



Turkish Policy in Cyprus: Continued violation of human rights and systematic destruction of our cultural heritage

The case of Assia [Askeia, Ashia] village

Cultural Association of Assia

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Honourable MEP,

We come from the village of Assia [Askeia, Ashia] in Cyprus. In the summer of 1974 we were expelled by force from our village by the Turkish army, and we were never allowed to return. Turkey provided justification for the invasion of the island on the grounds of restoring the Constitutional order, as dictated by the Treaty of Guarantee signed between Greece, Turkey and the United Kingdom, which was violated by the coup instigated by the Greek Junta against the legitimate President of the Republic, Archbishop Makarios.

Nevertheless, Turkey's 'Peace Operation' turned into a military Occupation for the past 36 years, of approximately 36 percent of Cyprus that radically altered our lives. The advancing Turkish Army captured our village on 14 August 1974 with dreadful consequences:

- 14 civilians were executed in cold blood and all males over the age of 15 were arrested.
- 84 persons went missing, among them 70 civilians with 7 of them being under the age of 18. The fate of 83 of those people is still unknown.
- Women and children were forced to live in appalling conditions full of intimidation and terror while many girls and women experienced the horrors of rape.
- Our properties were systematic pillaged and looted.
- Between the 24th and 28th of August 1974, all the residents of our village were expelled by force and were never allowed to return to their homes.
- Our homes and land was distributed to the Turkish Cypriots and illegal settlers transferred to Cyprus from Turkey.
- All the sacred sites of the village, churches and cemeteries were desecrated, pillaged and looted.
- 285 homes have been completely demolished.
- The Turkish army has taken up a large part of the village to set up an army base, extending over 3 square kilometres, where the 28th Mobile Infantry Division is stationed.

We strongly ask for your understanding and support for our cause. We ask you to reject the Ethnic Cleansing policies of Turkey in Cyprus. Please use every means in your disposal and every opportunity you get to make it clear that such policies are not acceptable within the family of the European Union.

We demand to know what happened to the missing persons of our village. Turkey has the answers and should be held accountable. Please help us resolve this humanitarian issue, which in turn will help the healing of old wounds and would aid in any future solution to the Cyprus problem.

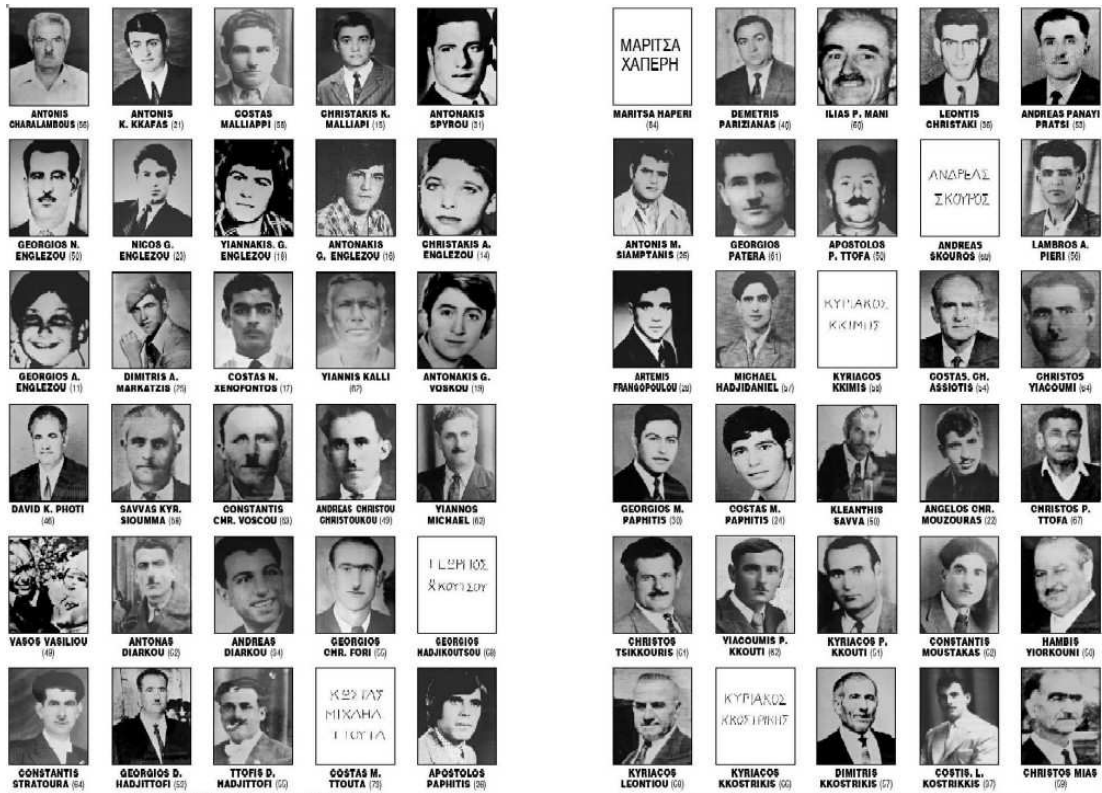
Please raise your voice against the systematic destruction of our cultural heritage and demand that it is properly restored.

