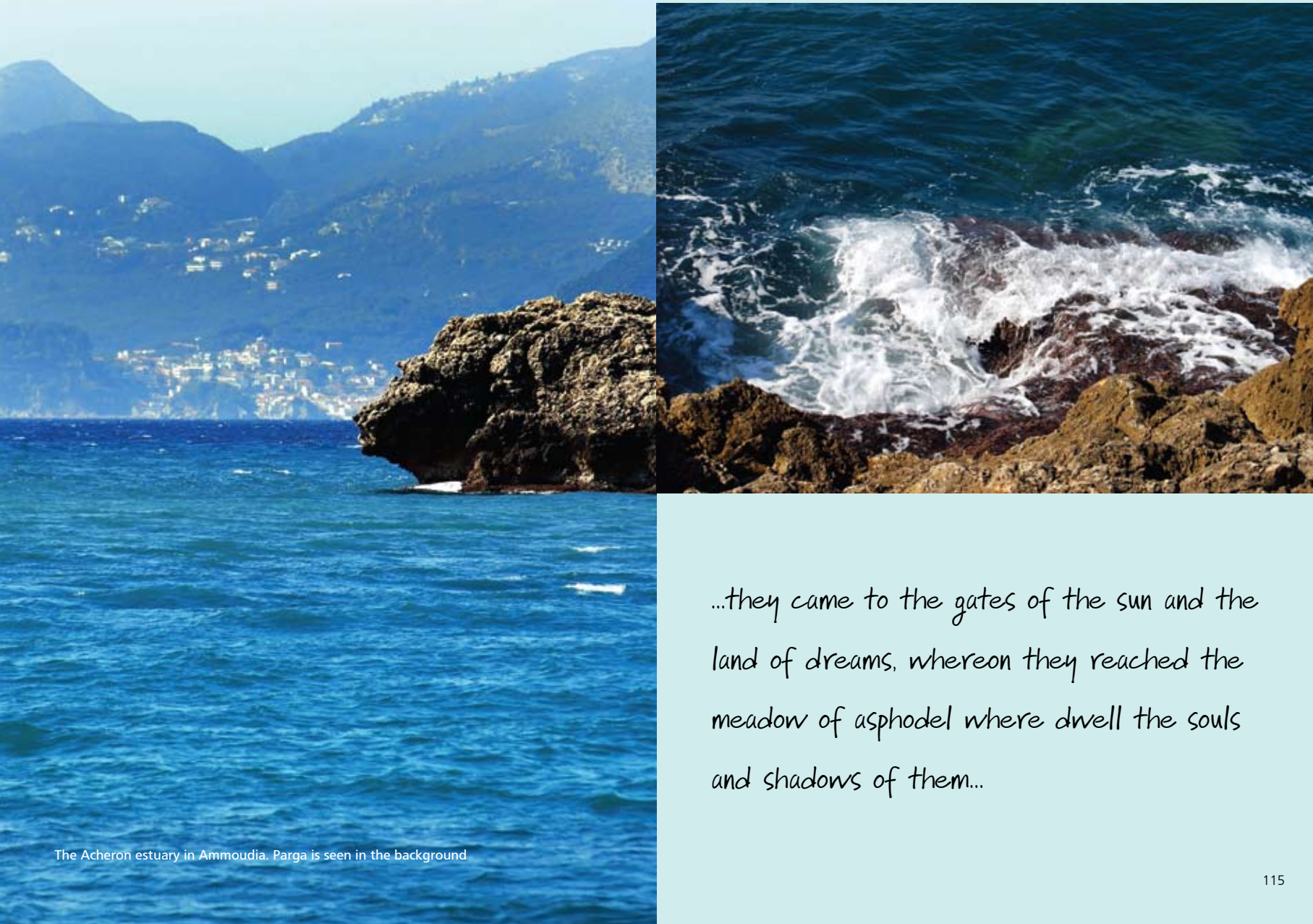
The Xylokastro Hill in May 1913. Fred Boissonnas who took this photograph believed that he was photographing Vouhaition. The residents of Thanexa (Lykoysri and modernly Mesopotamo) never suspected the horrible secret hidden in the hill with the ruins. S. Mouselimis wrote that olive trees, wild fig trees, carob trees, oak, briar and Christian tombs, covered the sacred location of the "Oracle of the Dead". The central chamber over the domed underground room of Adis (Death) had been converted to the village's cemetery.

