

Chapter 3

In the Heart of the Wine-Dark Sea: Cretan Insularity and Identity in the Roman Period

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‘Insularity poses special restraints and offers special opportunities; it demands risks, provides benefits, and can modify social and politico-economic developments in unique and often unpredictable ways. What is important is the way people manipulate insularity, in distinctive ways, in different times and places’

Knapp (2007, 50)

Introduction

In *The Odyssey* 19.169–174 Homer describes Crete as a land of one hundred cities: ‘Out in the wine-dark sea lies a land called Crete, a rich and lovely island. It is filled with countless people, in one hundred cities. They are not of one language, but speak several tongues. There are Achaeans there, and brave Eteocretans, Kydonians, three races of Dorians, and noble Pelasgians too. One of the cities is mighty Knossos, where Minos ruled, and every nine years spoke with mighty Zeus.’ This passage illustrates the large population and ethnic diversity on Crete at the time of the formation of the epic tradition (perhaps the eighth century BC) that we find in *The Odyssey*. Homer lists five ethnic groups living in Crete and gives them specific locations on the island, thus ‘dividing’ it along ethnic lines. One of these ethnic groups, the Dorians, also colonised the region of Cyrenaica in North Africa and it is surmised by some scholars that the common dialect and history may have been one of the reasons that in the first century BC, the Romans decided to unite Crete and Cyrenaica into a single province known as *Creta et Cyrene* (Fig. 12).¹

The subject of this paper is not Crete during the so-called Dark Age, but a much lesser – until recently – studied period on the island. In order to understand Roman Crete, however, the history of preceding periods on the island need to be considered which will help answer two important questions: how did Roman Crete differ from



Fig. 12: Map of the province of Creta et Cyrene (Maxine Anastasi).

Crete as envisaged by the epic tradition of the 8th and 7th centuries BC? What defined Cretan insularity and identity during the Roman period? In this paper, I will show that Crete under Roman rule was a vastly different island from Crete described by Homer in *The Odyssey*.

A major problem confronting the scholar of Crete during the Roman period is the relative silence of ancient sources regarding life on the island, a trait shared also with another large island in the eastern part of the empire, Cyprus (Gordon in this volume). With some exceptions – *e.g.*, Diodorus Siculus, Livy, Velleius Paterculus, Pliny the Elder – most historians living in the Roman period did not seem to concern themselves greatly with Crete, or at least such is the picture painted by the surviving texts. In order to comprehend Cretan insularity and identity, then, we must rely heavily on the archaeological record which is itself fragmentary, and what little remains is often difficult to piece together as few excavations set out with the explicit purpose of recovering remains of the Roman period (Kouremenos 2013 and forthcoming).² However, enough information from disparate sources can be pieced together for several conclusions about life on the island in the Roman period to be drawn. First, we need to consider Crete's geography and climatic features as they played a key role in shaping its insularity and identity. Then, we shall delve into the available historical sources and archaeological material in order to understand the political and cultural milieu that shaped much of the island's prosperity and contributed to its fame as a land of abundance and legends.

From the Archaic Period to the Roman Conquest

From the Archaic to the Hellenistic period, Crete was an island of many cities characterised by inter-city warfare for land, resources, and honor (Chaniotis 1996, 27–56; 2005a, 9–12; 2008, 85). While various cities on the island had been united in alliances, they had never formed a single coalition that comprised the entire island (Chaniotis 1996, 99–100). What these independent *poleis* had in common, however, was a type of social organisation that had its roots in the so-called Dark Age (c. 1100–800 BC) and survived until the island’s conquest by Rome in 67 BC. At the heart of this social system was the military training of the youth and the organisation of citizens in *andreia* (men’s club houses). The system was further supported by the establishment of an agrarian economy geared towards the funding of communal public meals, the *syssitia* (Chaniotis 2008, 86).³ The formation of this communal dining system appears to have prevented private symposia from taking place in Cretan *poleis* as was common in most other Greek states.⁴ A passage in *Athenaeus* (*Deipnosophistae* 4.143) quoting the Cretan historian Dosiadas,⁵ provides some information about what went on in the *andreia* of Lyttos, one of the most important Cretan cities in the Classical and Hellenistic periods:

The Lyttians pool their goods from the common mess in this way: every man contributes a tithe of his crops to his club, as well as the income from the state which the magistrates of the city divide among the households of all the citizens. The citizens are distributed in clubs which are called andreia. The mess is in the charge of a woman who has assistants, three or four men chosen from the common people. ... Everywhere throughout Crete there are two houses for the public messes; one of these is called the andreion, the other, in which they entertain strangers is called the koimeterion. In the house intended for the mess there are set out, first of all, two tables called ‘guest-tables’, at which sit in honor any strangers who are in town; next come the tables for the others. An equal portion of the food on hand is served to each person, but only a half-portion of meat is given to the younger men, and they get nothing of the other food. Then on each table is placed a cup filled with wine much diluted; this is shared by all who are at the same table, and a second cup is served after they have finished the meal. ... After dinner, they are in the habit first of deliberating on public affairs; from that subject they proceed to call up deeds of prowess in war and to praise men of proved bravery, in order to encourage the younger men in the pursuit of virtue.

In this passage we see that in the *andreia* there was a hierarchy between groups of individual men based on age and that discussions about public affairs and praise of men who had proven themselves in war took place in a public rather than a household setting that accommodated symposia. The passage also reveals that private ownership of land and produce was under the control of the polis. Dosiadas’ account is also supported by a passage in Ephorus, who states that the Cretan system fed the citizens at public expense, which created the appearance of equality among male citizens in a Cretan polis.⁶ All land was administered by a privileged group of warrior-citizens and, as a result, excessive displays of private wealth were frowned upon. Epigraphic documents from the Hellenistic period, the clear majority of which are predominantly

public, anonymous, masculine and local, also support the general view that drawing attention to the individual self at the expense of the social group was not part of the Cretan mentality before the Roman period (Chaniotis 2004).

Sanders argues that, during the Hellenistic period, urban sites dominated the settlement pattern chiefly because continual warfare meant that citizens would be safer in a city than in the countryside (Sanders 1982, 30). More importantly, Doric customs were centered on city life and it was not until the Roman period that private estates in the countryside became important symbols of status (Sanders 1982, 30; see also Raab 2001). By the first century BC, the island's archaic social system could not be reconciled with Roman rule and, as a result, the *sysstitia* were abolished (Chaniotis 2008).

