

## THE MOUNTAINS OF CRETE

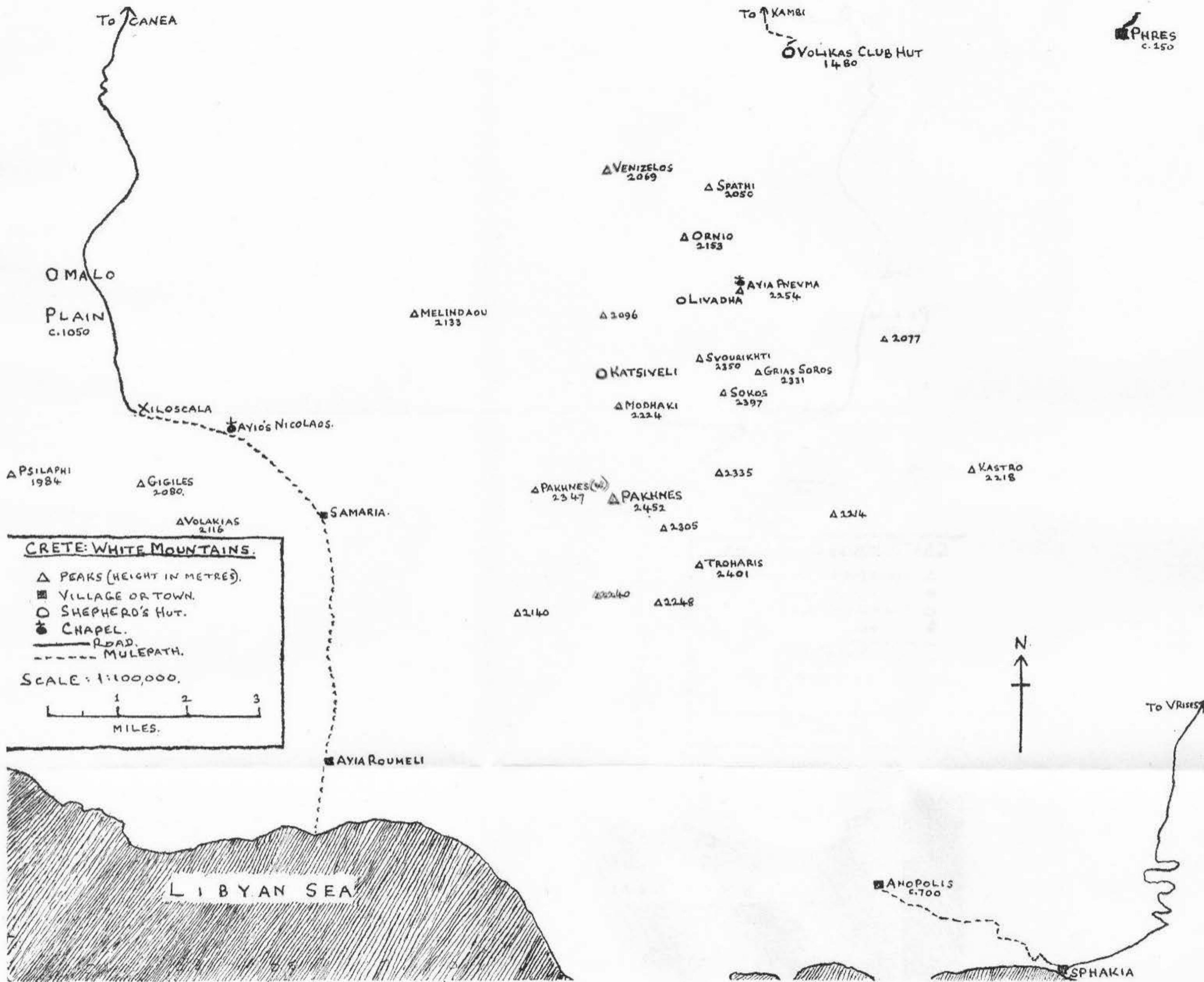
BY L. H. HURST

**I**F he is not already aware of the fact, the visitor to Crete will at once perceive that it is a highly mountainous island. There are three groups whose summits exceed 2,000 m. In the west, the White Mountains rise behind Canea and fall steeply on the south to the Libyan sea. The area contains some twenty such summits and is by far the most important of the three. Mount Ida (in Greek, Psiloriti) rises in the centre of the island. In the east, the upland Lasithi plain is ringed by hills and mountains which reach their highest point in Mount Dikte to the south. With the possible exception of one particular face, the rock-climber is unlikely to find anything to interest him in Crete. All the summits are easy and can be reached from various directions. But for the elderly mountaineer, whose more active days are behind him but who is still able to walk and to whom untravelled regions have an appeal, Crete may well be the answer.

