

Cretan Evidence for the Early Polis

Most recent discussions of the early Greek polis assume more or less continual strife between the elite and the common people or among the elite themselves. The traditional picture of Crete found, for example, in Aristotle *Politics* 2.10 is consistent with these views in that it portrays a land governed by elite officials, notably the *kosmos* and a Council composed of former *kosmoi*. The inscriptional evidence from archaic and classical Crete (c. 650-400 BCE), however, which consists of some 200 texts, presents a rather different picture. My paper will give an overview of the evidence from these texts and discuss its implications for the nature of the early polis in Crete. A handout will give a full list of the relevant inscriptions and the texts (Greek and English) of those that are most important.

I will begin with a law from Dreros which is relatively well known (*SEG* 27.620, Meiggs-Lewis 2). It prevents a *kosmos* from holding office again for ten years. Most important, the law begins with an enactment clause, “it was decided by the polis,” and in its last line it suggests that the polis was a fairly large body. Other enactment clauses also involve the polis, or in several cases a group referred to by the city collective, “the Gortynians,” “the Dataleis,” “the Lyktians.” The Gortynians even use pebbles to cast their votes, further evidence that it was a large group. Besides the Dreros law, there are more than twenty mentions of either the polis (as a political body not an urban area) or city collectives, and they show clearly that in these cities a large body, probably including all the inhabitants of the urban space which was designated as the polis, had significant decision-making authority.

By contrast, there is only one certain mention of a Council in these inscriptions, at Axos, where it gives money for a sacrifice, and there are two or three other possible mentions elsewhere. That’s all. Then, there are three mentions of “elders” -- or it could be an embassy --

who in one case collect payment. Tribes are also mentioned in three cities, and an obscure group called the *startos* at Gortyn, but there is no evidence that these had any authority either. The meagerness of this evidence for Councils or council-like groups makes it hard to believe that a small elite group could have been the main decision-making body in Cretan cities.

Officials, on the other hand, are often mentioned, especially the *kosmos*, who seems to have been the leading official in most if not all Cretan cities. Besides the *kosmos* we often hear of a judge (*dikastas*) at Gortyn, and there is one mention of a judge in Lyktos. Otherwise we hear of various officials in different cities, but all these officials except for the *kosmos* and the *dikastas* appear to be confined to just one city.

Obviously, the evidence of these inscriptions, many of which are fragmentary, is not absolutely conclusive. Many texts have undoubtedly been lost and a great deal of the original may be missing from the fragmentary texts. Still, quite a lot has survived and it points strongly to the conclusion that archaic and classical Cretan cities were governed by a large community-wide body designated either as the polis or as the city collective, and that this body had significant decision-making authority. In addition, a *kosmos* was the main administrative official, and was assisted by a number of other lesser officials who differed from city to city. I don't want to call this democracy, as this would be misleading. But we can conclude that in Crete the elite and the community as a whole must have worked together -- a very different picture from what we find in some other cities. Crete does seem to be different in one other regard, that there is no evidence in the inscriptions and no mention in later historical accounts of any tyranny in Crete. That this was the result of the cooperative form of government indicated by the inscriptions, seems to me a reasonable conclusion.