Roman involvement in Crete goes back to the early second century BC, when inter-city warfare led individual cities on the island to invite Rome as a chief negotiator and mediator (Sanders 1982, 3; Harrison 1993, 16; Chaniotis 2005, 139). The first major involvement in Cretan affairs occurred in 195 BC, when Rome ordered Nabis of Sparta to hand over his possessions on Crete (Livy 34.35.9). Five years later, in 189 BC, the praetor Q. Fabius Labeo arrived on the island as a mediator in the war between Kydonia and the alliance between Gortyn and Knossos. During this turbulent period, Roman prisoners were held on the island and Labeo was successful in securing their release (Livy 37.60). This event was followed by a series of further mediations throughout the second century BC, including one where Rome ended a war between Knossos and Gortyn (Polybius 22.15.3), and an arbitration in a land dispute between Hierapytna and Itanos (IC 3.4.9; see also Gruen 1984, 116–117; de Souza 1998, 112). In 85 BC, more than one century of mediations and arbitrations culminated in L. Licinius Lucullus' visit to the island, where he supposedly settled the affairs of the islanders while on a search for naval forces in the war against Mithridates VI Eupator of Pontus (Plutarch, *Life of Lucullus*, 2–3; see also de Souza 1998, 112). By 71 BC, however, the Romans came to Crete not as mediators but as conquerors under the pretext that the Cretans were aiding Rome's enemy, Mithradates, and that Cretan pirates were threatening Roman ships (Diodorus Siculus 40.1; Livy 97). M. Antonius, *praetor* and father of the well-known Mark Antony, arrived on the island with a Roman fleet in order to deal with the matter only to suffer a humiliating defeat by a force of 24,000 Cretans under the leadership of the Knossian Lasthenes and the Kydonian Panares (Velleius Paterculus 2.34.1). Roman prisoners were captured by the Cretans during M. Antonius' campaign and this led the Senate to pass an edict where the islanders were ordered to hand over 300 hostages in addition to the huge sum of 4,000 talents of silver (Diodorus Siculus 40.1; Plutarch, *Life of Pompey*, 45). This enormous amount, equivalent to half the tribute the Romans received from all their Eastern provinces combined, is indicative of the island's great wealth (Chaniotis 2008, 87). The Cretans refused the terms and in 69 BC, the Romans responded by sending Q. Caecilius Metellus with three legions in order to crush the islanders.

From 69 to 67 BC, most of the Cretan cities fell successively to the invaders while others, such as Polyrrhenia and Gortyn, chose to remain neutral. For his victory,

the senate awarded the title of *Creticus* to Metellus and the property of Lasthenes at Knossos was destroyed (Appian, *Sicelica*, 6.5). Sometime after 44 BC, Crete was joined with Cyrenaica in North Africa, which had already been willed to Rome by Ptolemy Apion in 96 BC (CAM X, 630–631; see also Tod 1932; Chevrollier 2016), to form the province of *Creta et Cyrene*,⁷ one of only two double provinces in the Roman Empire.⁸ The joint province was governed by a proconsul of praetorian rank and Gortyn in south Crete became its capital. At first glance, the choice of Gortyn as capital instead of Knossos might seem somewhat surprising, but the fact that Gortyn was neutral during the Roman invasion of Crete won it the benevolence of the Romans (see Chevrollier 2016; Lippolis 2016). In addition, the convenient location of the city in southern Crete coupled with its fertile hinterland and the possession of two harbors at Lebena and Matala made it an attractive agricultural and commercial center, especially for trade with North Africa (Alcock 2002, 104). Strabo states that the journey from Gortyn to Apollonia, the port of Cyrene, took two days and nights (Strabo, 10.4.5), which is a much shorter sailing distance than from any harbor of northern Crete. It is therefore not surprising that the Romans chose to make Gortyn the capital of the double province.

There is a relative lack of information about the history of Crete between 67 and 27 BC, including accounts on how the island was administered with Cyrenaica. This is mostly due to the silence of historical sources and the difficulty in drawing conclusions from the scarcity of the archaeological remains that can be attributed to this time period. As a result, potential conclusions often need to be pieced together from indirect information.⁹ We know, for example, that the governor of Crete in 50 BC was Cn. Tremellius Scrofa who was an agricultural expert; the Romans might have assigned him this position in order to exploit the island's natural resources (Cicero, *Ep.Ad.Att.* 6.1.13). In 58–50 BC, Caesar employed archers from Crete during his campaigns in Gaul (Caesar, *Gallic War* 11.7; Caesar, *Civil War* 3.4.1), while some years later Antony apparently gave the whole or a part of the island as a gift to Cleopatra VII (Cassius Dio 49.32.5). When Octavian emerged as victor against Antony and Cleopatra in the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, he took possession of Antony's former realm and reorganised the provinces. Furthermore, Octavian appears to have respected Antony's earlier designation of Crete and Cyrenaica as dowry for Cleopatra Selene, the latter's daughter by Cleopatra VII, and this fact may have given him the idea for joining the two regions into a single province.¹⁰

On the basis of an honorary dedication on an altar in Herculaneum, it emerges that M. Nonius Balbus, proconsul and patron of *Creta et Cyrene* around 25 BC, may have been responsible for the reorganisation of Crete as he was honored by the *commune Cretesium* by both the Knossians and the Gortynians (CIL X 1425–1434; Pagano 2004, 29–32; Bechert 2011, 28; Bowsky 2011, 122). It is probable that Balbus was the very first proconsul of the joint province and that the establishment of *Creta et Cyrene* occurred a couple of years earlier.

Why were the two regions united into a single province in the first century BC? The obvious answer is that the population of Cyrenaica was too small to make it a

province on its own.¹¹ Crete and Cyrenaica were also closely connected commercially through their main harbors more closely than Cyrenaica was connected to Egypt or Tripolitania. As Chamoux notes, the distance between Apollonia in Cyrenaica and the south shore of Crete is only 300 kilometers; by contrast, one must travel 800 kilometers from Cyrene to Alexandria and 900 kilometers from Berenike to Lepcis Magna through the desert (Chamoux 1952, 12–14; Chevrollier 2016). A further reason for uniting Crete and Cyrenaica into a single province was Rome's continuous struggle against piracy (Chevrollier 2016). Pirates in the Libyan Sea often cut the southern Mediterranean into two parts and trade with Egypt may have been affected by this situation. Thus, the unification of Crete and Cyrenaica into a single province brought an end to piracy in both regions. With the formation of the double-province and the establishment of the capital at Gortyn, Crete's position within the Roman Empire was consolidated.

