

Maritime Crete: Change and Transition amongst the Coastal Settlements from the 2nd Century BC to the 2nd Century AD – An Early View

Michael J. Curtis

The Cretan coastline extends for approximately 1,046 kilometres, offering long stretches of sandy beaches that are broken by rocky shores, promontories and sheer cliffs in some places. The coves and inlets of the island and lee sides of the islets were places where ships could safely anchor, be beached for repair and stored when not in use. This shoreline and the fertile plain beyond have been visited and settled since early prehistory. However, rising sea-levels, tectonic movement, as well as urban and tourist development along the shoreline pose an ongoing threat to the survival of many of these ancient habitation areas. Like other places in Greece, the post-Bronze Age shorelines of Crete are understudied. Many authors talk about ancient Crete as if the shores of the island have always been the same as they are today, but that in reality is far from the case.

This article considers some of the changes that took place along the coastline in a period extending from the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD (Hellenistic to Roman Imperial periods). It is an early view based on ongoing research.

The traditional view of Crete in the periods before the conquest of the island in 69–67 BC is overshadowed by an impression of warring city-states and piracy. For the Greek and Roman historians and commentators this often served as useful propaganda against the Cretans and has tainted our impression of Crete during these times. Down on the coast we know little of settlement and activity in the immediate aftermath of the Bronze Age. The traditional model is that the coastlines were abandoned in favour of settlements on defensible hilltops inland. It seems incredible to think that the maritime culture and associated dominance of the Minoan fleets over the surrounding seas was all lost. It is possible that this model is not correct as there are gaps in our knowledge concerning occupation along the shoreline and in the coastal plain for these periods. This situation is not helped by the submergence of the ancient shoreline in some places and the fact that this now lies buried with an overburden of sand beneath the sea. What is evident though is that fortified harbours and associated urban towns begin to emerge around the coast from 5th–4th century BC onwards. In the context of this paper some of these early foundations continue to dominate the coastal landscape into the 2nd century AD and beyond.

The coastal landscape at the beginning of the 2nd century BC comprised the Archaic – Classical harbour towns of Phalasarua, Kydonia, Itanos, and Hierapytna, along with a mixture of newly founded smaller coastal *poleis*, vassal harbour towns, and small villages that served as convenient landing points along the coast. The worries and concerns of

past generations had been put to one side and access to the sea was now politically and economically important. The scale of this new shoreline settlement has been usefully set out by M. Cross in his volume on the Cretan city-states,¹ where in addition to the 4 Archaic – Classical foundations, he identifies 33 other coastal settlements of notable importance, of which 16 were probably small *poleis*.² Currently we know little about many of these settlements as the shoreline has changed, and for some we only have the remains of the more inland structures as the areas that would have been closer to sea are now either underwater or have been swept away by the centuries of winter storms. However, from what is known, it is possible to argue that there is less evidence of large-scale harbour projects as seen in the Classical period. However, some communities certainly invested in improved berthing and mooring facilities, as seen in the construction of stone waterfrontages and boulder moles.³

In terms of layout and functionality, some of the small coastal settlements may have been nothing more than fishing villages which served as a convenient landing place, whilst others clearly sought to take advantage of the opportunities and benefits offered by the increase in passing sea traffic. Our knowledge of the urban areas is better than that of the waterfrontage and harbour installations, though many still await a detailed study. Like some of the harbours, many of the urban areas took advantage of the natural landscape, utilising hill slopes that commanded a view over their harbours/beaching areas, the sea beyond, and the surrounding fields and hillside terraces. As might be expected, the limit of the urban development is often defined by boundary walls, some of which are clearly designed to be defensive in nature. This expansion of settlement along the coast during the 2nd and 1st centuries BC is clearly related to the increase in inter-regional and long-distance shipping, for which Crete was ideally located to benefit. Whether you were sailing east – west or north – south the island offered a place to shelter from storms and strong winds, to restock with fresh food, and to rest or take on new crew. Whether the islanders were ready to fully exploit the new opportunities offered by the passing trade at this time is a matter of debate. The Cretan economies of the 2nd and 1st centuries BC seemed to have been based around subsistence agriculture and whilst the opportunities to trade their produce and goods may have seemed attractive it would have required a degree of planning to reach a state of overproduction. In the initial stages, this may not have been reliable enough to secure interest from visiting merchants or their agents looking for regular supplies. However, to the entrepreneurial merchant the Cretan harbours offered a routeway to a new marketplace for their goods, materials and people.

This external contact seems to have been primarily focused on the coastal *poleis* where there were harbour or waterfrontage installations to aid the berthing and mooring of vessels, and which offered some space for quayside storage of goods. This was important as the marketplace areas tended to be some distance from the waterfronts. The larger harbours, like Hierapytna in eastern Crete, developed into

what today we might term as 'trade and distribution hubs'. In a similar manner to modern ports, they serviced not only the immediate territorial hinterland but also other parts of the island and acted as a base for vessels that formed part of the intra-island fleet.

The Cretan coastline was also constantly changing, and it would be wrong to assume that this was a time of stability along the coast. In times of inter-state fighting even coastal settlements could be destroyed or abandoned as the conquering city-states attempted to centralise trade and direct external contact through their own main harbours. As the city-state economies developed it is possible to see this action as being revenue related for the purposes of collecting harbour dues and taxes. Human interventions were not the only problem for coastal settlers as the location of Crete on the Hellenic arc meant that the island has been prone to episodes of seismic activity throughout its history. Some of this has been so intense it has destroyed settlements, sunk and raised parts of the coastline, and brought devastating tsunamis that have washed away beaches and settlements and buried others. To date there has been limited study of the effects of such events during the 5th to 1st centuries BC, but the pattern of these events reflected in the historical record means that there is a strong probability of similar activity throughout these periods.

For the islanders there is no suggestion that life on Crete was easy either, and the subsistence-based economy meant that if you were seeking to improve your status or to raise additional funds then alternatives needed to be sought. One solution was to become a mercenary and fight for a foreign army. Mercenaries were one of Crete's main exports from the 4th century BC through to Roman times. The scale of this was not in single figures but in hundreds and thousands, making it a profitable service industry that brought in revenue and gifts from foreign kings and generals.⁴ The harbours towns of Phalasarna, Kydonia, Itanos, and Hierapytna, which had military associations, may well have been the embarkation points for the contingents of mercenaries; for some harbours, this activity may have led to their later association as being 'pirate ports'. It is easy to see how the growth in the mercenary service sector influenced the development and establishment of monetary-based economies on the island. As many of the mercenaries would have been citizen farmers this activity also created a demand for slaves to work the land whilst their owners were overseas. It is possible to speculate that the gradual reduction in the number of foreign wars throughout the 1st century BC, brought about as the power and influence of Rome increased, meant that piracy became a seasonal occupation for those citizens returning from wars and feeling, or being, displaced on their return.

Mercenaries were not the only export and in addition wine and oil, timber, herbs, stone and metals were also exported via the Cretan harbours.⁵ Currently, for the 2nd to 1st centuries BC there is no suggestion that the exports were of sufficient amounts to merit quayside or nearby storage. The lack of investigations in these areas does not help but

transport containers such as amphorae and jars could have easily been stacked on the quaysides or seafronts where there was no waterfrontage. From here they would wait to be loaded into either sea-going vessels or lighters if the larger ships were anchored offshore.

In terms of the landscape, the Roman invasion of 69–67 BC seems to have made little difference. The military campaign left the Cretan harbours untouched, which is a little strange since piracy seems to have been one of the factors in the argument for military intervention, along with the desire for revenge for the attack on Marcus Antonius's fleet off the coast of western Crete in 72–71 BC. Even with the formation of the joint senatorial province of Crete and Cyrenaica circa 27 BC there is little evidence of immediate change. It is possible however, that damage amongst the coastal settlements resulting from a cluster of earthquakes and a tsunami between 44–66 AD provided a good opportunity to rebuild and reorganise.⁶ Gradually new planned towns emerge beside the ruins of the old settlement areas, with paved streets, drainage, and piped fresh water brought across country by aqueducts. The larger harbour towns see the emergence of a new array of public buildings, including theatres, amphitheatres, and bathhouses reflecting the start of a new era and bringing an air of prosperity along the coast. It is interesting to note that most of the theatres on the island were built in the coastal towns.

The evidence that we have to date suggests that linked to this period of new construction was a reorganisation of the harbour towns. The coastal landscape now comprised eleven main harbour towns: Kasteli Kisamos, Kydonia, Hersonissos, Olous, Lato, Siteia, Itanos, Hierapytna, Inatos, Phoinix (Loutro) and Lisos.⁷ Of these, Kasteli Kisamos, Kydonia and Hierapytna can be looked upon as equivalents to modern ports. In selecting these locations, full use was made of not only the natural landscape but also the seabed. There was more shallow water on the northern side of the island, facilitating projects like the construction of concrete moles at the harbour at Hersonissos.⁸ On this coast, use was made of the islet of Dhia, which was larger in land mass than today, and which sat on the edge of deep water, which the larger vessels needed. The southern coastline was much closer to the deep water, and it is along this coast that we see the emergence of warehouses and storage facilities close to the waterfrontage. The largest harbour along this coast was Hierapytna at the eastern end of the island. In this part of the island the islet of Koufonisi was ideally located to service larger vessels. Like the islet of Dhia, in Roman times the land mass of this islet would have been much larger than today, separating it from the main island only by a small, narrow channel. It is possible that goods offloaded here were taken by lighters across the bay to the harbour at Hierapytna.