The mountains are best visited at the end of April or in early May, while some snow still remains to give them such beauty as they may claim and add to the interest of the ascents. Only a great enthusiast would wander amongst them in the months of summer when they have been stripped to their bare bones and their grey limestone faces blench and shimmer under a sun that is more African than European. Unless the traveller is able to obtain the use of wartime maps on a scale of 1:50,000, he will find only maps so small as to be practically useless. Nor is he (apart from Ida) likely to find helpful literature to assist him. The shepherds move to the high pastures with their flocks each year in the latter part of May. The innate Cretan hospitality will offer one a share of their spongy white sheeps-milk cheese (which it is discourteous to refuse). They may be repaid in cigarettes.

### *The White Mountains*

This group covers an area roughly oval in shape and some six miles across from the northern to the southern rim and eight from east to west. On the north, a line of foothills breaks the fall to the Canea plain; the drop to the sea on the south is steep and continuous. The deep cleft of the Xiloscala-Roumeli gorge forms the clear-cut western boundary, with the outlying Gigiles group beyond it; on the east, the range falls in foothills to the Vrises-Sphakia road. Within these limits lies an untidy upland plateau of peaks and depressions between some 1,700 m. (the



Livadha sheepfold) and 2,452 m. (the highest point of Pakhnes). There are no continuous ridges (apart from that along which are strung the three summits of Pakhnes) or valleys. It is almost completely waterless. The faces are of broken grey limestone, pitted like a sponge with holes and hollows of all sizes, firm and hard as steel, interspersed with scrub and stones. *Vibrams* grip admirably on it. Occasional, not very heinous, screes occur in the higher reaches.

In May 1934, I arrived in Sphakia, having followed mule-paths for three days westwards from Mount Ida, with the sea never far distant and the dry torrent-beds flushed with oleander. My object was to go through the ruck of the White Mountains from coast to coast, ascending if possible their highest point on the way. Local enquiry soon revealed that I was brushing the unknown, although a majority opinion believed a peak called Thodori to be the highest point. A tough, elderly shepherd called Mihali was engaged to conduct me thus far, spending the first night at a spot where there was water. Beyond the plateau on which lies the village of Anopolis, we entered an area of scattered pine; the call of a cuckoo gave a touch of home. Our watering-place was a cistern, partly roofed over and not too clean. I estimated the height at about 1,300 m. Next morning, we left early and ascended, with the island of Gavdos riding ever higher up the sky to our south, to Thodori in  $2\frac{1}{2}$  hours. An appreciably higher summit rose near at hand and masked the view to the north. What was it? Mihali did not know, so, paying him off and giving him a tin of butter (my sack was heavy) I made for it. From the summit I saw that, after an appreciable descent to cross a valley that curved in from the south-east and a shorter reascent, I would reach a fairly level area. At the far end, a nick in the northern rim lay right in the direction of Phres, the village to which I had from Sphakia hopefully telephoned for a taxi to await me that afternoon. The level stretch proved to be a broken region of limestone, with deep hollows and fissures, resembling the Désert de Platé. The nick in the northern rim was reached in rather over three hours. The descent was long, but after some appreciable time a strong smell of pig announced, indirectly, the presence of the first humans. Eumaeus came out. He was about to descend to the plain and, for the consideration of a blue silk handkerchief, offered to carry my sack. His guidance amid a number of intersecting tracks was also useful; indeed, it is in the lower approaches to the Cretan mountains that one is most likely to go astray without local help. Phres was reached just over twelve hours from my start.

It was not until many years later that I ascertained the summit ascended by me to be Troharris (2,401 m.), the second peak of the White Mountains. And not until my visit in 1960 did I realise that, by great good fortune, I had struck the only straightforward passage through

them. Any other way would have been circuitous, entailed more than one ascent and descent and hardly been practicable to carry out in a single day. My northern nick lies just east of Grias Soros.

