# THE BYZANTINE EFFLORESCENCE IN CRETE

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Crete during the third century through the eighth century A.D. experienced one of the most interesting and exciting periods in its entire history, a period during which one might assert that the largest number of fundamental changes took place. It is an easy period to define, since at both *termini* are periods of demonstrable depopulation and population shift, although it remains unclear, and controversial, whether these two phenomena were contributing causes or effects of the larger, sweeping changes.[1]

One might start with the developing *communis opinio*, for which there is still not unanimity, that the first Byzantine period (c. A.D. 410 - c. A.D. 802) has more continuity with the prior centuries than with those that follow.[2] Such a view is in essence a re-statement of the Pirenne[3] thesis that the fall of the West did not really occur until the beginning of the ninth century and Moslem expansion into Europe. Before then the case for continuity is stronger than the case for change, but in the following period the case for change is stronger than that for continuity.

Many of the categories of evidence cited by Pirenne for the West apply equally to Crete at this time: the dominant pottery styles, such as African Red Slip, Cypriot Red Slip, and Late Roman C are ones to be found throughout the eastern Mediterranean and are true successors to the previously dominant

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[1]The archaeological and historical evidence can sometimes conflict. At Knossos, for example, settlement abandonment seems to belong to the fourth and fifth centuries, while in church councils Knossos was represented in 431 and 451 but not again after that until 787.

[2]Paul Lemerle (*The Agrarian History of Byzantium from the Origins to the Twelfth Century*. Galway: Officina Typographica, 1979, 4) views the first Byzantine period as a natural extension of Diocletian's reforms, Basil Kalaïtzake (*H Krete kai Oi Sarakhnoi* [Athens: Ekdosis Rhonda, 1984] 21) views the major break as coming at A.D. 650, the on-set of the *Megale Sige*, and Ian Sanders (*Roman Crete* [Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1982] 1) places the break at A.D. 961.

[3]Henri Pirenne, *Mohammed and Charlemagne* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1939).



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Çandarli and Eastern Sigillata wares, which also can be traced in excavations on the island, although few shards with rouletting or stamps have been found.[4] These wares are much more ubiquitous and much more familiar than the medieval brown wares of the Byzantine *Megale Sige* which are still imperfectly understood and comparatively rare.

In terms of architecture the large, early basilica-style churches at places such as Knossos[5] and Chersonisos[6] and elsewhere are almost all datable to A.D. 450 - A.D. 550 and have more to do with the plan and scale of large temples than with the small cross and dome churches of the Second Byzantine Period. The trade routes and the types of commodities traded seem to have been the ones esteemed in earlier periods, although here the evidence is less plentiful; at any rate the disruption and re-focusing of trade in the Arab and later Franco-Venetian periods provide a strong contrast to earlier centuries.

This is not to deny or minimalize the extent or importance of changes which were taking place. Different names for civic and religious offices indicate that a conscious, irreversible break with the past was being orchestrated by individuals or groups.[7] The establishment of the patriarchates in the early fourth century is one clear sign among many of the separation of the East from the West[8] The separation of Crete and Cyrenaica into two separate provinces by Diocletion in A.D. 293 is another sign of the weakening of the central authority. The temporary abandonment of some settlements and the movement of others inland from coastal areas sometime around A.D. 350 - A.D. 450[9] would also

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[4]For example, sherds with extremely small limestone-plus-mica inclusions have been identified in several sectors of the Vrokastro survey region.

[5]Cp. W.H.C. Frend, "The Byzantine Basilica Church at Knossos", *BSA* 57 (1962) 186 - 238, and Sanders (1982) 105 - 107.

[6]Sanders (1982) 95 - 101.

[7] Kalaïzake (1984) 217. One thinks immediately of terms like *lampros*, and the indiscriminate use of superlatives; cp. Anastasius C. Bandy, "Early Christian Inscriptions of Crete", *Hesperia* 32 (1963) 227 - 47 and G.W.M. Harrison (1991) 318 - 19, 322, *et passim*, and, e.g., *IC IV* 284a and b for inflated expressions such as *aetthtous neikhtas*, *aionious tropeoucous*, and *despotas*.

