

Crete in the Hellenistic Period

Historians of Hellenistic Greece generally say very little about the island of Crete. It is occasionally mentioned as a supplier of mercenaries or as a home for pirates, but very little else. And yet the roughly 200 inscriptions that survive on the island from between about 400 and 50 BCE provide evidence that life in Crete during this period was interestingly different from elsewhere in the Greek world.

To begin with, although Alexander conquered almost the entire Greek world, neither he nor his successors ever conquered Crete, which remained home to 50-60 independent poleis until the Roman conquest in 67 BCE. Other differences are revealed by the inscriptions from Crete, which are significantly different from those from the rest of the Hellenistic Greek world. As the leading expert on Hellenistic Crete, Angelos Chaniotis, notes in an article on the epigraphic habit in Hellenistic Crete, “in a period which elsewhere is generally characterized by individuality and by the self-representation of strong personalities, the political and military leaders of Hellenistic Crete escape our knowledge because they have left no inscriptions which honor them for their public role” (Chaniotis 2004: 80). Many honorary decrees survive from this period, but they all honor non-Cretans. We only know the names of a few Cretan political or military leaders because they are mentioned in inscriptions from places outside of Crete, but very few Cretans are mentioned by name in Cretan inscriptions except for the eponymous *kosmoi*, whose names provide the date for legislative acts, and these officials are nothing but names for us.

Chaniotis further notes that “honorary decrees for benefactors, so abundant in mainland Greece, on the islands, and in Asia Minor, are entirely absent from Hellenistic Crete; the few honorary inscriptions which were set up for benefactors are always dedicated to foreigners”

(*ibid*). It appears, in fact, that individuals did not make donations for public projects, perhaps because there were few wealthy individuals on the island. Consistent with this view is the near total absence of artists, writers, scientists, and others who gathered in places like Alexandria where they received royal patronage.

Chaniotis concludes, “in Hellenistic Crete the epigraphic habit is predominantly public, anonymous, impersonal, masculine, local, and limited with regard to the representation of social groups – and all this despite the fact that Crete was neither isolated nor egalitarian” (Chaniotis 2004: 81). Chaniotis’ dilemma arises from the fact that he (along with most other scholars) generally agrees with Aristotle’s description of “the Cretan constitution” as an aristocratic form of government similar to that of Sparta with a strong aristocratic Council and a weak Assembly (*Politics* 2.10). The evidence of the inscriptions, however, indicates that Cretan cities were not aristocracies but were democratically organized, with power primarily in the hands of a popular Assembly, assisted by the *kosmoi*. An aristocratic Council existed in at least a few cities but its role was relatively insignificant. Thus it should not surprise us that the Cretan inscriptions reflect the concerns of the community more than the individual.

In my talk I will present a handout with the detailed evidence (mostly inscriptional) for a democratic Crete and for other features of Cretan cities that differ from those of cities in the rest of the Greek world at this time.

Work Cited

Chaniotis, Angelos. 2004. “From Communal Spirit to Individuality: the Epigraphic Habit in Hellenistic and Roman Crete.” In *Creta Romana e Protobizantina: Atti del Convegno Internazionale, Iraklion, 23-20 settembre 2000* ed. A. Di Vita, 75-87. Padua.