[Review of: S. Wallace (2010) Ancient Crete: from successful collapse to democracy’s alternatives, twelfth to fifth centuries B.C]
Kotsonas, A.

Published in:
Bryn Mawr Classical Review

Citation for published version (APA):

Reviewed by Antonis Kotsonas, University of Amsterdam (a.kotsonas@uva.nl)

This book covers a field of research which has attracted substantial attention, particularly in the last fifteen years. Because of the plethora of new evidence and interpretations, a wide-ranging synthesis of the kind now offered by Saro Wallace was long overdue. The author is well-known for her work on the archaeology and economy of highland sites in Crete. Socio-economic perspectives pervade Wallace’s book, the scope of which, however, is much wider and covers the island’s culture from the 12th to the 5th century BC.

The 12th century is marked by upheavals which dismantled Crete’s palatial socio-political system. Wallace follows other scholars in using the term “collapse” for these developments, but also argues that the relatively fast recovery of complexity and stability on the island make the collapse “successful” (the alternative term “positive collapse”, found only in the title of Part Two, looks like a relic of an otherwise abandoned choice). Many will find the term “collapse” outdated; resilience is lately seen as a more accurate term to describe a society’s response to crisis. More serious problems pertain to Wallace’s choice of the 5th century as the lower end of her study. This choice deserved some explanation by the author, particularly since no notable cultural changes have been identified in 5th century Crete. The subtitle suggests that democracy lies behind the choice, but this never reached the island and, anyway, was not a standard type of sociopolitical organization in the Greek world, against which the “alternatives” of Wallace’s title are to be defined. Democracy is not referred to in the entire body of the book and the introduction or the epilogue do not convince me that the concept is particularly relevant to Crete.

Wallace’s main argument is that the collapse which Crete suffered in the 12th century involved a planned adjustment. Because of this, social complexity recovered on the island already in the 10th century, considerably earlier than in mainland Greece, and brought about a socio-political system which remained fairly stable thereafter. Notwithstanding the significance of the 12th century developments, the argument for their pervasive impact on the island’s later culture is deterministic. Communities in Crete changed considerably in the course of the Early Iron Age and this was, among other reasons, because of the island’s contacts with the Near East, which were occasionally deeper than the author’s economic approach entails.

Wallace’s study is not only diachronic, but also admirably inclusive. A wide range of topics in the archaeology of Crete receive a treatment which is characterized by a commendable balance between theory and fieldwork, the treatment of long-term social process and the study of particular contexts. Likewise, evidence from an impressively high number of sites is taken into account and this evidence is often compared to that from other Aegean regions. Nonetheless, the book’s overall approach lags behind current island archaeologies like those available for other Aegean islands or Cyprus. Symptomatic of processualism are the
evolutionary character of Wallace's narrative, the use of a single, island-wide model of socio-economic development, which is more of a straight-jacket, and the paucity of references to current concepts like insularity and Mediterraneanization. The feeling of an outdated viewpoint is enhanced by recurring references to works from the 1970s-1990s as recent or as representative of what scholars “still” think (p. 13, 24, 32, 41) and comes along with neglect for current study projects and fieldwork. Actually, literature stops in 2006.

A welcome contribution of Wallace is the treatment of settlement as “the spine and engine of the island’s social organization” (326). However, by placing emphasis on defensible upland sites and considering Knossos as “exceptional”, the author adheres to a model put forward more than seventy years ago.5 I personally find this model one-sided and believe that the lowland sites, which Wallace repeatedly calls exceptional/unrepresentative and discusses disproportionately briefly, stand for a different pattern of occupation which deserves more attention. This pattern involves extensive sites showing continuous habitation from the Bronze Age to the Early Iron Age and occupying the major lowlands of Crete: Knossos in the Herakleion basin, Phaistos in the Mesara and the overlooked site of Grivilia in the Mylopotamos plain. The sheer size of these sites (which has, in the case of Knossos, been fully documented by recent surface survey) raises questions over their regional role, which should have been tackled. I maintain that settlement patterns and historical trajectories in Early Iron Age Crete can only be understood in their complexity when defensible sites do not monopolize the discussion.

Because of the integration of archaeological and textual evidence she pursues, Wallace identifies her work as cultural history (5). Nonetheless, the two types of evidence receive no integrated analysis, with archaeology discussed in a holistic way in Parts Two to Four and literary sources and epigraphy treated highly selectively in the brief Part Five. Also, the author’s command over the actual evidence is occasionally unsatisfactory, with implications for the reliability of a work which will be extensively used by scholars and students alike. I note some misunderstandings, inaccuracies and factual errors as follows.