[8] Alexis G.K. Sabbide, *Ta Cronia Schematopoises tou Buzantiou Athenas*; Basilopoulos, (1983), esp. 83 - 92, 114 - 18, and 126 - 29.

[9] Cp., e.gg., L.H. Sackett, "Post-Minoan Occupation above the Unexplored Mansion", *AR* 19 (1972/1973) 70, and Neil Roberts, "The Location and Environment of Knossos" *BSA* 74 (1979) 239, but, cf., B. Hayden *et al.* (1992) 334 n. 127 citing Sanders p. 31 who

seem to argue that the perception of the people regarding their society and security had changed for the first time since the suppression of the tumultuous conflicts of the Hellenistic period and the Roman civil wars.

As interesting as the cases for continuity and change may be, there are two problems which continue to baffle: first, there is what is sometimes referred to as the '*lost century*' in Cretan urbanization. There is mounting evidence of site abandonment, constriction, and dislocation in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, A.D., and at some places into the late fifth or even sixth centuries. This phenomenon afflicted large sites as well as small: one could cite the possible abandonment of Knossos, and the removal of the bishopric from Hierapetra to Episkopi. There remain twelve towns in Crete named Episkopi, or Skopi, that is, towns which were the sites of "bisphorics". Most are mere names, but for those for which documentation exists, the indications are that they were either founded during this troubled period or were expanded to the apparent detriment of coastal settlements. The plotting of such centers on a map easily shows that they belonged on the whole to the hinterland of the largest coastal cities such as Kissamos, Chania, Siteia, Kaloi Limenes/Lasaia.

The Arab corsairs of the seventh through the ninth centuries A.D. have thus been blamed unduly for site dislocation on the island, although the period A.D. 650/651 - A.D. 827 doubtless witnessed further upheavals. During this period there is no reason to doubt that the three coastal basilicas at Chersonisos and the main basilica of the island at Gortyn continued to flourish. The same might be said of the three basilicas at Ermiopolis on the extreme northeast of the island and other ones throughout the island. The evidence for this supposition is slight but significant: first, if Sanders (1982, 98) is correct that Basilica A at Chersonisos was converted to a mosque in the ninth century, it presumes that the basilica remained in use since Arabs tended to place mosques in active churches,[10] rather than in derelict buildings. More substantially, a monastic settlement thrived off-coast at Pseira until at least the eighth century where it surely would have been easy prey[11] and St. Andrew of Crete is credited in

argued that coastal settlements were not abandoned until after A.D. 550.

[10] There are two strong arguments against this view, however: (1) the Arabs in Crete were non-observant ones and (2) the early Moslems generally tried to co-exist peacefully with their non-Moslem subjects.

[11] Philip P. Betancourt and Costis Davaras, "Excavations at Pseira, 1985 and 1986",

hagiographies with new monastic foundations between A.D. 712 and A.D. 740.[12] These two seeming contradictory observations highlight both Arab interest in coastal areas and restrained treatment toward the local population.

Population reversal and cultural deterioration seem, rather, to belong to the period of the reigns of the last pagan and the first Christian emperors through the middle of the fifth century when the implosion of the infrastructure seems to have wrought more havoc than later incursions from outside. Concurrent with these political trends, one witnesses the rise of some regional pottery styles such as Gaulish `T.S. Grise' and Macedonian `T.S. Grise',[13] symptomatic of a general fragmentation. Again, although no one category of evidence is sufficiently complete in itself, one notes that the thin-walled ribbed cooking wares of the early imperial period are more numerous than shapes from the fourth and fifth centuries and fabrics from the late Roman period are numerically and qualitatively the best represented in survey and in excavation.