Putting all of this into context, throughout the 1st century BC there was a gradual reduction in the number of coastal settlements. Trading points become more centralised and easier to manage from an administrative and financial point of view. Throughout

the Roman period, the island continued to offer good and improved trading prospects for ships on their return journeys from Italy and for those merchants whose business was based on regional island hopping. Naturally, we should expect that some of the residents of places like Hierapytna and Kasteli Kisamos were merchants and ship owners involved in the export and import of goods, as well as the organisation of fleets engaged in coastal tramping. Throughout the 1st and 2nd centuries AD there is archaeological evidence of the new cargoes reaching the island, which range from fine table wares to marble architectural pieces. The latter of these was sourced from a variety of countries including Africa, Egypt, Greece, Italy and Asia Minor as part of a well organised industry that included stone finishers working on Crete.⁹

In closing, coastal archaeology on Crete is in its infancy. The challenge of overcoming boundaries between terrestrial and underwater archaeology still needs to be faced and whilst things are beginning to change there is still a long way to go. Along the coast many of the more popular tourist resorts sit on top of the ancient settlements and many of the archaeological investigations that were conducted in advance of modern development remain unpublished: the finds and information gained during the process of excavation remain locked away. In truth, the corpus of this unpublished material is so large that it could change our current perspective of Hellenistic and Roman Crete. Finally, the surviving sites and monuments of these periods remain at risk from human and natural interventions. In many cases they have little or no heritage status and no funding to support their preservation. None of these challenges are easy to overcome but more academic profiling of Hellenistic and Roman Crete and in particular of the lesser-known sites, such as those along the coast, will be a positive way forward.

Notes

¹ Cross 2011.

² Cross 2011, 53–56 Map 3.

³ For instance, at Hersonissos. Leatham – Hood 1959, 266 fig. 2.

⁴ The size of one of these contingents can be seen in Livy's account of Perseus's army in 171 BCE and which included 3000 Cretans, led by the Generals Sosos of Phalasarna and Syllus of Knossos (Liv. 42.51).

⁵ Chaniotis 1999, 211.

⁶ Werner et al. 2018.

⁷ On the basis of epigraphical and numismatic evidence, I.F. Sanders identified 26 possible Roman cities on Crete (Sanders 1982, 12). This number is close to the 24 mentioned in the 4th century AD writings of Servius and includes both inland and coastal locations (Serv. Ad. Aen. 3.106).

⁸ Hohlfelder – Brandon 2014.

⁹ Paton – Schneider 1999, 293.

References

Chaniotis 1999

A. Chaniotis, *Milking the Mountains. Economic Activities on the Cretan Uplands in the Classical and Hellenistic Period*, in: A. Chaniotis (ed.), *From Minoan Farmers to Roman Traders* (Stuttgart 1999) 181–220.

Cross 2011

M. Cross, *The Creativity of Crete: City States and the Foundations of the Modern World* (Oxford 2011).

Hohlfelder – Brandon 2014

R. L. Hohlfelder – C. J. Brandon, *Narrative of the ROMACONS Fieldwork*, in: C. J. Brandon – R. L. Hohlfelder – M. D. Jackson – J. P. Oleson, *Building for Eternity* (Oxford 2014) 55–101.

Leatham – Hood 1959

J. Leatham – S. Hood, *Sub-Marine Exploration in Crete, 1955*, *Annual of the British School at Athens* 54, 1959, 263–280.

Paton – Schneider 1999

S. Paton – R. M. Schneider, *Imperial Splendour in the Province: Imported Marble on Roman Crete*, in: A. Chaniotis (ed.), *From Minoan Farmers to Roman Traders* (Stuttgart 1999) 279–304.

Sanders 1982

I. F. Sanders, *Roman Crete: An Archaeological Survey and Gazetteer of Late Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine Crete* (Warminster 1982).

Werner et al. 2018

V. Werner – K. Baika – P. Fischer – H. Hadler – L. Obrocki – T. Willershäuser – A. Tzigounaki – A. Tsigkou – K. Reicherter – I. Papanikolaou – K. Emde – A. Vött, *The Sedimentary and Geomorphological Imprint of the AD 365 Tsunami on the Coasts of Southwestern Crete (Greece) – Examples from Sougia and Palaiochora*, *Quaternary International* 473, 2018, 66–90.