Wallace repeatedly mentions that the Knossos North Cemetery was established in the 12th century (24, 155, 158, 187), despite the fact that the publication she cites mentions the 11th. Mistakenly early dates are given for the Knossian temples of Demeter and Rhea (271, 328), while Kommos Temple A and the tripillar shrine are erroneously dated to the 8th century (208). The identification of the Amnissos cave with the Homeric cave of Eileithyia and the Psycho Cave with the mythical Dictaean Cave (319) is unsubstantiated and so is the recurrent argument that Crete exported subsistence goods during the 6th-5th centuries (227, 330, 346, 374). Children are thought to have been always excluded from cremations at Eleutherna (302), but this is disproved by the physical anthropological work Wallace herself cites. The Late Geometric date given for Eleutherna tomb A1K1 and the concentration of weapons it contained (300) is erroneous; the claim that Dreros was abandoned in the Archaic period (284, 331, 342) is debatable and so is the certainty for the abandonment of other poorly known sites; the argument for the resemblance of a burial rite manifested at Arkades with another documented at Carchemish (303) is confused. Sadly, some archaeological finds mentioned are non-existent; these include the “clusters of tombs” in Gortyn (297), the eastern imports in the Gortyn tholos (217), the stone sarcophagus at Rotasi (303) and the Phoenician inscription at Gavalomouri (212). Along come gross exaggerations: the “numerous” Attic and Cycladic imports to Phaistos and Gortyn (217); the “many” pre-firing inscriptions (227) and the “especially high concentrations” of faience figurines at Kommos (219); the “up to twenty-one burials dating from the late 9th century” in Arkades tomb R (290); the “large amount of Knossian ceramics at Arkades” (217). In this last case the author misinterprets her secondary source and overlooks the relevant reference from N. Coldstream’s Greek Geometric Pottery (London, 1968, 257), a classic work she has missed altogether. This omission is symptomatic of the author’s attitude towards studies of artifact classes.

Problems abound in the discussion of Cretan, particularly Knossian tombs. Wallace
misunderstands her sources about the dates of tombs containing Attic amphorae (207), the proposed identity of the occupant of tomb 186 (184) and the gender of the individuals interred in polychrome urns (300). Her conclusion that “no single very preeminent wealth or power groups are manifested” in Cretan burials of the 12th-11th century (162) overlooks the fact that Knossos tombs 200-202 “must be richer than any contemporary burials” in the Aegean of the time.6 The laborious statistical analysis of Knossian evidence (304-311) is poorly discussed and puts aside many of the vicissitudes that pertain to quantifying tomb material. It is indicative that three graphs quantify “wealth items”, yet the reader is never told what these items are. The actual figures are occasionally questionable: for example, the number of Knossian tombs starting at PG B-EG is considered to be higher than what Wallace thinks (310).7 One also wonders why the number of EG-LG pots of fig. 193 is lower than the number of pots assigned to the same phases in the more detailed fig. 194. Comprehension is obscured by occasional typos (fig. 193: LPG-PG B/RG and probably fig. 191: EPG-LPG instead of EPG-MPG). Lastly, throughout Chapters 15 and 30 the author mentions that the Knossian and other Cretan collective tombs were used by kin groups, barely explores any alternative interpretations and further uses this overarching assumption to construct complex arguments on the role of kinship. I have elsewhere called this assumption the greatest factoid in the archaeology of Early Iron Age Crete.8

Discussions of the popular subject of imports/imitations are wide-ranging. Wallace's treatment of the island's overseas contacts, nonetheless, occasionally reverts to notions of geographic determinism (9) and fails to grasp the variable degrees of Cretan insularity, noted already by Aristotle (Politics 1271b, 1272a-b). Chapter 24, on the Orientalizing, is unsatisfactory, and, despite emphasis on Egyptian(-izing) features, misses two volumes from the museum exhibition Crete-Egypt (Herakleion, 2000). Moreover, the treatment of Cypriot pottery imports and their local imitations is undermined by the use of the flawed term Cypro-Phoenician. Lastly, based on a vague reference, the author identifies the Cretan exports to Sicily as west Cretan (217, 369) and thus overlooks a much more reliable argument for the provenance of these vases from south central Crete.9

The treatment of textual and epigraphic evidence is inadequate. The stories of Etearchos and Ergoteles and the song of Hybrias are omitted, while the decision of the Cretans to abstain from the Persian Wars is not assessed. The Zakynthian interest in Kydonia (368) is a misreading of the ancient text, while dating the work of Konon in the 4th century (367) is erroneous. The suggestion for the development of port sites in Crete of the Early Archaic period (331-332) could have taken into account Pausanias III.2.7. By considering it “impossible to believe” that a defeat in war could lead to the temporary but drastic abandonment of a Cretan metropolis (328), Wallace overlooks the history of Lyktos. Further problems pertain to the discussion of the Dorian identity in Crete. Instead of tackling the issue by studying migration traditions, Wallace focuses on ancient references to the comparability of the polities of the Spartans and the Cretans. She therefore over-emphasizes the island's link to Sparta and underestimates a variety of other sources, including the single reference we have on the view of the allegedly colonized Cretans about migration myths (Pausanias VIII.53.4). Scholars may have additional reservations about Wallace's admittedly restrained reference to the role of Peloponnesian imports (366, 371) in the emergence of a Dorian identity in Crete. If, as Wallace has it (372-373), tangible trade links were behind the adoption of the island's dialect, the Cretans would have spoken Ionic, if not Phoenician.

More illustrations show landscapes than archaeological finds and images of landscapes from outside Crete are unnecessarily numerous. Several line-drawings are badly reproduced.

The bibliography is rich but avoids non-English scholarship. Major publications (including almost the entire monograph series for Syme Vianou), recent studies, even a book on Cretan settlements10 are overlooked. The spelling and accent of Greek titles is vandalized and, generally, the reference list has escaped any editing.

On the whole, the book is outdated and, in places, rich in misunderstandings and factual
errors, which, I fear, may be reproduced by non-specialists in the future. It is, however, useful and comprehensive and will stimulate much discussion.

Notes:


