Napoleon Xifaras

Continuities and discontinuities in Cretan society
from the 12th to the 6th century and the rise of the *Polis*

ABSTRACT

From the 11th to the 7th century, continuity and constant multifaceted development in Crete placed the island in the political, economic and cultural vanguard of Greece. Successive austerity and deep ruptures during the late 7th and entire 6th century—the abandonment of settlements and cemeteries together with urbanisation and changes in burial practices; the erection of temples and public buildings in urban centres; new perceptions in the form and contents of private(?) houses(?)—have been linked to the formation of the *Polis*—but in which way? Archaeological data, inscriptions, and written sources enable us to argue for a deep societal break based on inequality. The transformation of the closed rural economy of the oikos into a "market economy", population growth together with urbanisation, and the increase in goods surpluses allowed some members of the dominant clans to acquire impressive wealth and social power, while others lost their land due to debts, in a process of economic impoverishment and social decline. In this way, a continuously growing class of dependent inhabitants was created, resulting in the gradual annihilation of the cohesive role played by the traditional clans in each community. As a consequence, the population group which held land ownership or rather controlled the means of production was transformed into the citizen body, or inhabitants with rights (e.g. to exploit the labour of others, carry weapons, exercise power, and potentially live within urban centres). They created new mechanisms to secure societal cohesion, thus forming *phylai* and participating in *hetaireiai* as well as various kinds of common actions and events.

KEYWORDS: urbanisation, civic buildings, burial practices; inequality; *phyle*, not *genos*; social transformation; *Polis*

To the memory of my supervisor, Nikolas Faraklas

First of all, I would like to thank the organisers of the 13th International Congress of Cretan Studies for the opportunity to present this paper. Over the past two decades the interest in Geometric-Archaic Crete has grown, especially due to the impressive finds in Kavousi Azorias (Haggis et al 2011), as well as the recent excavations at already known sites and the study of material from earlier investigations, which has reopened discussion on the formation of the

Polis.[1] P. Demargne and N. Kontoleon emphasized the close relation between Archaic art and the city-state when they observed an austerity and decline in Crete from the late 7th c. onwards. Kontoleon (1970, 86) used Pliny the Elder's phrase "*deinde* (après 600 av. J.C.) cessavit *ars*" to describe the sudden fall of Cretan art. According to Demargne, "L' arrét brusque de la renaissance crétoise est un des plus curieux problèmes de l' archaisme grec, alors que le regime de la cité autonome continue de fleurir ailleurs tout au long du VIe siècle" (1947, 348), while Kontoleon later noticed "la relation étroite entre la floraison de l' art grec et la formation de la cité" (1970, 84), and remarked that some reasons "ont en effet empêché les cités crétoises d' évoluer …; les 'hoplites' qui le constituaient n' ont pas pu devenir 'citoyens'" (1970, 86).

The archaeological material brought to light since then has not altered this perception. While from the 11th to the first half of the 7th century researchers observe continuity and constant development in Crete (Ξιφαράς 2004, Wallace 2010a), from the late 7th and entire 6th century significant changes have been noted, which many scholars have linked to the formation of the *Polis*: settlements either went into decline or were abandoned, temples were erected in urban centres, and burial practices changed (Kotsonas 2002). Especially in Knossos, the abandoning of the main cemeteries around 630, after approximately four centuries of use, the inability to locate an Archaic habitation centre, and the almost complete absence of material dated from 590 to 525, have been described as the *Archaic gap* (Coldstream, Huxley 1999). Moreover, in the rest of Crete, in the late 7th and early 6th centuries scholars have noted crucial discontinuities or even decline. Widespread cremations were substituted with inhumations, richly furnished family tombs gave way to single burials usually in pithoi, while most cemeteries were abandoned between 630-575 (Kotsonas 2002, Sporn 2014). Additionally, the study of pottery production reveals a significant qualitative recession (Erickson 2010), while the funerary offerings and votives in 6th century sanctuaries cannot be compared in quantity and luxury to the respective material of the two preceding centuries (Prent 2005; Seelentag, Pilz 2014, 1-2). It seems that Crete's position in the vanguard of the politics, economy, and culture of Greece during the Geometric and Orientalizing periods was suddenly degraded (Chaniotis 2005, 175).

This impression has been altered by the discovery of the political nucleus at Azorias and by some publications over the last twenty years. In one of these, Sjögren catalogued more habitation sites in the island during the 6th century when compared with previous centuries (2003, 23, Diagram 1), while Wallace not only refuted the existence of an *Archaic gap* (2010a, 327-330), but also any significant reform in Cretan society from the 12th to the 5th centuries. In fact, she argued for a continuous evolution and development without any particularly deep ruptures within communities (ibid, 327-8, 341-346). According to her, the austere picture of the material and the change in funerary customs is due to the confidence of members in the dominant clans that had already formed after the collapse of the Late Bronze Age (ibid, 324, 344-345), who by that point did not need to highlight their kinship and display their power and wealth (ibid, 327).

However, Erickson has persuasively criticised Sjögren's list, arguing that she "organized the published data in century-length blocks so that a site with any 6th-century component appears on

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[1] Onithe (Ψαρουδάκης 2004), Axos (Tegou 2014), Prinias (Pautasso 2014), Anavlochos (Gaignerot-Driessen 2018), Dreros (Zographaki, Farnoux 2014), Lato (Gaignerot-Driessen 2012) and Itanos (Tsingarida, Viviers 2019).

her list" (2014, 69). Actually, her tables include both Knossos (despite the scarcity of the material, the "lacuna" from 590 to 525) and Prinias, "one of the starkest cases for discontinuity" as "one of the more plausible cases of abandonment" in the second quarter of the 6th century (2014, 70). Similarly, Wallace's considerations show some inadequacies; although the archaeological finds and inscriptions substantiate a rigid break from the past, and societal contradictions and clashes, she sees continuities without rupture. Furthermore, she does not explain how and why the inhabitants of Geometric settlements became citizens of Archaic Cretan *Poleis*, supposing no differentiations, constant stability and development as a linear economic and social evolution. Yet the rise of the *Polis* is not a natural consequence of any socioeconomic process; on the contrary, various social structures emerged in Archaic-Classical Greece.

In fact, while examining the archaeological data, the excavators of the nucleus at Azorias observe a discontinuity (Haggis 2013; 2014a; 2014b, 22-24; Haggis, Mook 2011; Haggis et al 2011). Briefly, the most important data I note are: a) the chronological limits of the habitation centre, from the end of the 7th to the early 5th century; b) the fundamental reconfiguration of the man-made environment; c) the erection of impressive public or communal buildings, the Communal Dining Building and the Monumental Civic Building, which are interpreted as an *andreion* and a space for meetings or events respectively; and d) the form and contents of private(?) houses(?) as a means of expressing new perceptions of societal organisation. This is, indeed, a deep rupture with the past by the descendants of the inhabitants of earlier settlements in the neighbouring sites at Kastro and Vronta, who decided to organise a new civic centre in their territory (Haggis, Mook 2011, 367-370; Haggis et al 2011, 2-3; Fitzsimons 2014), at a site where a nucleus pre-existed. The process of socio-political reform as depicted in the architectural remains of Kavousi is unprecedented, but could possibly have occurred elsewhere in the island too. New excavations at Onithe Goulediana may soon present a close parallel (Ψαρουδάκης 2004).

In other places in Crete, for example at Dreros, economic, social and political developments always gave a different impression - one of continuity, of gradual multifaceted development without ruptures from Subminoan-Protogeometric to Geometric-Archaic times, when we note an impressive floruit based on the finds from the central habitation area. As observed in our study on Protogeometric-Geometric Crete, considering the remains of the temple of Apollo Delphinios and the so-called "prytaneion-andreion" in the second half of the 8th century, the execution of a large-scale building project for the arrangement of the area where the political centre of Dreros was soon to develop constitutes a collective undertaking. It presupposes planning and does not simply indicate the existence of a decision-making centre and the allocation of significant resources, but seems to mark the organisation, not only of the cult, but also of the administration. Actually, the erection of the patron deity's temple and the collection of the basic functions of the state in the same place point to a process of urbanisation and the rise of the *Polis* (Ξιφαράς 2004, 341).

In examining its stages, our starting point will be the LM III period, when the overturn of the older Minoan-Mycenaean economic and administrative system with the ensuing absence of a strong central power during the 12th century caused social fluidity, favouring the formation of new population groups. This was based on the inhabitants' realisation that a new nexus of

relations and the undertaking of common action were necessary in order to overcome insecurity, re-establish stability and achieve economic and cultural recovery.