Defining Cretan insularity in the Roman period: spotlight on the island's environment and economy

The concept of insularity has only recently been considered in detail by archaeologists of the Roman period. Building on the work of scholars specialising on Bronze Age and Classical Period insularities (*e.g.*, Dumas 1983; 2016; Knapp 2008; Constantakopoulou 2010; Broodbank 2013) as well as on current theoretical approaches to identity, mobility, and connectivity, a more coherent approach to insularity in the Roman Mediterranean can be formed. As noted above, one cannot discuss Cretan insularity in the Roman period without possessing a substantial understanding of the island's previous periods all the way back to the Minoan. While it is not the aim of this paper to highlight pre-Roman Crete, it is imperative to mention that what shaped Cretan insularity and identity in the Roman period is inevitably tied to pre-Roman antecedents (see *e.g.*, Sanders 1982; Chaniotis 1999; 2004; 2008; Sweetman 2011; 2013; Francis and Kouremenos 2016; Kouremenos 2013; 2016; forthcoming).

Insularity as a term has two different meanings. The first is 'the condition of being an island' and the second is 'a state of isolation'. Islands may be envisioned as isolated entities, but connectivity with the mainland and other islands does not warrant their isolation. What does living on an island entail for an individual's and a group's identity? Even today, when one asks people who have been born and raised on islands 'what does being an islander mean to you?', the answers will vary; for one person, being an islander means being 'at once alone and at the center of the world' while for another it is 'being confined to a landmass and limited in terms of mobility' (personal communication); still another – rather poignant – answer was 'my island is the center of the universe'. In antiquity, islanders may or may not have ascribed similar multiple meanings to their own insularities, but in the case of Crete, the lack of historical accounts by the Cretans themselves leaves us with little understanding of what insularity meant to them. Thus, in their absence, we must rely on the scant

Roman historical accounts and our understanding of the archaeological record in order to form a coherent picture of Cretan insularity and identity in the Roman period.

What features make a landmass an island? Strabo, writing in the early first century AD, states that ‘most of all it is the sea that delineates precisely the layout of the land, creating gulfs, sea-basins, traversable narrows and in the same way isthmuses, peninsulas and capes; in this the rivers and mountains also play their part’ (Strabo, *Geography* 2.5.17). Modern scholars of insularity and identity focus more on islands as environment systems that allow for the development of distinct insular cultures. Walsh, for example, argues that ‘islands possess a series of environmental characteristics that differentiate them from continents, and these characteristics will have influenced the development of insular cultures’ (Walsh 2014, 235). For Knapp and others before him (*e.g.*, Patton 1996; Flenley and Bahn 2003), what sets islands apart from the mainland are often their peculiar mini- or mega-fauna, or what are considered as ‘enigmatic’ human cultures and unusual types of material culture such as imagery, memory, metallurgy and monumental architecture (Knapp 2008, 39). For Constantakopoulou, islands are defined as places of ‘interaction, integration and connectivity, but also of isolation and uniqueness’ (Constantakopoulou 2010). As is evident in the above descriptions, both ancient and modern authors conceive of insularity differently and no single characterisation can be all-encompassing.

With these definitions in mind, let us consider what defined Cretan insularity and identity in the Roman period. First, we need to take into account briefly the location and topography of the island. Crete lies in the middle of the eastern Mediterranean Sea and is bordered by the Aegean Sea to the north and the Libyan Sea to the south. The distance from west to east is 260 kilometers (160 miles) (Fig. 13), and the narrowest distance between north and south, located in the Gulf of Mirabello, is only

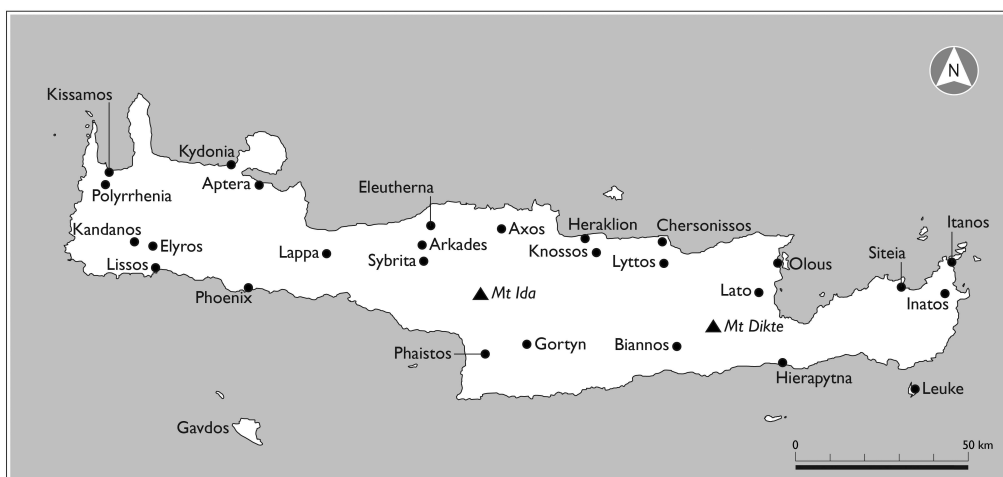


Fig. 13: Map of Crete with major cities (Maxine Anastasi).

12 kilometers; the longest distance in the central part is 56 kilometers (35 miles). The interior of the island is dominated by Mt. Ida (the so-called 'birthplace' of Zeus) with an altitude of 2,456 meters. The geographic dichotomy resulting from this mountain range in the middle of the island produced distinct sub-cultures throughout the pre-Roman period, subdividing it roughly into west, central, and east. West Crete is dominated by the White Mountains and due to its geographic location had closer relations with the Peloponnese and the west throughout its history. Central Crete is dominated by Mt. Ida and, as the largest of the three regions mentioned, was the heart of the Minoan civilisation as three major palace sites – Knossos, Phaistos, and Malia – are located in this central region. From the Archaic to the Roman period, two cities dominated this part of the island – Knossos and Gortyn. East Crete is dominated by the Lassithi Plateau and Mt. Dikte and due to their geographic proximity, the cities of east Crete fostered closer relations with Rhodes and the eastern Mediterranean, as can be seen by, for example, alliance treaties between the cities of Hierapytna and Lyttos with Rhodes that were signed in the early 2nd century BC, well before the Roman conquest of the island (*ICret* III, 31–36, no. 3A).¹²

