

Another Phoenix in Crete

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When the ship taking grain from Alexandria to Rome carrying Paul and his companions left Fair Havens, as described by Luke in Acts 27, they were heading for a harbour in Crete called Phoenix. While there is no question that the place called Phoenix near what is now called Loutro had a well known and valued harbour, there are reasons to doubt that this was the harbour they were heading for. The purpose of this note is to suggest a previously unrecognised alternative location, at the east end of what is now Plakias bay, some miles to the East of Loutro, and to give reasons for preferring this location to the one near Loutro, as their intended destination.

I first give reasons for believing that such a harbour (or, more probably, anchorage) did exist in Roman times. and secondly summarise why such a harbour would have been a preferable destination, and why it fits Luke's description. I recommend that reference should be made to, for example, Google maps in satellite view, to examine both the Plakias and Loutro areas, and their setting in Crete. If you can access Google Earth you can see more details of the terrain and how high the different hills are, which is even more informative. Further details and references are included in an appendix.

Currently the sea is not deep enough at the east end of Plakias bay to be an anchorage, and fishing boats and tourist boats use the west end of the bay. But two things have changed in the last two millennia. First, there has been substantial uplift of the land at the Western end of Crete, revealed principally by careful investigation of raised beaches. The uplift is greater to the West (for example near Loutro) but is estimated to be about 2 m in the Plakias area. Second, there has been substantial erosion and deposition of sand and gravel, with an eastward drift along the bay, so that there is quite deep sand forming a beach at the east end of the bay, and extending under water for some distance out to sea. So before the uplift and the deposition of eroded material, the sea depth at the east end would probably have been at least 3m deeper than at present, and therefore suitable for an anchorage. One should note that a track has been blasted out to give access along the promontory at the east end of the bay to a gun emplacement, and that the rocks lying in the sea are due to that construction, not remnants of a harbour. But it is this promontory, together with the hills to the north, which provides good shelter at that point for an anchorage.

The name Phoenix survives in the Plakias area, because of a monastery north west of Plakias village, which has given the name Finikas to the local authority administering Plakias and several other local villages. It therefore seems probable that some settlement carried the name Phoenix in this area in Roman times.

We adduce other evidence for such a harbour or anchorage. Strabo gives the distance from the north coast to south coast of Crete at Phoenix as 100 stades, or around 12 miles, which fits Plakias well but not Loutro, where the distance is significantly greater. Moreover he describes it as "Phoenix of Lappa". Ptolemy gives a longitude for both the city of Phoenix and the harbour of Phoenix, which differ significantly. However this difference can be accounted for if one refers to a location near Loutro and the other a location near Plakias. There is some uncertainty about this, because Ptolemy makes the harbour some miles to the West of the city, whereas I assume that the city is near Loutro and the harbour near Plakias. The latitudes quoted are also significantly different, in a way which does not fit well; it is almost as if the city he is referring to is Lappa rather than Phoenix.

In addition, it is clear from archeological remains and other records that the city of Lappa, now the village of Argiropoulis, had good trading links with the south coast of Crete. It is a much shorter and easier journey from Lappa to Plakias, with access through the short gorge just north of the village and via relatively flat roads, than to Loutro which is much further, and with over much more arduous terrain.

If the evidence is strong for the existence of a harbour called "Phoenix of Lappa" near Plakias, what are the reasons for thinking that this was the intended destination of the ill-fated voyage from Fair Havens, rather than the Phoenix near Loutro? The harbour at Phoenix near Loutro was known and valued as the

only safe harbour on that stretch of coast, and therefore an important harbour of refuge. But it is about 50 miles by sea from Fair Havens, which is a large distance to be attempted in one day in uncertain weather. Plakias is about 30 miles. The Plakias area is also more accessible, both to Lappa, which as a city with strong Roman links and sympathies would have appealed to the centurion in charge of Paul and his party, and with easier links to the towns and harbours on the settled north coast. For these reasons it may well have appealed as a more convenient place to over winter, than either Fair Havens or Phoenix near Loutro.

Finally, there is the question of Luke's description of the harbour of Phoenix; there is agreement by scholars that his description means that it was open to the north west and south west. This does not fit at all easily with the anchorages at Loutro, on either side of the peninsula called Cape Mouros; in particular the main and most sheltered anchorage is to the east of the peninsula and open mainly to the east. The bay to the west is not well sheltered and really only open to the south. But the description fits precisely with the east end of Plakias bay, which is well protected from the east, and open to the west, in fact precisely from the north west to the south west, though in fact if you stand on the beach at the point where the harbour may have existed, the two ends of the bay mean that you are not directly exposed to the open sea at all.