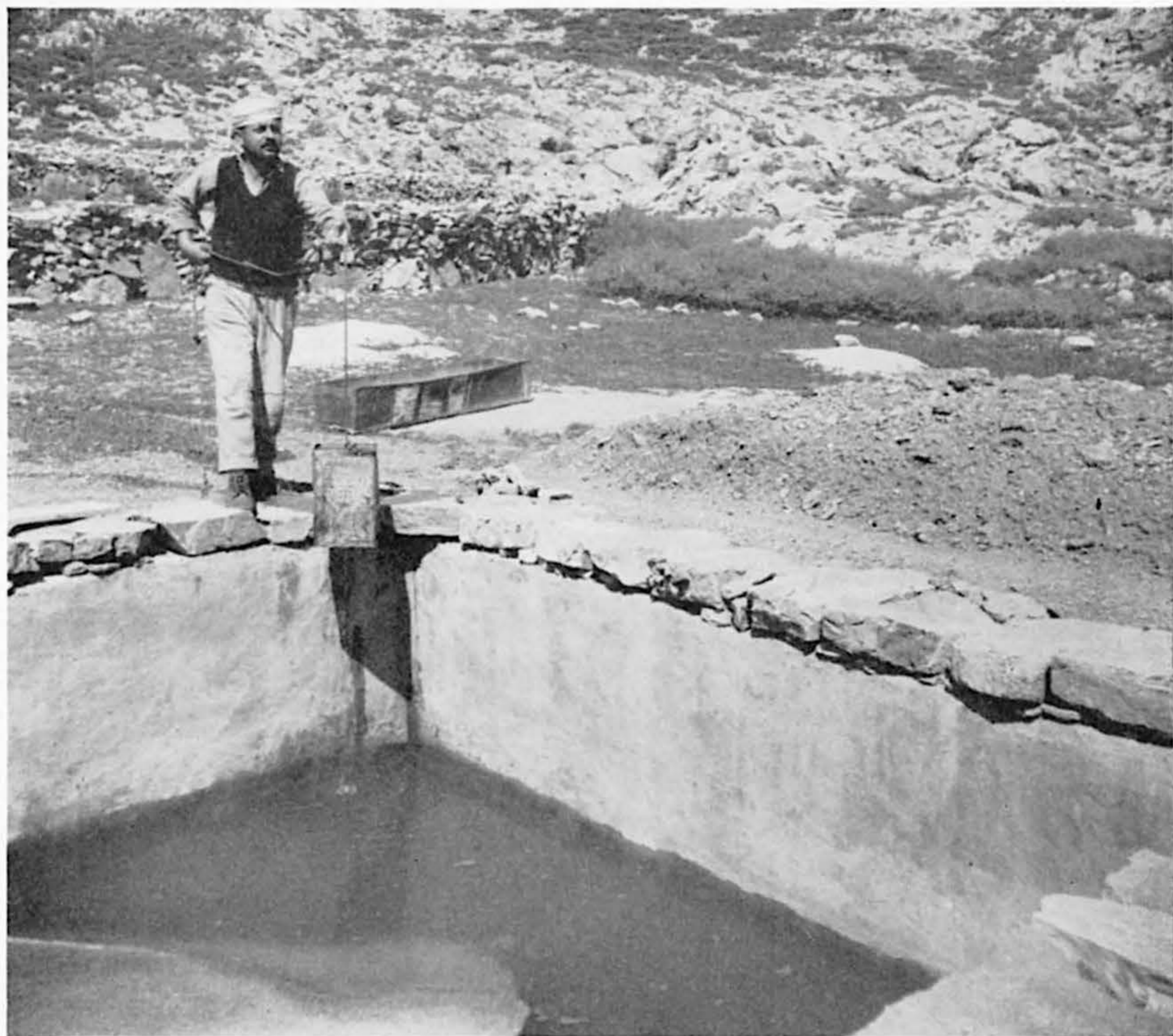
In May 1960 I again visited the White Mountains. The active and energetic Canea branch of the Hellenic Mountain Club had in the interval built a Club Hut on the northern slopes at Volikas (1,480 m.). One of their members, Mr. Petychakis, who could not possibly have been more helpful, had made out for me a five-day programme, divided into days of seven to eight hours which appeared suitable for my seventy-one years. He also arranged for Nicolas Fanourakis of Kambi to accompany me. He knows his mountains thoroughly and is as strong as a horse. It is an hour by car from Canea to Kambi, whence a mule-path takes one in some three hours to the Volikas hut. This is well equipped with mattresses, stove for heating, primus, some crockery and cutlery and emergency rations and does great credit to the Canea branch. Water is piped down to it from a source ten minutes away. The disadvantage of the hut is that it is too low to admit of ascents other than of peaks of the northern rim being made from it in a single day. (That of Pakhnes would, for instance, take some 16 hours there and back). For the central peaks one must sleep at either the Livadha or the Katsiveli sheepfold and for the southern peaks at the latter. The Volikas Hut is the highest point to which a pack-animal can get. This fact was borne in on me the next morning when I shouldered a sack bulging with my sleeping-bag and warm clothing for nights in the open and a modest portion of four days' provisions for the two of us. Up slopes of stones and scrub, we reached the northern rim and, traversing across and up the firm limestone were in three hours on the top of Spathi (2,050 m.). Descending some way, we contoured rather circuitously around depressions and across ribs without much descent or reascent to reach in  $1\frac{1}{2}$  hours the base of Ayia Pnevma. There is an intermittent track and the Canea branch have marked the route with cairns. Another  $1\frac{1}{2}$  hours of slow and tedious ascent up the gentle face of stones and scrub took us to the summit (2,254 m.). What should have been a very extensive view over the north coast was (as on Spathi) marred by heat-haze. We cut down at an angle more to southerly to reach a valley-floor and faint track which took us to the shepherd's hut at Livadha (1 hr. 40 mins.). There was supposed to be a source of water somewhere hereabouts. We failed to find it. However, Nicolas brought back from a nearby snowpatch a large snow-man and the steady drip from it under the hot sun provided an adequate supply during the day.