This leads to the second point: that without the slightest possibility of contradiction the second half of the fifth century through the seventh century and into the eighth was the period of greatest population and greatest wealth on Crete since Minoan times. The evidence for this statement is to be found throughout the island and is abundant. One might, however, profitably focus on eastern Crete where survey and excavation has been making available increasing amounts of highly reliable information. One might cite, for example, the mounting evidence of habitation on Pseira.[14] It is beyond doubt that the late Roman/early Byzantine era was the first period of sustained activity on Pseira since Minoan times. Since the island was waterless, the location was obviously

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*Hesperia* 57 (1988) 221, 224.

[12] In fact, the monasteries seem to have more to fear from the iconoclasts than from Arab Muslims; cp. J.J. Norwich (1988) 361. It has further been observed that many Christian communities at the boundaries between Byzantine and Moslem land opted for Arab suzanerity since the Moslem poll tax was less onerous than the Byzantine poll tax and corvées, and Arab interference in the observance of Christian rites, at least under the early caliphs, was less than by Christian clerics; cp. Martha Gregorios-Ioannidos, *Stratologia kai Eggeia Stratiotike Idioktesia sto Buzantio* (Thessaloniké: Ekdosis Banias, 1989) 18 - 21 (for Crete) and 91 - 93 (general conclusions).

[13] Hayes (1972) 402 - 13. The re-emphasis on local imitation wares in Crete might similarly belong to this period.

[14] Philip Betancourt and Costas Davaras, "Excavations at Pseira", *Hesperia* 57 (1988),

one chosen deliberately. Its exposed off-shore location also rules out the possibility that it was an inland refuge settlement like Kavousi during post-Minoan times.

These observations also apply to the neighboring town of Mokhlos. Although some Roman remains from the high empire have been found, including most recently a building with a mosaic, the period of greatest settlement seems to have started late in the second century and continued well into the sixth and seventh centuries. The walls of the fountain at the terminus of the aqueduct system have shards of the third-fourth centuries embedded in their fabric. There is thus *a priori* some reason to re-examine whether other public/commercial structures such as the fish tank, originally dated to the second century on the basis of comparison with the ones at Chersonisos,[15] might well belong to this period. Repairs to the aqueduct system and the density of shards on the surrounding hillsides indicate a strong population at this period. Renewed confidence at the beginning of the Byzantine period manifested itself particularly in intensive settlement and agricultural exploitation of the land. Two recent articles[16] have noted signs of working at two marble quarries in the Vrokastro - Siteia region, and a third quarry is now reported just outside the Vrokastro Survey region. The use of such stone is significant since the marble in each quarry is scarce and low in quality.

The Vrokastro Survey[17] has identified several local imitation wares which occur throughout the collection area. For the proto-Byzantine era, although one might be tempted to conclude that such local pottery is a sign of reduced importation due to economic depression, the high volume of imported fine wares and the high quality of the local imitation wares and imitation wares from the Cyclades would argue that these wares are a result of expansion.

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121 - 25, *et passim*.

[15] Sinclair Hood and John Leatham, "Sub-Marine Exploration in Crete, 1955", *BSA* 53 - 54 (1958 - 1959) 263 - 80.

[16] M.K. Durkin and D.J. Lister, "The Rods of Digenis: An Ancient Marble Quarry in Eastern Crete", *BSA* 78 (1983) 69 - 96, and G.W.M. Harrison, "A Roman Quarry in Eastern Crete", *Cretan Studies* 2 (1990) 247 - 51. Whether the working of any of these quarries extended into the fifth century and later remains problematic.

[17] George W.M. Harrison, "The Roman Pottery", in Barbara Hayden and Jennifer Moody, *The Vrokastro Survey Project*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum, 2000; in proofs.