As with all islands, climate is an important factor in defining insularity. Throughout most of the Roman period, the southwest Aegean region including Crete was particularly wet and warm, characterised by mild, wet summers and warm winters as evidenced by stable isotopes and microfossils, speleothems, sapropels, alluvial and core deposits (Moody 2016, 65–67). These climatic conditions favoured abundant vegetation, lengthened growing seasons, and permitted crops like the olive and the vine to grow at higher altitudes (Moody 2016, 66). Climate thus had a significant effect in defining the economy and by extension the insularity of Crete during the Roman period. Much of the wealth of Cretan cities derived from five groups of products in particular, which are described briefly here:

Olives and olive oil

The olive has been cultivated all over Crete since at least the Early Bronze Age (Warren 1972 32–33, 138–139, 255–256, 315–317; Hamilakis 1996, 6–21; Chaniotis and Hadjisavvas 2012, 163–169). Both in the pre-Roman and the Roman periods olive oil was used in cooking and religious and funerary rituals, as fuel for lamps, but also in perfume and cosmetics, unlike North African olive oil, which was second rate and was better suited for lamps and as a massage oil for athletes rather than in cooking or for perfumes and cosmetics (Wilson 2004, 148). However, unlike our historical and archaeological evidence for Cretan wine, evidence for the export of Cretan olive oil beyond the island is lacking. This is almost certainly due to the fragmentary nature of the archaeological record and the miniscule number of sources that describe olive oil in the Roman period, but it is just as likely that Cretan olive oil was not exported in large quantities beyond the island and may have perhaps not been considered of top quality by the Romans.

Historical sources do not mention Cretan olive oil, but installations of olive presses, vases containing olive oil or perfume, and olive pits have been found in many pre-Roman and Roman archaeological sites (Bosanquet 1902, 264–269; Vogeikoff-Brogan and Papadakis 2003, 69; Chaniotis and Hadjisavvas 2012, 167; Kouremenos 2013). The latter category is often overlooked by scholars but archaeological sites contain large quantities associated with baths of the Roman period, such as the case of the 2nd–3rd century AD private bath suite in the House of Phidias at Kissamos, where olive pits were used as fuel for the hypocaust (Kouremenos 2013, 158). It is evident, then, that the consumption of olives and the production of olive oil continued to be important to the Cretan economy well into the Roman period and beyond.

Honey and wax

Like the olive, honey was also produced in Crete long before the Roman period as ceramic beehives from Minoan and Iron Age sites attest (Davaras 1986; Melas 1999; D'Agata and De Angelis 2014; Francis 2016). The Roman invaders would have been aware of the myth of Minos' son Glaukos, who drowned in a vat of honey (Pseudo-Apollodorus 3.3.1) and the island's place as a honey-producing region within the empire was thus assured.

Thyme honey and pine honey, in particular, were the two most common types produced on the island and were exported throughout the empire. Ceramic beehives found in substantial numbers in central and west Crete suggest that these were prime apiculture centers on the island (Francis 2016, 84). Most Cretan honey seems to have been consumed for medicinal purposes; thyme honey was exported to Italy, as an amphora with *dipinti* found in Pompeii indicates (Francis 2016, 96).

Medicinal plants and herbs

Crete has a fertile ecosystem which produces a variety of indigenous plants, about 200 species of which are indigenous to the island. Dictamus (also known as Dittany of Crete today) was perhaps the most well-known medicinal plant from the island; it was used in the healing of wounds, for digestive problems, arthritis, as an aphrodisiac, and as a means to induce abortion in women and goats (see especially Hippocrates 7.348.17; 2.150.19; 172.9; 180.15; Cicero, *de natura deorum* 2.126; Virgil, *Aeneid* 12.412–415; Pliny, *Natural History*, 25.92–94; Plutarch, *Moralia* 974 d; 991e–f). The healing properties of this plant can be seen in a wall painting from the house of Sirico at Pompeii, which shows Aeneas being attended by a physician after he was wounded in battle, while his mother Venus, holding a few branches of dictamus, hastens to nurse his wound (Fig. 14). This scene is described by Virgil in the *Aeneid* 12.411–423.

Other species of plants that grew on the island and were exported as whole plants or as herbal mixtures in medicinal preparations and perfumes included oregano, thyme, Cretan birthwort (*aristolochia cretica*), marshmallow (*althea officinalis*), anise, yellow

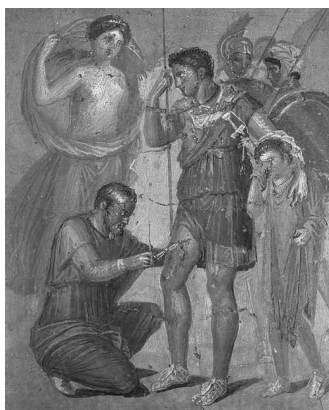


Fig. 14: Wall painting depicting a wounded Aeneas being attended by a doctor, with Venus carrying branches of dictamnus (dittany of Crete). From the house of Siricus, Pompeii, Reg. VII, Ins.1. 1st century AD (National Archaeological Museum of Naples).

gentian, and myrtle among many others (Rouanet-Liesenfelt 1992; Chaniotis 1999, 219–220).

Purple dye

Another product that Crete exported to Rome and other parts of the empire was purple dye derived from murex shells. The small island of Leuke, located 5 km off the modern Cape of Goudouras in the southeast of the island, was one of the prime producers of purple dye; Kydonia and Chersonessos in the north of the island were also important production centers (Bosanquet 1939–1940; Papadakis 1983; Raab 2001, 11; Gliozzo 2007, 74; Gallimore 2011, 484; Sweetman 2012, 31; Koutsinas, Guy and Kelly 2016). Pliny in *Natural History* 35.36 mentions specifically *paraetonium* being exported from Crete to Rome. Like the murex from Leukas (Zoumbaki in this volume), the Romans used imported Cretan murex in purple dye production by boiling the shellfish in lead vats in order to extract the mollusc's purple color. The few houses that have been

excavated on Leuke suggest that their inhabitants made their living partly through trade in purple dye (Papadakis 1979 and 1980); most of the material found in the houses includes large quantities of murex shells as well as parts of nets, needles and other tools associated with fishing and the purple dye industry (personal observation, Archaeological Museum of Siteia).