The night was cold and we were glad to be stirring again at the first sign of daylight. To avoid carrying our heavy sacks more than necessary, we had decided to make direct for our next bivouac at Katsiveli,

cut out the Grias Soros summit and ascend only the second summit on our programme, Svourikhti. It was only  $1\frac{1}{4}$  hours to Katsiveli, which must be some 150 m. higher than Livadha. Relieved of our sacks, we were on the top of Svourikhti (2,350 m.) in  $1\frac{1}{2}$  hours. The slightly higher Soros—a conical summit, like several in the White Mountains—was separated from us only by a saddle not far below, and it would have been easy to reach it in an hour or less. From Svourikhti we had our first view of Pakhnes, not far off to the south and still with considerable snowfields. Back at Katsiveli far too early and unable to find shade, the long day passed slowly. Ample water is obtainable throughout the summer from snow melting in a cement pit. The night was again too cold for sleep and I appreciated the local saying that 'the turkey which dies of cold at night is roasted by the following noon'. We again modified our plans. After climbing Pakhnes and returning, we would make the Volikas hut in a longish day and avoid a third night in the open.

The ascent of Pakhnes calls for no particular comment. Nicolas wove a way around the snowfields until finally it was necessary to cross one for some twenty yards. When I caught up with him he was still prodding at it gingerly from the verge with the end of his shepherd's crook. A few scrapes with the axe took us across. (Like all Greek peasant-guides he fears snow, and when, on the descent I took to the snowfields, uttered loud cries of alarm and despair). The highest summit of Pakhnes (2,452 m.), which we reached in  $2\frac{1}{2}$  hours, is at the easterly end of a broad ridge. It lies on the southern rim and the drop to the Libyan sea (again, alas, masked by haze) is continuous. Back at Katsiveli, we prepared for the return. Nicolas nobly shouldered my sack as well as his own two shepherd's bags—the latter now the lighter by the contents of a sizeable bottle of Tsikoudhia (a fiery local spirit) at which he had sipped periodically during the preceding few days. From the northerly end of the Livadha flat, a tiring ascent took us to the foot of Ayia Pnevma. Hence we followed our route of two days before (but slanting across the final face of Spathi) and were back at the Volikas Hut soon after 3 p.m. Next morning we returned to Kambi and Canea.

The following day I decided to have a look at the outlying Gigiles group (Volakias Gigiles and the gentle Psilafi), to the west of the Xiloscala-Roumeli gorge. A car can get across the Omalo plain to the top of the Xiloscala at the south end in 2 hours from Canea. This makes Gigiles comfortably accessible from Canea in a single day. From the point where the car stops there is no particular difficulty in reaching the summit in  $3\frac{1}{2}$  hours. On the north, Gigiles falls in steep cliffs for some 1,200 m. towards the lower part of the mule-path which zigzags down the passage of the Xiloscala and here, if anywhere are



DRAWING WATER FROM SNOWPIT AT KATSIVELI.