We dream of the day that all Cypriots, regardless of ethnic origin, colour, religious or political beliefs, will be able to live and enjoy the same rights and freedoms that all European citizens enjoy. Please help us in this endeavor.

We thank you for your precious time and kind consideration.

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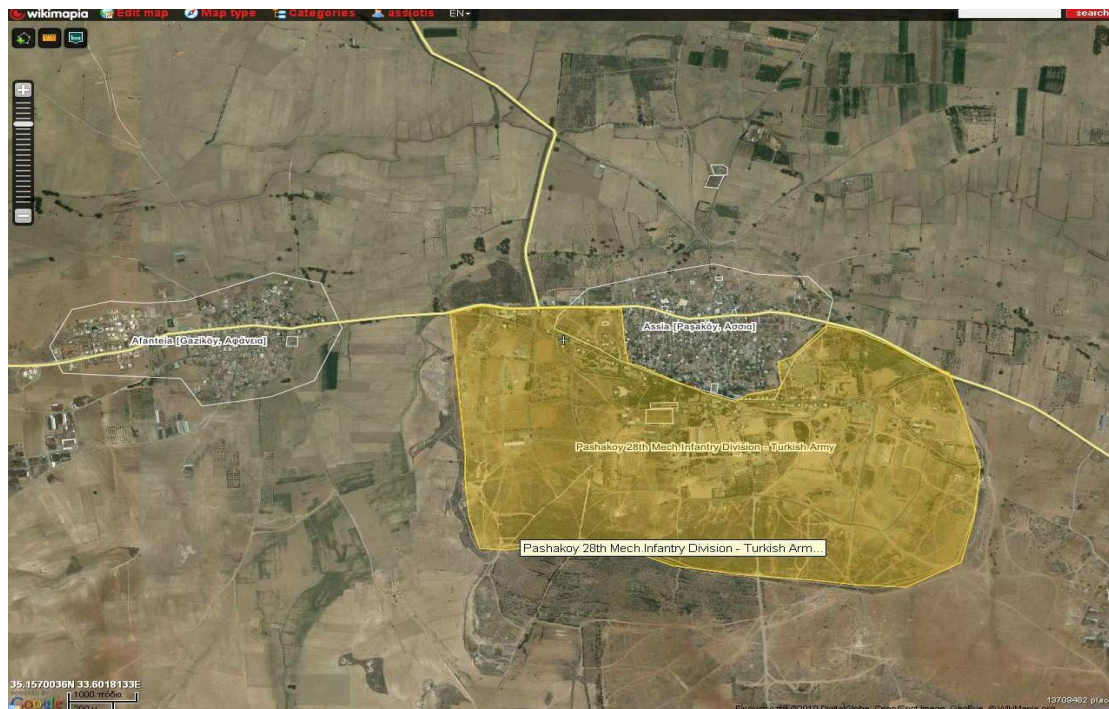
The 83 missing persons from Assia



- The list includes 70 civilians and among them 8 youths below the age of 18.
- Most noticeable is the case of the Englezou family with 7 family members missing.
- The current investigation by the Committee for Missing Persons has confirmed that the remains of many, which were dumped in a series of mass graves 4 km west of the village, have been exhumed in the 1990s. The Turkish side claims that they do not know of their whereabouts.