Wine

The most widely exported Cretan product was wine, of which several varieties were known to have been associated with the island in antiquity. These were aromatic wine (*aromatikos*); light white wine (*hydatodes*); wine with myrtle berries (*myrtites*); grapes imported from Thera which were turned into wine on Crete (*Theraios*); wines mixed with pepper, saffron and honey; wine mixed with seawater; and *passum* or *staphidites* which was a sweet wine mentioned in medicinal texts (Chaniotis and Hadjisavvas 2012, 169).

Historical sources do not explicitly mention the importance of viticultural production in the Cretan economy, but archaeological discoveries, especially those dated from the Augustan period onward, imply that wine producing was probably the most important economic activity in Roman Crete. This is attested by the great number of Cretan amphorae found in numerous Mediterranean sites throughout the Roman Imperial period (Marangou 1999, 269–278). The quality of Cretan *passum*, probably



Fig. 15: Part of a Cretan wine amphora found in Caerleon, Wales. *LEG II AVG* is painted on the neck. On the shoulder is a contents label, 'best quality raisin wine'. 2nd century AD.

the most popular wine exported from Crete, can be deduced from inscriptions on amphorae found at such cities as Pompeii, Lyon, Athens, and Corinth which declared that they contained *vinum creticum excellens*. Indeed, by the first century AD, Campania was the largest consumer of Cretan wine (Gallimore 2016, 175). In *Natural History*, Book 14, Pliny describes the methods used to make *passum*: 'Cretan wine is made sweet by the grapes being left on the vine longer than usual to ripen in the sun, or else being ripened in boiling oil, after which they were gently beaten and pressed for their juice.' However, Martial gives us a different opinion; he states that Cretan *passum* was of mediocre quality and calls it 'the poor man's wine' (Martial 13.106). *Passum* seems to have been a popular type of wine in the Roman army, as Cretan amphorae of Dressel 43 type have been found not only around the Mediterranean but also in the more remote northern sites such as Caerleon in south Wales and Vindonissa in Switzerland (Williams 2003, 28; van den Berg 2012, 218–219) (Fig. 15).¹³

The trade of these five products was instrumental in making Crete one of the wealthiest regions of the empire. To give an idea of how wealthy Crete was, we only need to take into account Diodorus Siculus' reference, mentioned earlier, to the tribute that the islanders had to pay the Romans: 4,000 talents of silver per year, equivalent to half the sum of the tribute the Romans received from all of their eastern provinces combined. This was a huge sum and is a testament to the wealth the island had generated both before and during the Roman period. Thus, trade brought not only increased connectivity with other parts of the empire but also large amounts of wealth which, like in other parts of the Greek East, led to euergetic activities, both within the island but also outside of it. Note, however, that none of these economic activities had their beginnings in the Roman period; the five categories of products described above were all produced in and exported from the island long before the advent of Roman rule. Thus, Roman rule in Crete did not bring with it the introduction of new economic activities; what it brought was increased connectivity which allowed Cretan

products to be produced en masse and to be exported to other parts of the empire using a trading network that was more complex and reached further than ever before.

Finally, we need to consider the number of cities on the island. In the Roman period, there were not one hundred cities as imagined in the epic poetry of the eighth and seventh centuries BC, but rather about twenty-two (Figs. 16 and 17). The number had dwindled in the early Roman period due to synoecisms with other towns and the movement of upland communities to the coasts in order to profit from trade with both east and west (Kouremenos 2013). This is most evident in the movement of the population from Polyrrhenia, an upland city in western Crete, to the newly established coastal foundation of Kissamos beginning at the end of the first century BC and continuing well into the first century AD (Kouremenos 2015). Compared to the number of inland cities in the Hellenistic period, it is evident that many of the smaller towns in the interior that were built on the foothills of Mt. Ida ceased to exist in the

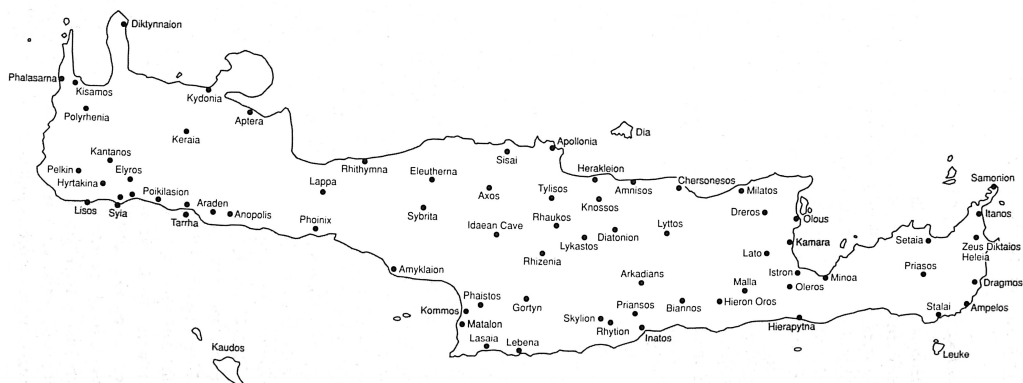


Fig. 16: Map of Hellenistic Crete with major cities (Chaniotis 2004).

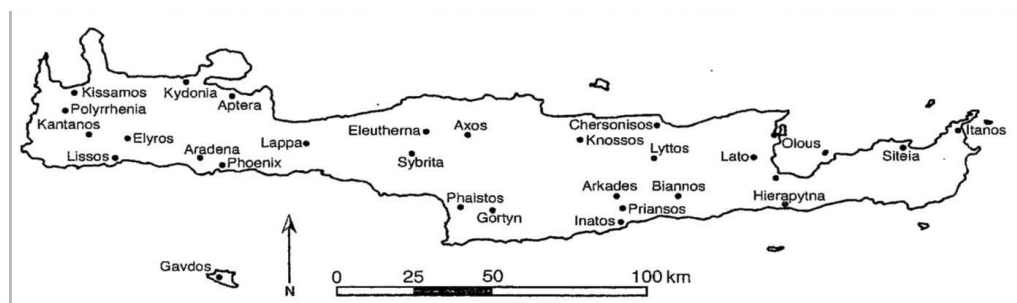


Fig. 17: Map of Roman Crete with major cities (Chaniotis 2004).