VIEW SOUTH FROM AYIA PNEUMA.



VOLIKAS CLUB HUT.



GIGILES FROM TOP OF XILOSCALA.

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problems for the rock-climber to tackle. The rock, however, is no longer the firm limestone of the main group and is said to be bad.

### *Mount Ida*

The long hogsback of Mount Ida rises in the centre of the island, and, with its height of 2,456 m., is the highest point in Crete, just overtopping Pakhnes. The Nidha plain on its eastern flank is the base for the ascent by the ordinary route. The plain itself is usually reached from the large village of Anoyia. A car of the Land-Rover type can now get to the top of the first step beyond the village by a very rough track and it saves a good hour of atrocious mule-path. Hence it is some three hours' walk to the plain, largely on the level. The Nidha plain can also be reached from the south, from Kamares or Vorizia, and from the east, from Kroussona or Assiti; this east way is the longest.

In May 1934 I went up to it by the Kamares route, with a mule to take my kit thus far. A few minutes above the shepherd's hut at the edge of the plain, a spring gives water for the flocks all through the summer. Just above this, I spread my sleeping-bag on a flat beside the little chapel. The track next morning soon led past the Cave of Zeus. A spirit of evil hung heavy over the spot. A line of snow—the only snow in view—lay across the threshold. As I approached, a flock of black birds, last lingering votaries of the ancient gods, wheeled heavily from their crannies in the overhanging cliff and hooted maledictions at the disturber of their age-long peace. I was glad to pass on. It seemed a long way up to a first ridge, across an intervening dip to the main one, and over successive rises to the main summit. On the snow-field leading to it, I flushed a hare; they are not uncommon in Crete. The summit lies a long way to the west of the Nidha plain. A service is held on its saint's day in July each year at the small ruined chapel which crowns it. For the descent, I struck down westerly, aiming at the village of Vizari. The slopes at the start were gentle. At the upper edge of the scattered ilex-forest, the ground suddenly steepened. Intermittent cliffs edged me on to the flanks of a gorge and later down to its bed. After some rough going, the gorge finally debouched into the foothills in a fan of debris. At Vizari, the village doctor took charge of the unexpected stranger and, with true Cretan hospitality, gave him food and shelter for the night.

### *Mount Dikte*

The fertile Lasithi plain, with its numerous irrigation windmills, is ringed by hills and mountains which, at their southern end, rise to over 2,000 m. in the neighbouring peaks of Dikte and Afentis Christos. In May 1958 we reached the village of Ayios Gheorghios by car. Our



way up Dikte made a wide arc to westerly and we spent the night at a sheepfold at the outermost point of the arc ( $2\frac{1}{2}$  hrs.). Three hours walk the next morning saw us on the summit (2,143 m.). The snow had all gone and the ascent lacked interest. A long slope of loose stones took us down on the north-east to a shepherd's shelter and the faint beginnings of a track.

### *Kophino Vouno*

This little chain, which separates the Messara plain from the Libyan Sea, merits a mention. Its highest point (1,230 m.) rises from the gentle slopes on the north in a great sweep of rock some 150 m. high and is a conspicuous object from far away. The stone hut at its foot on the north is reached most directly from the village of Panayia via the Ayios Nicolaos chapel. But a more pleasant way is from Loukia via Kapetaniana; one has then the south coast in view below one in the level central stretch. A few minutes of scree from the hut bring one to a couloir, which one leaves at about two-thirds height. A terrace slants westerly between the cliffs to a natural rock-staircase and by this the broad summit-ridge is gained. The wild south coast is at one's feet and the view westwards along it past bay and headland to Cape Lithinas is superb.

This article has dealt with Crete from the angle of the mountaineer. But it would be unjust to end on this specialised note without a brief more general paragraph and tribute. For no island in the Mediterranean has more to offer the percipient traveller. The birthplace of Zeus, it is rich in legend and steeped in history. In the middle of the second millennium before Christ, its palace society was as sophisticated as that of the Second Empire. All down the centuries, from the days of Theseus to those of the Luftwaffe, its inhabitants have struggled fiercely in an endeavour to uphold their independence against heavy odds. And many a simple cross and inscription on mountainside or shore records the violent end of some Cretan patriot—as like as not for helping our soldiers and agents—in the dark days following the British evacuation.