Photographs by Fred Boissonnas, 1913



House mural on Esquilini Hill, Rome, Italy, depicting Ulysses arriving in the underworld. His comrades are sacrificing lambs while Ulysses keeps away the souls of the dead allowing only Teiresias to pass through. Acheron and Kokytos are depicted in human form between the rocks and the thick wetland vegetation. Middle 1st century BC, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana

Ulysses by Homer Ω' 12-14.



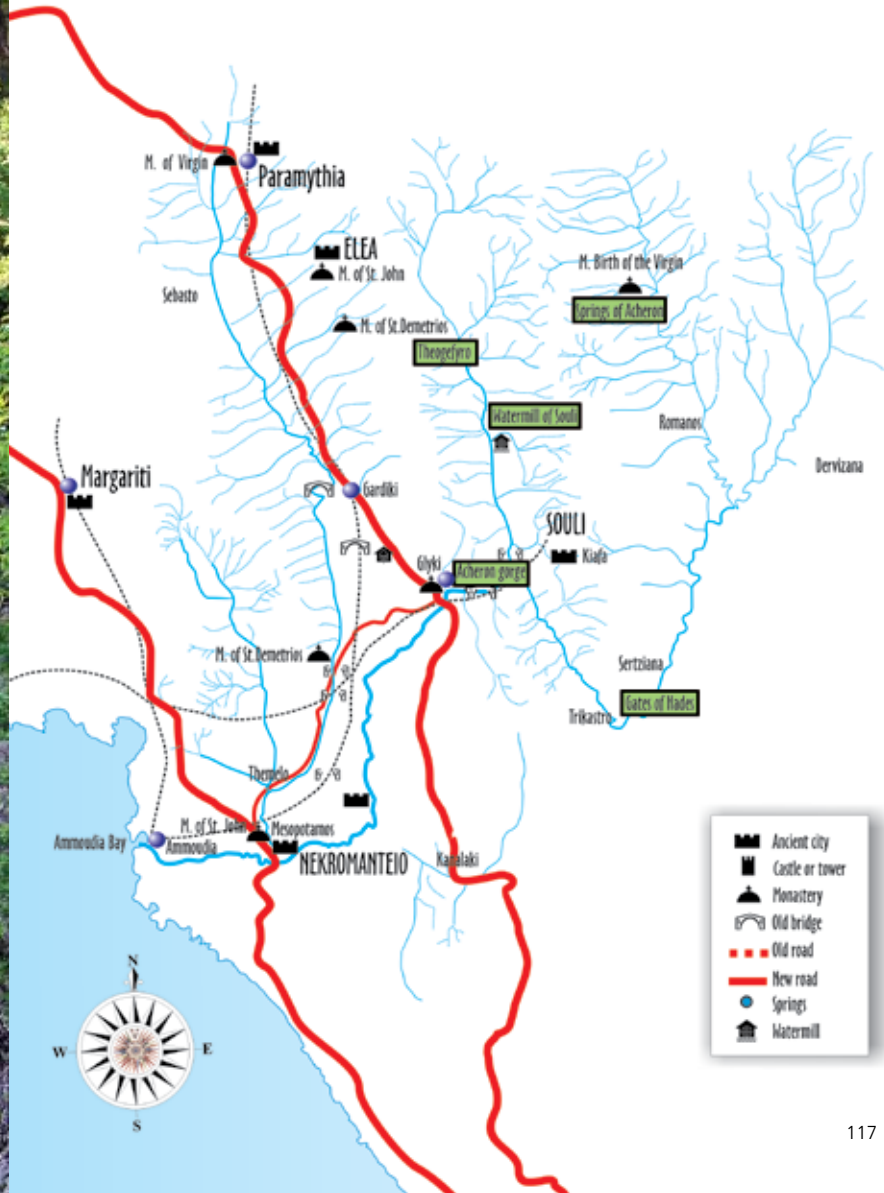
...they came to the gates of the sun and the land of dreams, whereon they reached the meadow of asphodel where dwell the souls and shadows of them...