Roman period and nowhere is this more evident than in the area between Knossos and Gortyn, part of which was awarded to veterans from Capua in Italy by Octavian and was known thereafter as the ‘Capuan lands’ (Rigsby 1976, 316–318). Whether this was farmland that was owned by Italians living in the *colonia* of Knossos or the capital of Gortyn is difficult to ascertain in the absence of historical and epigraphic evidence, but what is likely is that the inhabitants of these small inland cities had moved to Knossos or Gortyn by the Roman period.

What brought about this movement from rural, upland areas to civic, coastal areas? In the Classical and Hellenistic periods, Crete was characterised by constant warfare between neighboring city states and a social system that favoured the communal and public over the individual and private. The military activities of the Cretans, which were at the heart of the social system in Cretan cities during pre-Roman times, could not be reconciled with Roman rule (Chaniotis 2008). The *syssitia* – the communal meals – which took place in the *andreia*, or men’s club houses, were abolished, and with them the fundamentals of the archaic social system that had existed in Crete for centuries up until the Roman conquest (Chaniotis 2008). The ownership of land was no longer confined to a class of privileged warrior-citizens and the legal and social discrimination of merchants and craftsmen disappeared (Chaniotis 2008). This major shift in the political and social order that arose as a result of the Roman conquest brought increased urbanism and the rise of maritime cities to the island, a trait which is observed in other large islands of the Mediterranean such as Cyprus and Sardinia (Gordon, Roppa in this volume). Although these two large islands did not share the Cretan social system before the advent of Roman rule, the movement from rural to urban, maritime areas was part of a wider trend that took place in many parts of the empire during the imperial period (see *e.g.*, Alcock 1993; Chaniotis 1999; de Ligt and Northwood 2008; Bowman and Wilson 2011; Kouremenos 2015).

In the Hellenistic period, large cities such as Knossos and Gortyn were constantly at war with one another and fought for control of the smaller cities in the interior and on the coast. By the Roman period, three major coastal cities had emerged – Kydonia, Hierapytna, and Kissamos – which dominated the island’s east – west trade route. Together with Gortyn, which was the seat of the Roman governor of *Creta et Cyrene*, they directed the island’s political affairs. Thus, even though the number of cities on the island decreased greatly after the advent of Roman rule, urbanisation, city size and population increased as a result of increased trading opportunities and connectivity with other areas of the empire.

Culture as financial capital

There was, of course, another important source of revenue for the inhabitants of Crete under Roman rule which played a significant role in defining and shaping the islanders’ insularity and identity in the Roman period and beyond. This was cultural capital,¹⁴ embodied by Crete’s historical and mythological past. Although Pausanias does not provide a description of Crete in his *Travels in Greece* – and it is not known whether

he ever visited the island – tourism was a major source of revenue for the Cretans during the Roman period as it is today. People across the empire were well-aware of myths that had taken place in Crete, with the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur in the labyrinth at Knossos appearing as a favourite theme in art all over the empire. Non-Cretans visiting Crete thus played an important role in defining Cretan identity by ascribing to the island mythical properties and glorifying its ancient past.

The Cretans took advantage of their mythological past by promoting various parts of the island as places with a deep history and as locations for healing. This cultural capital was, of course, utilised by many cities in the Greek provinces during the Roman period, especially from the second century AD onwards when cities all over the eastern provinces were rediscovering and/or re-inventing their ancient pasts (see especially Spawforth and Walker 1985 and 1986; Boatwright 2000; Doukellis 2007). While the examples of Athens and Sparta may be more well-known for historical reasons, Cretan cultural capital was mostly mythological and religious in nature. First and foremost, the island was known as the birthplace of Zeus. Both Mt. Ida in central Crete and Mt. Dykte in east Crete claimed to have been the birthplace of the king of the gods. The Sanctuary of Zeus on Mt. Ida was full of votive offerings and lamps, dedicated by tourists and worshipers of the god (Sapouna 1998) even before the advent of Roman rule. Lucian in *On Sacrifices* 10 emphasises that the Cretans not only maintain that Zeus was born among them but also point out his tomb; according to the writer, the irony is that people believed thunder and lightning came from the king of the gods when he himself lay buried in the soil of Crete according to the Cretans themselves.

Then, there was Crete as a place of healing, with the temple of Asclepius at Lebena in the south of the island serving as an important sanctuary for those who came to be cured of their ailments. As in every Asclepieion in the Greek world, an ill person would sleep in the temple and wait for a dream that would offer the cure for his or her ailment. Several visitors from Libya are attested epigraphically at Lebena (*ICret* 1), as well as the famous 1st century AD sage Apollonius of Tyana who, according to Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius* 4.34, visited Mt. Ida, Gortyn, and the temple of Asclepius at Lebena even though he did not suffer from any ailments.

And for the tourist who was a lover of Greek literature, Crete was the land of Homer's heroes: Diktys, Idomeneus and Myriones, who were later worshipped as heroes on the island and, much like Troy and Ithaca (see also Zoumbaki in this volume) attracted tourists who were admirers of the Homeric epics. A curious passage preserved on a papyrus fragment from Tebtunis attributed to the fourth-century AD writer Lucius Septimius describes the supposed tomb of the Cretan hero and author Diktys who fought in the Trojan War and is purported to have written a diary (*ephemeris*) of its events. Lucius Septimius states that:

after many centuries, the tomb of Diktys at Knossos collapsed with age. Then shepherds, wandering near the ruins, stumbled upon a little box skilfully enclosed in tin. Thinking it was treasure, they soon broke it open, but brought to light, instead of gold or some other

kind of wealth, books written on linden tablets. Their hopes thus frustrated, they took their find to Praxis, the owner of that place. Praxis had the books transliterated into the Attic alphabet and presented them to the Roman emperor Nero. The emperor rewarded him richly.

There has been some scholarly debate over the origin of the language that was being transliterated. The *ephegeris* states that these tablets were sent to Nero, who summoned experts that eventually identified the language of the inscriptions as Phoenician, although the preface to the Latin account of this story indicates that the language was Greek and that the text had merely to be transliterated from the Phoenician to the Greek alphabet (Stampolidis and Kotsonas 2006, 337–338). Forsdyke suggests that what may have been discovered in Knossos was a group of Linear B tablets, a type of Greek script that pre-dated the one used by later Greeks and Romans (Forsdyke 1956, 154–155; Stampolidis and Kotsonas 2006, 338). Whatever the case may be, what we can garner from this passage is that the tomb of Diktys, which, like the so-called tombs of other Homeric heroes such as those of Achilles and Patroclus at Troy, attracted the attention of visitors due to its mythological and literary connections.