While comparing two neighbouring and successive settlements at the *polje* of Lasithi—LM IIIc-Subminoan/Protogeometric Karfi and Protogeometric-Archaic Papoura Agiou Georgiou—I argued in my thesis for a significant differentiation: the unification of the population which occurred in the second half of the 11th century. The position of Karfi on an inhospitable summit is certainly due to internal division among the plateau's inhabitants, and the cult objects denote past survivals (in this case Minoan). By the turn of the 1st millennium, however, the settlement had been abandoned, and the robbers and looters or fugitives and hunted inhabitants (Φαράκλας κ.ά. 1998, 110-111; Ξιφαράς 2011, 11-12, with bibliography) descended to Papoura, to a settlement approximately twice the size. The Protogeometric-Geometric habitation, cultic, and funerary remains are similar to what one observes anywhere on the island. It seems that by that time the population, which until then could be identified based on its Minoan, Mycenaean, Doric or other background, had completed any social processes and ideological quests. The long-term co-existence of varied ethnic groups within narrow geographical limits contributed to their gradual mix and the crystallisation of the Greek, Cretan and local identity of each community's inhabitants. The impressive homogeneity of finds throughout the whole island is indicative, and their similarity with the rest of Greece significative of the consolidation of the Greek world-vision in Crete (Ξιφαράς 2004, 319-323).

The picture of sanctuaries such as the Idaean Cave or Kato Syme Vianou, and cemeteries such as that of Knossos, dating from the late 11th to the late 7th century, is characteristic of yet another feature: the emergence of a leading group through social restructuring, an economic elite with authority, which, based on the cohesive social power of the *genos*, attempted to justify or impose its supremacy in various ways. At Eleutherna, the finds from Orthi Petra cemetery reveal that a homogeneous group of aristocrats or *hetairoi* warriors had already taken shape, systematically trained within the framework of a militaristic organised society and connecting their dead with the heroic narratives of the Homeric epic (Σταμπολίδης 1990; 2004). Members of these clans would ensure both the autonomy and the cohesion of Cretan societies, simultaneously projecting their dominant ideology. Characteristic elements of this have been detected everywhere, even in a corner of Kissamos, at Astrikas. The limp bronze tripod cauldron leaning on the wall of Tomb 1 supports this view, as do the rest of the Geometric funerary offerings (Ξιφαράς 2004, 29).

The socioeconomic situation in the island seems to have consolidated by the second half of the 8th century, as it steadily evolved for approximately 250 years within the framework of the closed agricultural economy of the *oikos*. However, significant changes have been documented during the Late Geometric period: a population boom, intensification of production, division and specialisation of labour, an increase in the number of exchanges with the rest of Greece and especially with the East, and a multifaceted development which was to peak from the 7th century, thus placing Crete in the vanguard of several sectors. Some settlements became powerful and populous, essentially urbanised, concentrating the economic and social life of the surrounding areas (Haggis 2014a, 138), while others were abandoned, in a process whose causes remain to be explained by future research (Ξιφαράς 2011, 14-16). The traditional clans maintained their

eminent role in the organisation and cohesion of society, while a "market economy" allowed some of their members to acquire impressive wealth, showcasing their financial prowess in order to dominate in social life.

However, prosperity would not extend to everyone. Population increase and economic development would intensify inequality in each community, resulting in the creation of a constantly burgeoning group of dependent inhabitants. These were essentially landless people, forced to work in the fields of landowners as dependent serfs. They had either lost their land due to debts, or inhabited smaller, weaker and poorer areas which had been incorporated or attached to more powerful neighbouring ones. Despite the difficulty connecting finds with this part of society, inscriptions and written sources cover the gap; for example, Hesiod's lively descriptions of landless people asking for loans or begging in order to survive, in the didactic epic *Works and Days* (286-404).

It seems that the process of economic impoverishment, social decline and the marginalisation of inhabitants further intensified in the 7th century, and the number of serfs drastically increased. Their discontent and attempts to improve their position led to internal disturbances and/or conflict within the communities. The adoption of written law as an attempt to defuse the tension in the Greek world was not enough. In fact, the balance of social power determined developments, the course of which is revealed by archaeological data. I suggest that the starting point was the degradation and eventual annihilation of the role of the *gene* in the cohesion of Cretan society. The abandonment of communal burials in chamber or tholos tombs, which were very popular for 400 years, with some in constant use for many decades, attests to the depth and the significance of this differentiation.