Patterns of settlement as determined by pottery scatters within the Vrokastro Survey area are also significant. Sites which had been abandoned, or little used, since the end of the Minoan period have enough scatter to indicate strongly some settled activity. The lower zones especially of hillsides have yielded up enough imported fine ware fragments to suggest year-round farm structures, rather than seasonal habitations. The coastal areas, with the exceptionof Nisi Pandelimon, also would appear to have been the *loci* of more activity and more intensive activity than at any time since the Minoan period.[18]

The quantity and quality of objects of all classes, the high ratio of imported fine wares, and the intensity of activity in ll geographical zones indicate that the first Byzantine period reached an apogee of population and culture not attained again until re-union with Greece in the opening years of the twentieth century. Activity stretching from the coast past the *maquis* shows that the working of less productive land on slopes was not due to the fear of incursion or actual conquest but was the natural effect of a need to exploit marginal land to support an expanding population. The Byzantine efflorescence in Crete is even more remarkable since its occurrence was simultaneous with a series of earthquakes, ending with the major earthquake of A.D. 438. The island as a result tilted on a North - South axis leaving the West end of the island nearly ten meters higher[19] than before and the East end a corresponding ten meters lower. Many other societies even in the best of times could not have overcome such a series of cataclysms coming on the heels of centuries of social strife and cultural dislocation. That Crete embarked at this very moment upon a centuries' long period of prosperity must be judged one of the more remarkable events in history.

Just as Cretan prosperity in the first Byzantine period was linked to the rise of Constantinople so, too, the end of this period in Crete was tied to external events in Constantinople and in Egypt. The series of court intrigues and short, ineffectual reigns in Constantinople seem to have affected Crete adversely, although precisely how can only be surmised and cannot be precisely measured. The myth of Arab corsairs was exploded as long ago as 1961 in a paper

[18] Barbara Hayden, Jennifer A. Moody and Oliver Rackham, "The Vrokastro Survey Project 1986 - 1989: Research Design and Preliminary Results", *Hesperia* 61 (1992) 293 – 353.

[19] Y. and J. Thommeret, *et al.*, "Late Holocene Shoreline Changes and Seismo-tectonic Displacements in Western Crete", *Zeitschrift für Geomorphologie* 40 (1981) 146, 148.

circulated by Basil Kalaitzake,[20] yet it has shown a stubborn persistence. The Arab invaders of Crete were *Mozarabe*j (non-observant Moslems) expelled from Andalusia in Spain (A.D. 814), who fled to Egypt, and were subsequently expelled from Egypt (A.D. 827). Thus, rather than being part of a long range, strategic plan of conquest and occupation, these Moslems were double exiles in search of a home. Their occupation after A.D. 828 was always tenuous; although coins are known from eleven emirs, they are restricted to coastal cities. Nor did the occupation, regardless of its character, last long; after 133 years they were expelled by Nikephoras Phocas in A.D. 961, acting as general to the emperor in Constantinople.

Between A.D. 828 and A.D. 961 the Crete which Plato, Plutarch, and the other great figures of antiquity would have recognized, changed irreparably. The main cities on the island, such as Heraklion, Chania, Rethymnon, and Siteia, took on the general shape and primacy which they have preserved to this day, eclipsing the archbishopric of Gortyn and other formerly major settlements. These newly large cities drained population off from the surrounding countryside, leaving it underutilized. Much of the rest of the countryside also became feral, if the evidence of the Northeast can be generalized safely. The wares changed again with the introduction first of the Medieval brown wares and then true vitreous lead glazes. Architectural styles, private, public, and ecclesiastical, were likewise transformed. Society was re-organized on a different, post-Justinianic model, and the increasing presence of monasticism,[21] now based in Greek lands having lost its centers in Egypt and the Levant, changed the interrelation between lay and clerical communities, both socially and in the use of the land. In closing, the cistern[22] at Tholos might be taken as a metaphor for the despiritedness of an entire society: what had once been an imposing water storage facility and fountain for an entire, vibrant community was relegated to being the homestead of one of the few squatters in the vicinity.

[20] *Supra* n. 3.
[21] For monasteries, cp., Detorakis in Psilakis (1988) 5.
[22] Considered a granary by Donald Haggis; see "The Port of Tholos in Eastern Crete and the Role of a Roman Horreum along the Egyptian `Corn Route'", *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 15 (1996) 183 - 209.