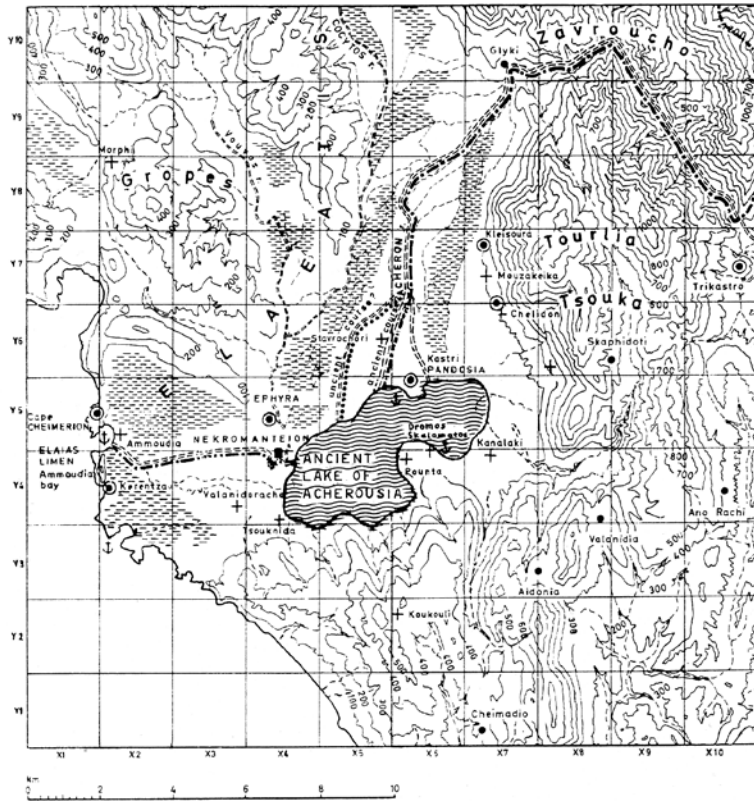


The Gates of Hades

ACHERON RIVER

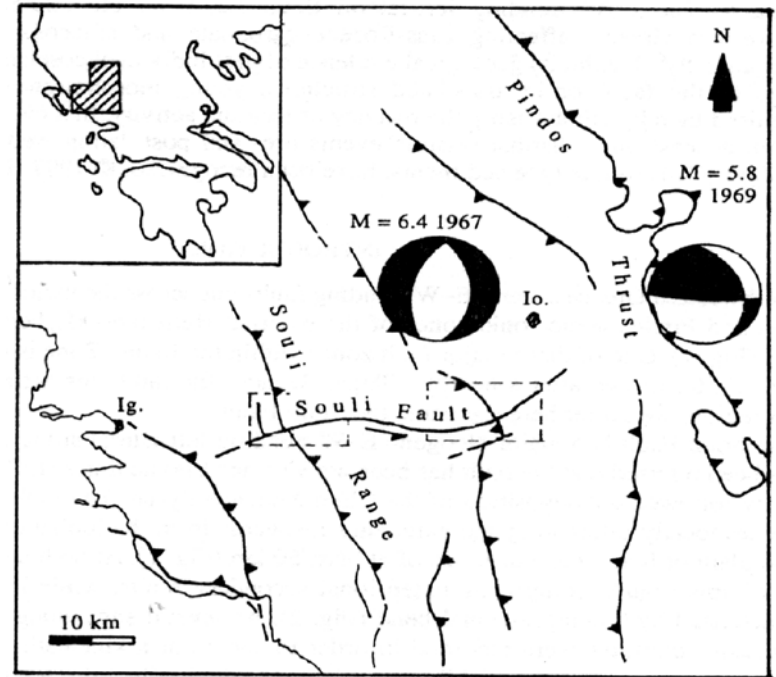
Important archaeological and natural sites





According to the archaeologist Sotiris Dakaris who excavated the hill in Lykoursi (Mesopotamo), Aherousia Lake reached as far east as Kanalaki Village.

The Roman writer Lucius Ampelius in his 2nd century BC “Liber Memorialis”, mentions the famous double bridge of Aherousia Lake (pons magnus columnatus duplex). The bridge, which was constructed in the 3rd century BC, was approximately 300 meters in length and supported by wooden columns. It was either a bridge with double width to service the pilgrim visitors during the holy days, or it consisted of two separate parallel bridges so that the faithful who were arriving could not come into contact with the ones who were departing thus making the exchange of information between the two groups more difficult according to the wishes of the priests of the “Oracle of the Dead”. According to N. Hammond, this bridge connected Kastri to Pounta, which may have been named in honor of the memory of the bridge. Of course the faithful pilgrims could reach the area by boat through the port of Glyki.