- **A war crime that remains unpunished.** It is well documented, with numerous testimonies, that among the civilian prisoners, 52 persons who were over 50 years of age, were transferred twice to a prisoners of war detainee camp (Pavrides Garage) in the outskirts of Nicosia, but were rejected both times due to their age. Orders were given to transfer them back to their village to join their families. These men were last seen on 21 August 1974, the day of their second transfer to the Pavrides Garage. None of them has ever returned and currently there is a search for their remains in a series of wells in the Ornithi area, which lies 4 kilometres west of the village. [2,3,4,11]

Turkish Occupation of Assia



(Satellite view of Assia today, source: wikimapia.com)

Today the southern part of the village is enclosed by high walls and barbed wire and guarded by armed Turkish soldiers. This vast military area , shown in yellow above, comprises of:

- hundreds of houses belonging to the people of Assia,
- two churches, of Saint Theodore and Saint Spyridonas,
- the primary school of Assia which in 1974 accommodated about 400 students and 12 teachers,
- two football fields belonging to the local teams,
- two movie theatres, and
- a very large rural area in the south of the village.

Destruction of our cultural heritage – A formal policy of the Turkish government

Church of Saint Mary of Assia

The Byzantine church of St. Mary dates back to the Venetian era (1489 – 1571 AD) in Cyprus and it is probably one of the oldest surviving Christian monuments in our region. In this church, the residents of Assia would go and pray, when our community was built around the church in medieval times.



All the valuable items of the church, ancient icons, the iconostasis and sacred objects were looted. The church currently lies desecrated in ruins and its northern wall has partly collapsed or has been demolished.

(Church of St. Mary, photo from our archives)

The church sits on the flat plain in the proximity of the Gialias river [12] and is often exposed to serious flooding. The lack of maintenance of the protective wall barrier around it, and the collapse of its northern wall, leaves the church seriously exposed to natural forces and it now runs a serious risk of total collapse and destruction.



(The flooded church of St. Mary, photo: Costas Chr. Tziortzis, 2004)

Cemeteries of Assia



(Cemeteries of Assia, photos from our archives)

The two cemeteries in the village, next to the church of St. Mary, have been desecrated and left in ruins and many graves are standing open to this day. The state of the monuments and crosses cause anguish to the relatives of the deceased and repulsion to the viewer.



Church of Saint George of Assia



The church was built in 1861 over a sixty-five day period, in the lower parish of Assia, mainly through voluntary work. The short time of completion was due to the intense competition that existed between the two parishes of the village, which both began construction of their own church simultaneously.

(Church of St. George, photo from our archives)

The Turks, following the capture of Assia, looted and desecrated the church. All the icons, sacred vessels and the iconostasis were stolen and professional looters probably removed the wall painting of Saint George on the northern side of the church. They also demolished the portico and the external stone built wall fencing.



(Church of St. George, removal of wall painting, 2009)

The church of St. George was converted into a storage area for hay and the surrounding areas into a stall for sheep.



(Photo: Anikitos Hadjicharalambous, 2003)



(Photo: Anikitos Hadjicharalambous, 2003)

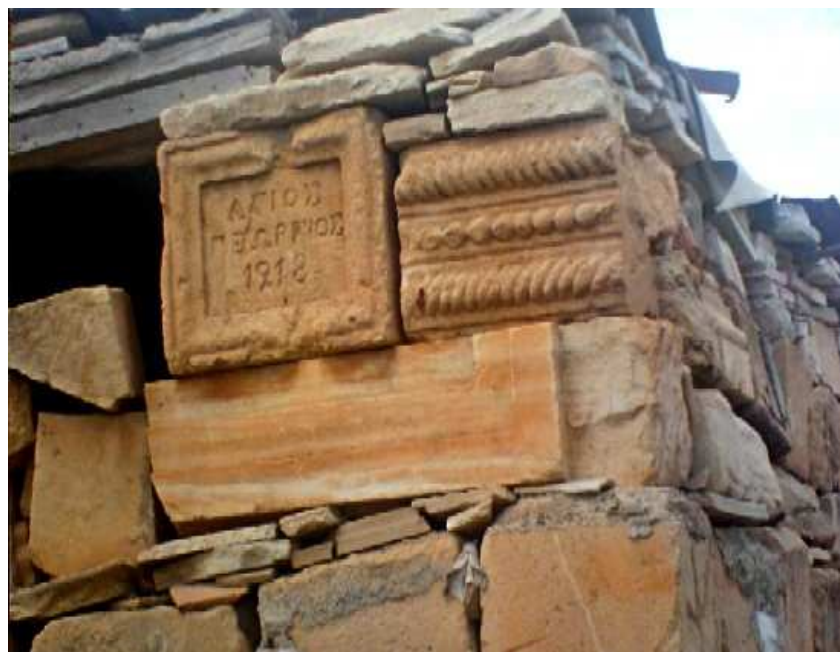
In 2004 the church building was emptied of the hay, and the sheep farm was moved a short distance away from the church. Whatever is left of the building today plays host to the wild pigeons in the area and graffiti.