Much of Crete's mythological past was incorporated into works of art displayed in houses, portable objects, and coins. In the case of the latter, individual Cretan cities promoted their identities by depicting mythological figures or legendary locations on the reverse of coins during the Roman period as was common in other parts of the Greek East. For example, coins of Gortyn often bear the image of Velchanos on the reverse, a tree god with a non-Greek name probably of Minoan origin, who was later associated with Zeus (Wroth 1885; Stefanakis 2002). Knossian coins depicted the labyrinth on the reverse while the Cretan Koinon minted coins depicting the local goddess Diktyinna nursing the infant Zeus (Wroth 1884; Stefanakis 1997).

Older Cretan symbols also appear in funerary stelae, jewellery, and portable objects such as lamps. Bull leaping scenes, which were prevalent in Minoan art, are depicted on a few lamps dated to the 2nd century AD. An example from the cave sanctuary of Melidoni in central Crete shows a bull leaping scene not unlike the scene depicted on a Minoan gold ring of the 15th century BC (Sapouna 2004), but in the Roman example, the bull leaper's back faces the bull (Figs. 18 and 19). Might this be an indication that bull leaping rituals continued into the Roman period on the island or that at least the memory of such events was kept alive long after the time of their flourishing? Possibly, but they may have equally been part of Roman athletic tradition rather than a continuation of an older Cretan tradition.

The double-axe, or *labrys*, is the most well-known symbol in Minoan material culture. Its importance is best summed up by Nilsson, who stated that 'of all religious symbols and symbols that appear in the Minoan civilisation, the double-axe is the most conspicuous, the real sign of Minoan religion and as omnipresent as the cross in Christianity and the crescent in Islam' (Nilsson 1927, 194). Its representation in several different contexts, from larnakes and mason's marks to pottery and miniature votives found in caves, among many others, is a testament to the pervasive appearance of the symbol all over the island. The *labrys* continued to be depicted in various



Fig. 18: Seal ring depicting a bull-leaping scene. Late Minoan. Archaeological Museum of Heraklion (Sakellarakis, 1992).

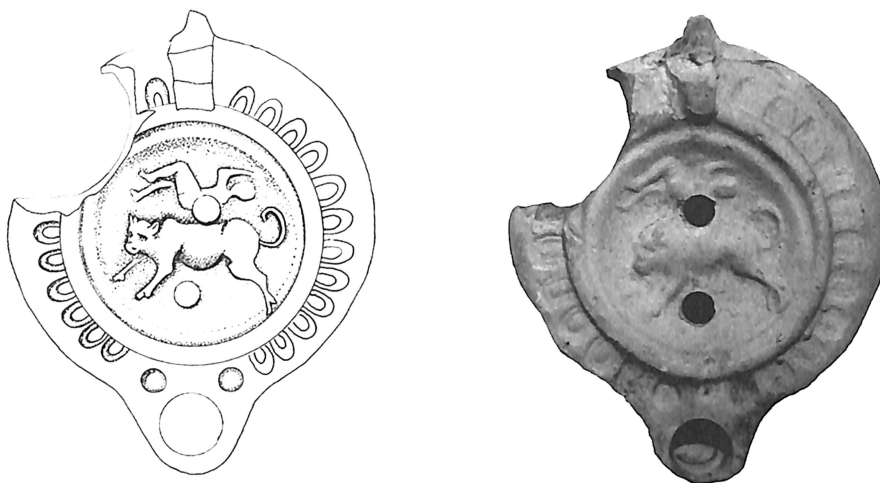


Fig. 19: Lamp depicting bull-leaping scene. 2nd century AD, from the Melidoni cave sanctuary (Sapouna, 2008).

contexts throughout the Roman period. It is during this time, in fact, that it seems to have acquired a variety of meanings, potentially leading to diverse interpretations (Kouremenos 2016). I will only focus on a few of these depictions which will shed light on the symbol's importance and close association with the island in the Roman period.

Two double-axes appear on a mosaic floor in the House of Phidias at Kissamos in north west Crete, which is dated to the 2nd to early 3rd century AD based on associated finds (Markoulaki 2009; Kouremenos 2016) (Fig. 20). Their inclusion in a mosaic which includes a *tabula ansata* that extends good luck to the owner of the house and depicts a central scene with a centaur attacking a panther raises a few questions: could



Fig. 20: Room 1 in the House of Phidias, Kissamos (Markoulaki 2009, 363).

the double-axes represent Phidias' desire to connect himself with the Cretan past? Certainly, the double-axes depicted in the reception room do not seem to fit in with the rest of the composition; they also do not appear to be closely associated with the subjects depicted in the other mosaics of the house. One might argue that their small size and positioning away from the entrance and the *tabula ansata* indicate that they might have served merely as decoration.¹⁵ What is important, however, is that this is the only depiction of a Cretan symbol found in a Roman house on the island and may be associated with antiquarianism on the part of the owner.

The double-axe also appears on at least two grave stelae (Kouremenos 2016) excavated in Tarrha, southwest Crete. The first commemorates Aitiros, son of Sosos (Guarducci 1935) and we see the double-axe held by a hand (Fig. 21). This juxtaposition raises a few questions: were the relatives who put up this grave stele aware of the double-axe's native Cretan origin and significance? During his lifetime, was Aitiros perhaps employed in an occupation where he regularly used the double-axe as a tool? The double-axe also appears underneath the name of the deceased in a sepulchral cippus from Tarrha (Fig. 22). Here, the deceased is Zopiros, son of Philolalos, and the double-axe carved beneath the inscription is free standing. Was Zopiros also



Fig. 21: Funerary stele depicting a hand holding a double-axe. From Tarrha, Crete. 1st-2nd century AD (Guarducci 1935, 307).



Fig. 22: Sketch of a sepulchral cippus sowing the double-axe. From Tarrha. Probably 2nd-3rd century (Guarducci 1935, 308).

associated with an occupation that used the double-axe as a tool, or should we look for an alternate meaning where it might be read as a protective symbol?