The main neotectonic pattern of the greater Kalamas And Acheron Rivers area

Δ/Α	Όνομα	φ°	λ°	Χρονολογία	Μέγεθος
1	Ιωάννινα	39.64	20.59	1740	6.2
				1813	6.2
				1858	6.0
				1867	6.2
				1898	6.3
2	Ηγουμενίτσα	39.65	20.12	1651	6.0
				1809	6.3
				1854	6.5
				1872	6.1
				1897	6.2
3	Κέρκυρα	39.37	20.15	1674	6.5
				1732	6.5
				1773	6.3
				1823	6.3
				1871	6.0
4	Παραμυθιά	39.41	20.56	1895	6.3
5	Παζοί	39.16	20.03	968	6.6
				1444	7.1
				1743	7.1
				1786	6.8
				1915	6.1

Table with known earthquakes in the wider area of the Kalamas and Acheron rivers. The wider area of the river system is classified as seismic risk zone 2 (Zone II) and it is characterized by a repetition of seismic activity occurring every 20 to 40 years on average with a magnitude of 6.3, which is the highest possible annual magnitude of earthquake that could be experienced in Greece.

Mapping Kalamas and Acheron



1. Ptolemy, Hellas 1478 (detail)



2. Rigas Velestinlis, Charta 1797 (detail)

The rivers of Kalamas and Acheron are presented in the paintings of Ptolemy (1) with their ancient names of Thyamis and Acheron. Efforts have been made to etymologize the name Thyamis by its rough waters but it is possible that the name Thyamis is pre-Greek, as is the name Acheron which does not originate from the Greek language (ο τα άχεια πέων = he who carries pain and soreness) but from the pre-Greek language with the root 'Ah' which meant water, like Araithos and Aheloos rivers. The first appearance of the name Kalamas for Thyamis River was during the late Byzantine period. It is for this reason that the etymology of the name Tsiamourgia originating from Thyamis-Thyamourgia is impossible since Vagenetia as a subject continued to exist until and including the 15th century. The names Thyamis and Acheron were completely lost and, as a result, the area visitors and cartographers of the 19th century often identified Kalamas as the ancient Acheron (see Lord Byron and Charta of Rigas, where Pavlas is identified as Thyamis and Acheron as Kalamas) (2). Kalamas is mentioned for the first time with its modern name in the 10th table Greece set forth in the 12th century hand written edition of Ptolemy located at the Library of the Vatopedi Monastery in the Holy Mountain, while Acheron continues to retain its ancient name (3). At the beginning of the 15th century, the Florentine cartographer Cristoforo Buondelmonti in his work "Liber Insularum Arcipelagi" recognizes Kalamas (possibly from Ptolemy's charts) in the land of Epirus under the city Saiata (Sagiada) and Acheron which discharges itself



3. Ptolemaios, Hellas 13th Century (detail)



4. Cristoforo Buondelmonti 1485 (detail)

above Fanaro (Fanari) but he does not record their names (4). In the beginning of the 16th century, the Ottoman Admiral Pirie Reis recorded in detail Kalamas and Acheron with the following words: The port of Aigou Mantzou (Igoumenitsa) is in the northwest. In the northwest, the great river Kalama (Kalamas) is flowing winter and summer Exiting Preveza, at the northwest is the port of Fener (Fanari) with the small river Fener (Acheron). Of course, Kalamas and Acheron are mapped in chart 169a (5). Generally, to sea captains, Kalamas is mentioned as a supplier of fresh water, which was something very important for marine navigators of the period. It seems that the river was navigable at least until the Zorgianou Skala where a strong tower was constructed to control the area.

Gitani (Gkoumani today) had a port in Kalamas in antiquity. In 1570, during the war between the Ottoman and Venetian Empires, Balthasar Jenichen illustrated his war operations in Epirus and mapped Kalamas (without naming it) with two arched bridges above Bastia (Sagiada). Although the map mentions Fanaro (Fanari), it does not mention Acheron (6). During the same period, in Nuremberg, Matthias Zóndt covered the war theatre in Epirus with impressive details but with many mistakes as well. In his work, Acheron and Araxus are named while Kalamas appears twice, once above Gamenizza (Igoumenitsa) and once below Bastia (Sagiada) (7). It is evident that the cartographers used two sources for information in order to draw their maps: Ptolemy, which explains the use of the ancient names of the areas, and sea captains of the period who were only interested in the coast and not the inland areas. As a result, maps presented conflicting information, errors and imaginative pictures. In contrast to A. Ortelius, who did not record any rivers in Epirus on his map of Corfu, Johannes Cotovicus in 1619 recorded with relative accuracy the three large rivers of Pavlas, Kalamas and Acheron, without mentioning their names. The existence of the cities



5. Piri Reis, Corfu 1520

of Butrinto (Vouthrotos), Bastia (Sagiada), Gomenizi (Igooumenitsa) and Fanaro (Fanari) in their correct positions demonstrates that the cartographer knew of the rivers' existence although he was not aware of their names. In 1686, the Venetian cartographer Vincenzo Maria Coronelli, while mapping the Straits of Corfu, recorded Calama (Kalamas) north of the Igooumenitsa Port, which was in the city that the Venetian Admiral Francesco Morosini had conquered and destroyed. It is natural that the cartographers of the period were more interested in the island of Corfu and its Straits than the unknown, and there was no great interest in the land mass of Epirus. In instances where significant war activities took place in Epirus, such as the conquering of Sopoto and Margaritio, the cartographers were obligated to use information acquired from Ptolemy or simply, from their own imagination.