The photo below portrays the inside of the church of Saint George as it is today.



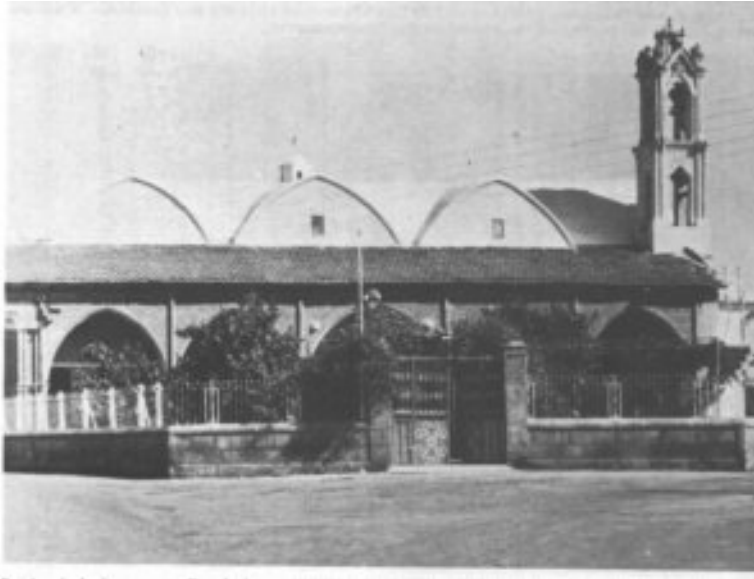
(Photo: Christoforos Skarparis, 2009)

The photo below shows the engraved stones taken from the now demolished portico and stone-built fence. They currently form a part of a sheep stall, a short distance from the church.



(Photo: Mary Pelekanou, 2009)

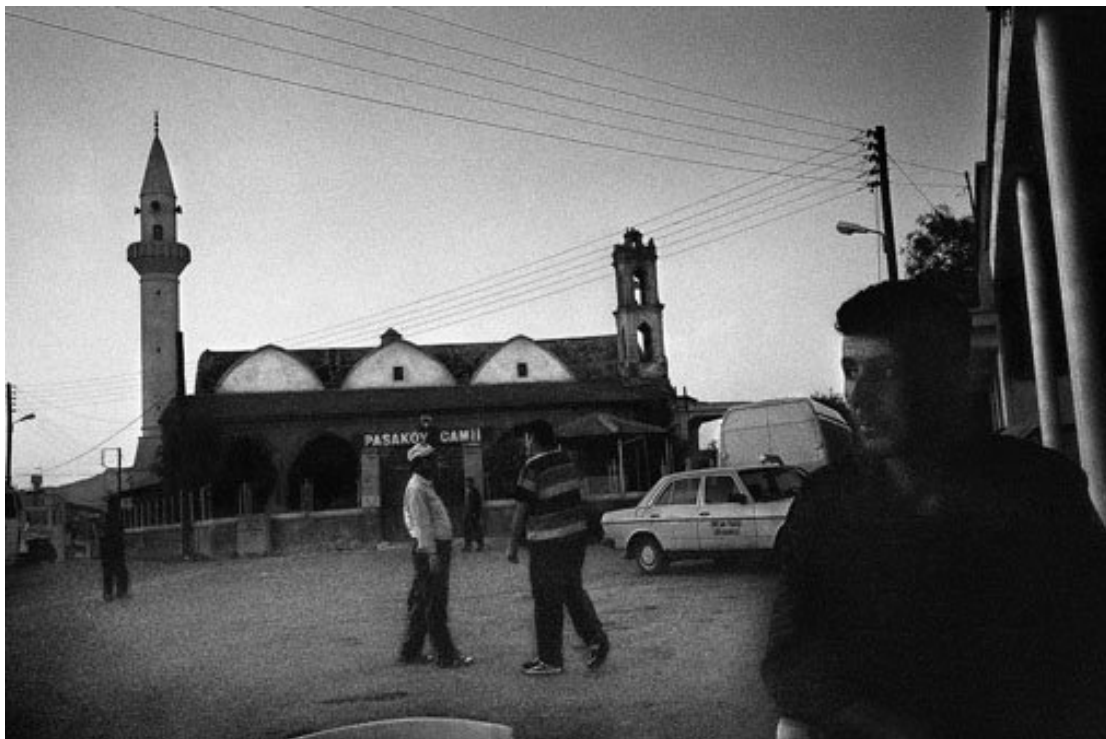
Church of Saint John the Baptist of Assia



The church was built in 1861 in a period of sixty-five days (July to September), in the upper parish of our community, particularly through voluntary work.

