

Prehistory of Corfu (Corcyra)

Corfu has always been of strategic importance. The island was inhabited during the Paleolithic, Neolithic, Chalcolithic and Bronze Ages as flint tools have been found.

Greek Antiquity and Corcyra

The history of Corfu begins around 750 BC. The first recorded settlers on Corfu were Illyrians who came from the Western Balkans. By 734 BC the Corinthians had made Corfu an important and prosperous city. The naval strength of Corfu was second only to the Corinthian Navy, and established Corfu as the first maritime city to build a fleet of triremes, triple decked warships. Such was their might they often fought naval battles on behalf of Athens.

In 375 BC Corfu joined the Athenian Confederation. During the following years the island was occupied by the Spartans and became independent in 255 BC when Alexander, the last powerful King of Epiros died.

Corfu under the Romans

In the summer 229 BC the Romans took control of the island and Corfu became the first Greek city to place itself under Rome. The Romans governed the island for more than five centuries. Corfu became an important Roman naval base for their military activities in the Eastern Mediterranean. Many wealthy Romans had estates on Corfu and notable Roman visitors include Nero, Tiberius, Cicero and Mark Anthony. Although under Rome's governance Corfu remained, to a certain degree, a free state with its own laws and magistrates.

Byzantine Corfu

In 395 Corfu was included in the Eastern Roman, and later the Byzantine Empire. Many of Corfu's ancient churches were built during this period. In 1080 Norman raiders from Sicily attacked Corfu, without holding control. It was only after the capture of Constantinople by the Crusaders in 1204 that Corfu was ceded to Venice. However, they failed to occupy the island.

Corfu under the Despots of Epiros (1214-1267)

In 1214 Corfu had passed to Angeloi Comneni, a Byzantine Prince and Head of the Free Despotate of Epiros, an independent Greek State based in Arta, Western Greece. He assumed the title of 'Despot' and ruled until 1267

The Angevins in Corfu (1267-1386)

For just over a century the Angevins ruled the island after Corfu was given to King Manfred of Sicily as a dowry. Upon his death in 1267 his possessions, which included Corfu, passed to the House of Anjou. The island's natural resources of olive trees, vineyards and salt pans made Corfu a valuable possession for the Angevins. During this time Corfu was divided into four districts called the Circle, the Mountain, the Center and Lefkimmi and the feudal system of rule was first introduced to Corfu. The Angevin occupation ended in 1386 with the death of Charles III of Anjou.

The Venetian Domination (1386-1797)

The Corfiots accepted the rule of Venice who took formal possession of Corfu on the 9th of June 1386 and ruled the island for more than four centuries. The Venetians showed a keen interest in agriculture, especially in the cultivation of olive trees. To this Venetian policy Corfu owes its countless olive groves, which much of the island. The long Venetian domination had a marked influence on local Greek language, which absorbed into itself a wide range of Italian and Venetian words. In spite of this, the Greek language was almost universally used on all legal documents.

The Republican French (1797-1799)

The Venetian rule ended in 1797 when Napoleon Bonaparte conquered the Republic of Venice. Under the terms of the Treaty of Campo Formio, between France and Austria, France gained Corfu and Venice's other Ionian islands, which occupied them for two years from 1797 to 1799.

The Russians and Turks

After the defeat of the French, by the British Royal Navy led by Horatio Nelson, at the "Battle of the Nile", in August 1798, Russia and Turkey formed an alliance in order to occupy the French held territory in the Ionian Islands. The French were driven from Zakynthos, Lefkada, Cythera and Kefalonia. Corfu, as the largest and best fortified island, remained under France until March 1799 when the French ceded Corfu to the Russians and Turks. One of the first official acts of the Russians was the reinstatement of a Greek Orthodox Archbishop of Corfu.

The Septinsular State (1800-1807) and Ioannis Kapodistrias

The Septinsular State, consisting of the seven Ionian Islands, was created following the Treaty of Constantinople between Russia and Turkey in 1800. It was the first independent, self governing Greek State to be established since 1453. The executive body was called the Senate; its Prince was Count Spyridon-George Theotokis, who appointed as his General Secretary of State Ioannis Kapodistrias (1776-1831) a nobleman and who had trained as a doctor, but became a politician at the age of 25. The Septinsular State was dissolved by the Imperial French in 1807. Kapodistrias became a well respected and experienced European statesman and diplomat. In 1827 the Greek Assembly unanimously elected him as the President of Independent Greece. Upon his arrival from Geneva, he launched a major reform and modernization programme that included public education and health, military unity and in order to raise living standards among the general population introduced the cultivation of potatoes. He laid the foundations for the regeneration of the State. He was assassinated on the steps of the church of St. Spyridon in Nafplion in 1831.

The Imperial French (1807-1814)

In 1807 following the Treaty of Tilsit, between France and Russia, the Ionian Islands were returned to the French. Under the governance of General Cesar Berthier, the Septinsular State was dissolved and the islands were proclaimed as French Territories. Berthier's replacement was General Donzelors, who was popular amongst the Corfiots. This rule of the island by the French was nothing like the previous one. Donzelors maintained and added to the islands fortifications, built new barracks (the present Liston buildings) and improved agriculture by importing new and different crops. 1808 the French Imperial administration founded the Ionian Academy for the Advancement of Letters, Arts and Sciences and in 1811 the first school of Fine Arts in Corfu was founded.

British Protectorate (1814-1864)

In May 1814 not long after the fall of Napoleon, different claims were made on the Ionian Islands. Initially they were placed under Austrian rule, but thanks to the intervention of Ioannis Kapodistrias, this was not accepted. In 1815 the United States of the Ionian Islands were created under the exclusive protection of the British. During the following fifty years, ten High Commissioners ruled on the island and each of them changed Corfu, mostly for the better. On May 21st, 1864 the Ionian Islands were finally, united with Greece, which had become a sovereign independent Kingdom under King Otto in 1833.

From ancient times until today, the history of Corfu has been interesting. Although there has been a long succession of foreign occupations with rulers both good and bad, the true Greek character of Corfu, the island and its inhabitants, has never been diminished.