It is intriguing to enquire why Luke gives this description. One surmises that this is what the master of the ship told him, although it is possible that Luke had prior knowledge of the area. It is clear from reading his descriptions in the book of Acts that Luke was very interested in sailing and in travel by sea. The detailed description of the shipwreck voyage is the most obvious example, but elsewhere he gives very much more detail of travel by sea than of travel by land. But although he refers to at least twenty port cities and harbours, in no other case does he give an indication of which way the harbour faces; why then this exception in the case of Phoenix? Two reasons may be suggested. Perhaps the mariners were aware that the greatest danger came from "the violent wind called the northeaster" which actually proved their downfall, and therefore looked for a harbour with appropriate protection. Alternatively, perhaps Luke knew that there was more than one harbour called Phoenix on the south coast of Crete, and wanted to identify the one which they were hoping to reach. If that is the case, then his description is invaluable in identifying where in Plakias bay the harbour known as "Phoenix of Lappa" was in fact situated. It would be interesting, though not a trivial exercise, to investigate perhaps by remote sounding methods, whether there are remains of a port or harbour hidden under the sand at the east end of Plakias bay.

Appendix

In this section I have included an explanation of the nature and intended use of this note, references and acknowledgements, background material, contact details and some personal history, and illustrations.

I am neither a New Testament scholar nor an archeologist. In both these subjects I am at best an interested amateur. My interest in this matter initially arose out of our first holiday in Crete, in 1996, we took the opportunity to visit Kali Limenes, or Fair Havens, which is well signposted and about whose location there is no doubt. We have returned to Crete for a number of other holidays, and visited Plakias. Three things struck me. First, that the east end of the bay fitted Luke's description. Second, I noticed dust bins and local authority vehicles labelled Finikas. And thirdly, a visit to the site of Lappa made me aware of the links that Lappa had to a port on the south coast. Later we spent a couple of days at Loutro, and walked over to the bay now called Phoenix, and I was confirmed in my view that Luke's description does not really fit. I have been investigating the possibility of a "Phoenix of Lappa" near Plakias at intervals ever since. In fact during most of our subsequent visits my wife Meg was regularly amused to see me looking down at the bay of Plakias, for example from near the Finikas monastery, and saying "now *that* is the place that Paul never visited!"

A number of scholars have given useful information and encouragement. Very early on Professor Howard Marshall of Aberdeen University alerted me to the article by R.M. Ogilvie, "Phoenix" Notes and Studies, Journal of Theological Studies, 9, 308 - 314 (1958) which has much invaluable background information and references. Ogilvie makes a case that Phoenix of Loutro can be made to fit Luke's description if submerged rocks to the west of the end of Cape Mouros formed a more definite peninsula in Roman times. This possibility can now be discounted by the evidence of sea level changes (see below) which mean that in Roman times the sea here was much deeper, not shallower. More recently I have had helpful encouragement, information and discussions with Professor N T Wright of St Andrews University, Professor Clint Arnold of Talbot School of Theology, and Dr Peter Williams of Tyndale House in Cambridge. Among other things they have pointed me in the direction of the current NT scholarly consensus on the matter, which may be consulted for example in the four volume commentary on Acts by Craig Keener, where many references can be found, and an excellent and thorough case is made in support of a location near Loutro. It is with some trepidation that I venture to put forward a different suggestion!

I have also had invaluable help from people with archeological expertise. In particular, Dr Lucia Nixon of Oxford University, who has been closely associated with the Sfakia project, a wide ranging investigation of the area which goes by that name, to which Loutro belongs, though it does not quite extend as far East as Plakias. Dr Nixon has corrected a number of my misconceptions. The evidence for sea level changes has been most clearly established by the Sfakia project, and may be consulted for example in Relative Sea-Level Changes in Crete: Reassessment of Radiocarbon Dates from Sphakia and West Crete, Simon Price, Tom Higham, Lucia Nixon and Jennifer Moody, The Annual of the British School at Athens, Vol. 97, (2002), pp. 171-200. I have had further most enthusiastic and helpful input from Arthur de Graauw who maintains a fascinating web site entitled ancientportsantiques. He is a retired coastal engineer with an interest in sailing and diving, and he brings this background to his archeological passion, and has given me valuable insights about coastal erosion and typical wind directions.

The archeological museum at Rethymnon in Crete contains some material recovered from the city of Lappa. Their description, which may be found on their website <http://www.rethymnon.biz/Reth/Cult/arch/Lappa.htm> , reads as follows:

Lappa, near current day Argiroupoli was one of the most important towns in Crete during the Roman period, issuing its own currency. From the coins that have been discovered on the site it is clear that Lappa, although inland, maintained close links with the ports of Hydrarnia on the North coast and Phoenix on the South coast.