The case of Philippus Cluverius is a classic. In 1641 in Amsterdam, he drew the map of Epirus and the Ionian Islands. Wishing to illustrate Iannina (Ioannina) and its lake, he extended Acheron until the lake of Iannina (Ioannina), documented Pamvotida as Acherousia and continued drawing Acheron all the way to Pindos. He presented the tributary Cacutus (Kokytyos), although Thyamis was illustrated in the wrong position way below Bastia (Sagiada) (8).

Of course, in old maps it was considered to be far more important to serve the purpose for which they were drawn rather than for scientific accuracy, and aesthetics as well as design were considered to be far more important factors than mathematical calculations. For some strange reason, in some maps of the 18th century, Kalamas is mentioned as Abus. Abus' identification with Kalamas occurred in the work of Joachim Ottens (Amsterdam) in which he mentioned both names (Abus, Kalamas) (9) and in the work of Giacomo Cantelli (Rome 1684) (Abus, Thianis).



6. Balthasar Jenichen, The Siege of Margaritio 1571



7. Matthias Zóndt, The Siege of Margaritio 1570

The beginning of the 19th century found Epirus in the crosshairs of the super powers of the time. The peculiar situation of the autonomous region of Ali Pasha of Ioannina, made the area attractive to westerners for a landing whenever the conditions allowed it. Travelers of all sorts rushed to the area and informed their national governments of their discoveries which also satisfied the public thirst for adventure. W.M. Leak, F. Pouqueville and Henry Holland were included in this category of travelers. Travelers would normally arrive at Corfu and travel to the opposite coast to reach Epirus. The road that would take them to Ioannina passed along Kalamas and thereby information about the river was derived.

At the same time, the struggle of the people of Souli against Ali Pasha brought many travelers to the wider area of Aheron. F. Pouqueville, the French Consul General assigned to Ali Pasha's Court, published the knowledge and experience that he acquired through his long residency in Epirus. The map accompanying the text presents Kalamas and Acheron with commendable accuracy. Pouqueville visited these lands and was capable of adding information to the existing maps of his time. H. Holland was careful and methodical in his descriptions and presented a general map of Greece without being interested in detail. Kalamas is presented in his map while Acheron is presented as Glycys (Glykis). During the same period, Kosmas the Thesprotian mapped the wider region of Epirus based on information that he acquired from his teacher Athanasios Psalidas. His maps presented Kalamas and Acheron in simplistic detail as though they were drawn by someone who considered the region to be his motherland. At the end of the same century, cartographer Michael Chrysochoos from Zitsa, mapped the entire former border area from an assignment given by the Greek and Ottoman governments. His work provided significant information about



8. Philippus Cluverius, Epirus, 1641



9. A.C. Seutter, Corfu, 1730 (detail)

the wider Kalamas and Acheron area. In his map, Chrysochoos gave Aheron its new name, Mavropotamos, a name by which the river became known to the area residents in later centuries. Kalamas was mapped in exquisite detail because, according to the Berlin Treaty of 1881, Kalamas was the border line between Greece and the Ottoman Empire. Any ambiguities that had previously existed in area maps became resolved at the end of the 19th century with the proper mapping of the area by the Royal Cartography Service of Great Britain and the Cartography Service of Switzerland. A copy of these maps was published in Greek by K. Kontogoni.

Subsequent to this, editions of the Geographical Service of the Greek Army were published. The Greek Navy limited its mapping to the estuaries of the two rivers and was based on the British edition of the time. Finally we have the edition of the United States Geographical Service which was followed faithfully in later editions of the Greek Army Geographical Service. Nowadays, with the use of digital geographical information systems (GIS) and satellite imaging, the old maps have found their place of rest in museums and private collections. Although these maps were deficient in detail and accuracy, they still offer us the opportunity to obtain a plethora of historical and cultural information about the area that we examine and the maps satisfied the demands of the societies that created them.



KALAMAS & ACHERON

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