The church was looted and desecrated before the residents were forcefully expelled from the village by the Turkish army in August 1974 and consequently converted into a mosque

as shown in the photo below.



(Photo: Anikitos Hadjicharalambous, 2003)

The search for our looted cultural heritage – The recovery of the icon of St. John the Baptist



After the partial lifting of the restriction of movement in 2003, a Greek Cypriot family from Assia located the icon of Saint John the Baptist in their house. It was kept there for almost 33 years by the Turkish family living there after they had located the icon in a garbage dump outside the village. The cooperation of the two families gave positive

results. With great personal risk of those involved, the icon was transferred to the free areas of the Republic of Cyprus.



After proper cleaning and preservation at the monastery of Stavrovouni, the icon was handed over to the community of Assia in a solemn and highly emotional ceremony on 27 July 2003. The icon is presently hosted at the Church of Saint Andreas at Plati Aglantzia, Nicosia.

Church of Saint Theodore of Assia

The church was built in the southern part of the village. Construction work began in 1942 and was completed in 1962. Today the church lies in the military zone controlled by the Turkish army. The present condition of the church is not known since the area is inaccessible to the public.



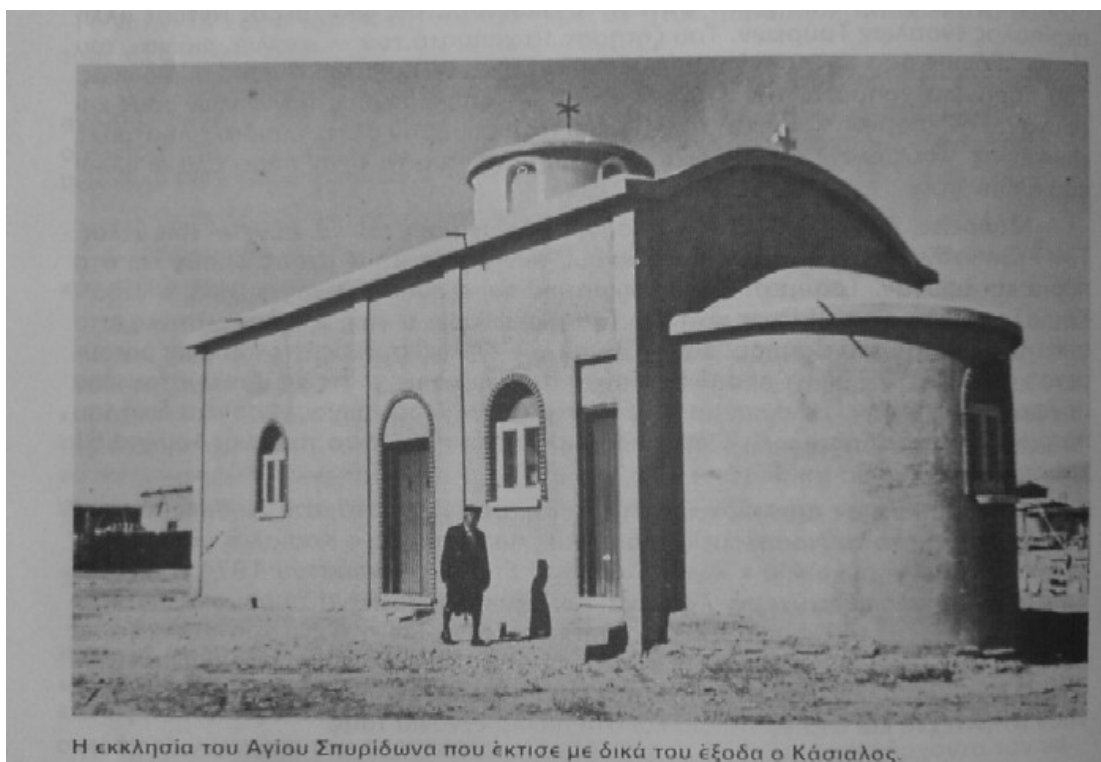
The discovery in the bazaars of Turkey



M. Kozakerides, a Greek national, discovered and purchased the Holy Gospel of Saint Theodore of Assia, in the bazaars of Trabzon on the Black Sea coast of Turkey. The gospel was looted by the Turks in 1974. His thoughts turned to the people of Assia, the rightful owners of the holy gospel. On 26 July 2009 in a solemn ceremony which took place at the Church of