In 68BC Lappa was destroyed by the Romans, but during the civil war between Octavius and Antony, the people of Lappa cleverly chose to side with the victor, Octavius, who allowed them to rebuild their city. Most of the remains that have been discovered on the site date back to this period.

There is more detailed evidence of trading to the south as well as to the north from Lappa, in Klios clay, a study of domestic articles recovered from digs in Lappa. Martha W Baldwin-Bowsky, Eirini Gavrilaki, *Creta Antica* 11, 173 - 252, 2010. This study clearly favours a "Phoenix of Lappa" in the Plakias area.

I add below some illustrations from Google Maps and a photo.

I now wish to offer the fruits of my research, such as it is, in particular to these people who have been of such help to me, and with the specific encouragement and permission to use it in any way they choose. I do not think I am competent to present this material either to a new testament journal or to an archeological journal, but if any of you wished to take it further in any way, you have my explicit permission.

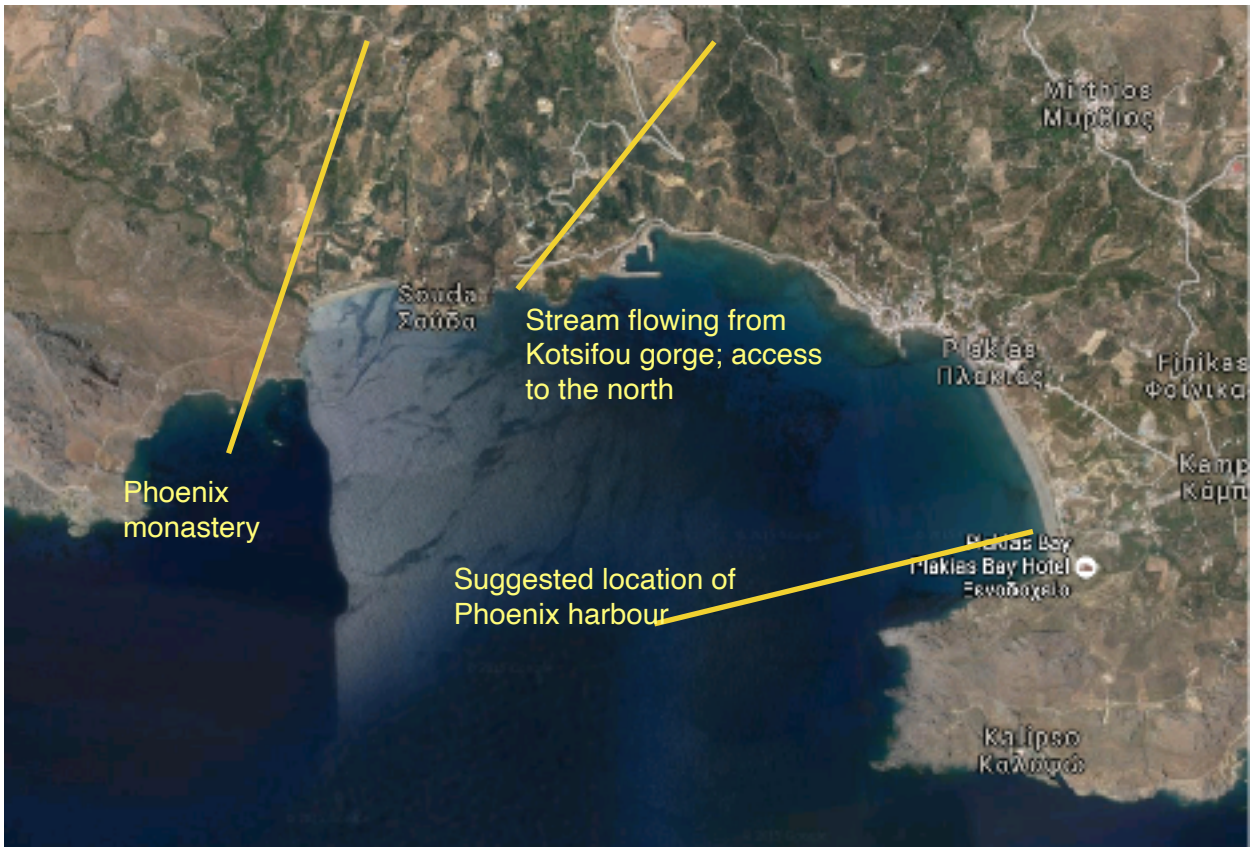
I may be contacted by mail at 4 Dungeith Avenue, Banchory, Kincardineshire, Scotland, AB31 5UA, or by email (note that this is a fairly new address for me) at paulandmegwraight@gmail.com



Map of part of Crete indicating locations mentioned



Photo of the Plakias bay. The suggested anchorage site is in the middle of the picture



Loutro and Finikas for comparison