For centuries, until the Late Geometric-Orientalizing periods, inclusion in a *genos* not only determined but mainly secured the place of community members, specifying their status to some degree, and strengthening societal cohesion. The Late Bronze Age collapse highlighted the kinship ties of inhabitants in small rural communities as the main cohesive power, with this role constantly being upgraded up until the closed rural economy of the *oikos* was transformed into a "market economy", with rapid population growth and urbanisation, an increase in goods surpluses and an intensification of inequality among members in each community. From that moment onwards, a man could become rich while his brother could lose his land due to debts (Hesiod, supra). In this way, members of the same *genos* suddenly charted diametrically different courses, resulting in justified challenges to the significance of the *genos*, while at the same time its members were reduced after losing their freedom and becoming *apeteroi* and serfs. Finally, the absence of the term *genos* from the numerous Cretan inscriptions of the late 7th and ensuing centuries, as noted by Perlman (2014, 188-192), hardly seems coincidental when compared to the frequently used terms *Polis* and *phyle*, usually in the context «ἔϜαδε Πόλι διαλύσασι πυλᾱσι» ("The city-state decided after consulting the tribes", e.g. in the Dreros inscription from the second half of the 7th century).

I suggest that during that time in the 7th century, the population group which held land ownership or rather controlled the means of production was transformed into the citizen body, i.e. inhabitants with rights (e.g. to exploit the labour of others, carry weapons, exercise power,

and potentially live within urban centres). In some societies, for example in Athens, internal disputes determining who would belong to the citizen body and what the rights of each citizen group would be lasted for decades. Meanwhile, in Crete, the *hetairoi* chose and imposed the militarisation of society and the conservatisation of the economy, in order to successfully quell dissatisfaction and potential uprisings by dependent inhabitants. Free citizens lost their creativity by limiting their activities, and henceforth restricted themselves to overseeing their serfs and training, which resulted in conservatism and economic and cultural stagnation. The *klarotai* created wealth through their labour, while simultaneously constituting a "burden" for any development and evolution.

With the disappearance of the *gene* role, the citizens had to create new mechanisms to secure societal cohesion. Thus, they formed *phylai* and participated in *hetaireiai* as well as various kinds of common actions and events (communal meals, rituals, rites of passage etc.). Even though the term *phyle* is already documented in Cretan inscriptions from the second half of the 7th century, and seems to constitute the basic subdivision and grouping of the citizen body (Perlman 1992, 195-6; Chaniotis 2005, 180-182), we do not know how it was created, exactly what its role was or how it functioned – those are issues beyond the scope of this paper. In any case, I would like to stress the significance of common participation only by citizens in religious rites in the patron deity's temples at Dreros, Prinias, Gortyn etc. (Kristensen 2014, 147-150), at common meals and gatherings, and events at sites such as the Communal Dining Building and the Monumental Civic Building in Azorias (Haggis et al 2011, 64-65; Haggis 2014a, 135). Perhaps the innovatively planned buildings that contained numerous storage vessels in the centre of the nucleus at Azorias (Fitzsimons 2017, 361-4), as well as those at Onithe Goulediana, may point to their communal rather than private character and be linked to the *phylai*, the *hetaireiai* and finally the *Poleis*.

Scholars are reluctant to characterise settlements such as Kavousi and Prinias as *Poleis*, as Whitley recently noted (2018, 241; contra Wallace, 2010a, 339-342), due to the lack of a known ancient name and their abandonment between the Archaic and Classical periods. Even so, use of the term *Proto-poleis* is only a simplification. In our study of Protogeometric-Geometric Crete we noticed that among Geometric settlements in sites with similar geographic features, some survived and transformed into *Poleis*, while others did not (Ξιφαράς 2004, 346; see also Wallace 2010a, 341; Gaignerot-Driessen 2016, 79-81). It seems that the basic factors determining developments were the economy and social cohesion, not geography. Some settlements/societies completed internal transformation and cohesion in time and became *Poleis*, others achieved the first but failed in the second process, while others were abandoned too soon. I consider the above version as the most probable, without ruling out the possibility of a voluntary incorporation or violent annexation of such *Poleis* to their neighbours. But again, it seems self-explanatory that those societies which completed their transformation into *Poleis* the fastest, in the least painless way, perhaps grew stronger earlier and achieved benefits vis-à-vis their neighbours and rivals. However, investigation of the factors that influenced the development of Cretan *Poleis* is not one of the goals this paper set out to achieve.

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