Is the presence of the double-axe in Roman Crete a sign of the continuity of an old Cretan symbol or was it a more generic symbol that was used on Crete as elsewhere within the empire? Judging by comparative material from other parts of the empire, I argue that while the Cretan origin of the double-axe may not have been entirely lost by the Roman period as myths set in Minoan Crete – especially that of Theseus, who was often depicted using a double-axe to slay the Minotaur in Greek and Roman art – are depicted on mosaics, lamps and other artifacts, the true meaning of the double-axe as a motif was far more multifaceted during the Roman period than it was during the Bronze Age, when it appears to have functioned mostly as a religious symbol (Briault 2007; Haysom 2010; Kouremenos 2016). In the post-Minoan period, the double-axe was an apotropaic symbol that was not necessarily associated with specific gods. Having undergone centuries of transformation in its meaning and significance, the double-axe may be described as a truly multifaceted symbol in the Roman period, as can be seen from examples from Crete and elsewhere. Its presence in various contexts across the empire may have given it multiple meanings depending on the contexts in which it appeared, but the constant emulation of various apotropaic symbols, including the

double-axe, in material culture in different parts of the empire was probably a result of the cultural phenomenon which I call emulative acculturation (Kouremenos 2013 and forthcoming). This implies the continuous imitation of specific traits among the upper classes which were gradually transmitted to the lower classes through emulation. Symbols tend to fall into such a category of imitated traits. The double-axe, which was a symbol used in the material culture of several peoples before the Roman period, was one of the most likely candidates to participate in this emulative acculturation, as it not only appears to have held multiple meanings both before and during the Roman period but was presumably also understood and replicated by a wide variety of the empire's population, both elite and non-elite. Thus, while one might argue that the double-axe was a multifaceted symbol long before the advent of Roman rule in Crete, it was only during the Roman period that we see it on a wider variety of artifacts and in a wider geographical space. That the inhabitants of the Roman empire understood the multiple meanings of the double-axe is a testament to the holistic nature of Roman rule.

Conclusion

This paper provided a general portrayal of Crete under Roman rule and defined how the island's geographic location, climate, economic activities and mythological/historical past contributed to the formation of Cretan identity *vis-à-vis* insularity. What defined Cretan insularity and identity during the Roman period?

First, the island's lucrative location on the east-west trade route which allowed for the production, consumption, and export of local products such as wine, olive oil, medicinal plants, purple dye, honey and wax. The wealth derived from these five groups of products allowed many Cretans of the Roman period to become elite land owners, a trait that was not possible in pre-Roman Crete, which was characterised by a communal social system that prohibited private ownership of land and ostentatious displays of wealth. Roman Crete was characterised by a new social order that was defined by the private ownership of land and the thriving of mercantile activities and trade rather than the archaic communal social order that had prevailed on the island for centuries.

The island's mythological past also contributed to the maintenance of Cretan identity; specifically, four themes dominated during the Roman period: Minos and his associates; the island as the birthplace of Zeus; as a place of healing, exemplified by the temple of Asclepius at Lebena; and as a land of heroes who served in the Trojan War (Diktys, Idomeneus and Miryones). Thus, Crete was seen by many outsiders as a place with a mythic past and these legends were 'sold' as a type of cultural capital which allowed the island to become a tourist attraction in the Roman period. Furthermore, depictions of older motifs such as the double-axe, the labyrinth, and bull-leaping scenes were also forms of culture capital that broadcast Cretan history and mythology both to the islanders themselves and to outsiders. All indications seem

to point to the fact that Crete was seen by outsiders as a wealthy island, and this is perhaps best denoted by the amount of tribute it paid to Rome annually and the fertility of its land and sea. Thus, current research suggests that Cretans living in the Roman period lived in a far different and more prosperous island than that of their ancestors. In the Roman period, even though Crete did not possess 100 cities as it did in Homer's day, the inhabitants of the 20 or so cities that flourished on the island enjoyed a level of prosperity that was on par with other affluent areas of the empire. In the absence of 'Cretan voices' to inform us how the Cretans viewed themselves, the material remains and the few surviving accounts of non-Cretan writers paint a picture of an island of abundance and prosperity but also of a population that exploited both the land, the sea, and its mythological past for profit. Thus, Cretan insularity and identity was, simultaneously, both distinctive and part of an integrated Roman network; the island functioned both as a microcosm within the empire and as part of a connected network of islands and continental cities in the wine-dark sea that was the Mediterranean heart of the Roman Empire.

Notes

- 1 Cyrene was colonised by Therans, partly aided by Cretans from the city of Itanos. Crete and Cyrene were united into a single province in c. 27 BC.
- 2 Kissamos is probably one of the few exceptions. See Kouremenos 2013.
- 3 This social system was also shared by the city-state of Sparta, which it had originally borrowed from Crete. See Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, 5.6; for scholarship on the subject, see Erickson 2011; Spawforth 2012.
- 4 Erickson 2011 describes the *syssitia* and the social structure that supported them at length, drawing attention to the ambiguity of the ancient sources and the fact that *andreia* – the spaces where *syssitia* took place – are notoriously difficult to identify in the archaeological record.
- 5 The work of the Cretan historian Dosiadas survives in fragments, Jacoby *FGH* 458. See Hansen 2005.
- 6 The passage from Ephorus is *FGHist* 70 F149.16. See also Hansen 2005, 310–311.
- 7 The earliest historical evidence for the existence of the double province is found in Cassius Dio 53.12 and Strabo 17.3.25. Both authors mention *Creta et Cyrene* when discussing events which occurred around 27 BC.
- 8 The second double province was *Lycia et Pamphylia*.
- 9 This is discussed further in Chevroliier 2012 and 2016.
- 10 The dowry is mentioned in Antony's supposed will which was seized by Augustus after the former's death. See Plutarch, *Life of Antony*.
- 11 See Wilson 2011 for estimates of the populations of cities in Cyrene.
- 12 For modern commentary on the alliance decree, see Gabrielsen 1997, 53–56; de Souza 1999, 80–84.
- 13 Dressel 43 type amphorae are characterised by an ovoid body, a neck with a bulging profile and peaked handles. According to Marangou-Lerat 1995, 84–49, the chief production centers of this type in Crete were at Heraklion, Tsoutsouros, and Dermatós.
- 14 Cultural capital may be defined as having assets that give one social mobility. These assets are both tangible and intangible, as with skills and music taste; but importantly, they are not usually related to income, net worth, or any financial measure. Cultural capital falls into three categories: **institutionalised** (education or specialised knowledge), **embodied** (personality, speech, skills), and **objectified** (clothes or other belongings).

- 15 A few examples of double-axes from Antioch, e.g., in the House of Menander and the House of the Boat of Psyche, do indeed seem to have a purely decorative function. See Levi 1941.

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