Saint Andreas in Plati Aglantzia, Mr. Kozakerides delivered the gospel to the Community of Assia.

Church of Saint Spyridonas of Assia



Η εκκλησία του Αγίου Σπυρίδωνα που έκτισε με δικά του έξοδα ο Κάσιαλος.

The church was commissioned by Michael Kashalos, the renowned naive painter-sculptor of Assia, and was built in the yard of his house. The construction of the church began in 1969 at the expense of the folk artist and was completed in about two years.

Michael Kashalos fully dedicated his limited resources, great love and artistic skill to complete the church. He undertook the challenge to paint the icons and other religious depictions inside the church. His vision and dedication was brutally disrupted when the Turkish army entered the village on 14 August 1974. The 89 year old artist was robbed and then struck with the butt of a rifle on 18 August 1974. He was carried to the free areas of the Republic of Cyprus on 24 August 1974. He did not withstand the hardship and he passed away six days later, on 30 August 1974. [2,13]. Kashalos' artworks, which he hosted in his humble home-workshop, and the Church of St. Spyridonas, were looted and their fate is unknown.



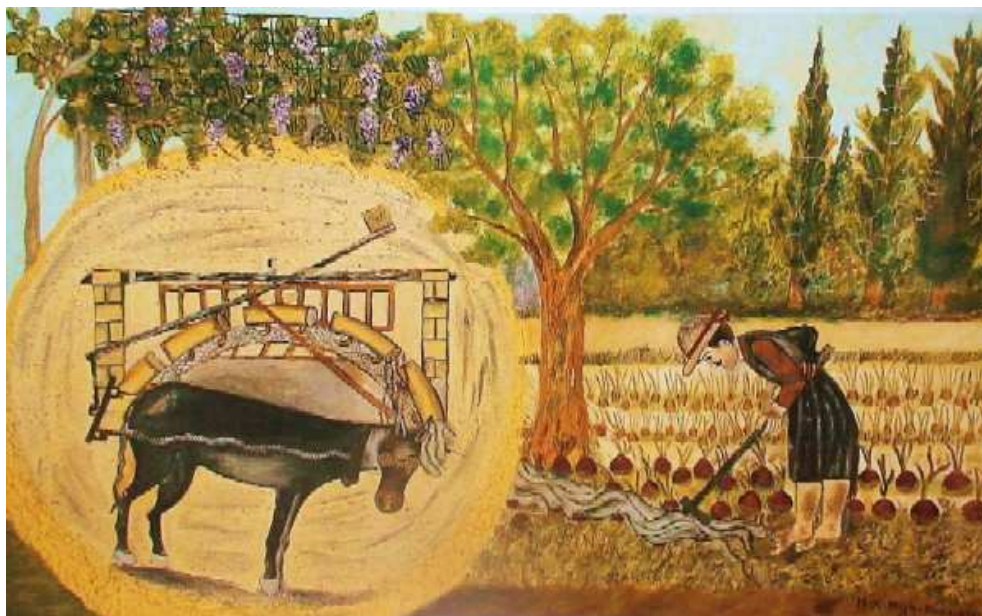
Ο Κκάσιαλος ενώ ζωγραφίζει μια εικόνα
Kashalos painting an icon

The church Kashalos built is currently located within the military zone and has been converted into an army depot of the Turkish army.



(Church of St. Spyridonas, Assia today, photo archive of Politistikos Syndesmos "Assia")

Turkish aggression in Cyprus in 1974 was brutal and indiscriminate, as the experience of the civilian population of Assia and the case of Kashalos in particular clearly indicate. Turkey had put in place a systematic mechanism of fear and destruction, which aimed at the complete demoralisation of all civilians, and their plan was only completed after the forced expulsion of all the residents from their homes.



(Painting by Michael Kashalos, "Watering the Fields")

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