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Crete in Transition: The Pottery Styles and Island History in the Archaic and Classical Periods


The long-standing and widespread interest in Crete’s Bronze Age has extended over the last few decades to the Early Iron Age and more recently to the Archaic and Classical periods. Both the author and the publisher (The American School of Classical Studies at Athens) of this volume are known for their contributions to this last development, which has challenged deeply rooted scholarly assumptions about the island’s historical period.

The relatively poor archaeological record of Crete for the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E. contrasts with the lavish material culture of earlier times; hence, this period has puzzled scholars, who have given it gloomy names. A range of dramatic scenarios to more nuanced interpretations have previously been put forward (discussed in ch. 1). Yet Erickson’s book stands out in combining a complex interpretative scheme with the publication of new evidence from various sites. Because of its scope, the book tackles an intriguing question: can fragmentary and nonfigurative pottery shed light on early Greek social and even political history? It can, says Erickson, provided it is carefully studied and contextualized.

Accordingly, chapters 3–8 contain a meticulous study, aiming to offer a ceramic chronology and typology for Crete of the sixth and fifth centuries. The method and approach (ch. 2) is unpretentiously traditional, but readers will appreciate enormously Erickson’s painstaking analysis of pottery profiles, his efforts for clarity (esp. in the tables), as well as his honesty in reminding them of the limitations that apply to his work and the tentative nature of some of his suggestions. The study covers local black-gloss pottery and imported ceramics. Because of the emphasis on the black gloss, which is explained by the state of the research (vii–viii, 23–5), the range of shapes discussed is not extensive and includes a variety of cups and, to a lesser extent, pouring vessels and lamps. The catalogue includes 549 entries of previously unpublished and mostly fragmentary material from Eleutherna, Knossos, Gortyn, Praisos, and from a few small sites in the Isthmus of Ierapetra, but Erickson’s analysis reveals his unique familiarity with a larger quantity and range of material across the island. Much of the material catalogued comes from surface surveys (east Crete) or from excavated surface layers (Eleutherna) and mixed assemblages (Gortyn and, to an extent, Knossos). Closed contexts, so important for a typological and chronological study, are currently only available for Knossos, pending the publication of stratified deposits from Dreros, Itanos, Kydonia, and especially Azoria.

Erickson’s typology and chronology is undoubtedly an invaluable yardstick for Cretan pottery studies. I think, however, the author should have engaged more closely with current ceramic methodologies, especially on fabrics. This would prevent, among other things, the apparent confusion between petrography and chemical analysis (32, 79, 87, 121). However, the discussion of Cretan fabrics is aptly supplemented by color pictures (although two are rather blurred). I would
also have expected the author to problematize the term “gloss” in light of many scholars’ preference for “glaze” (which he uses as a synonym for gloss) and the widespread use of the term “paint” for the coating which is seen on earlier pottery but is no different (i.e., less glossy) than the one that is occasionally found on some of the ceramics Erickson studies. There is also room for more uniformity in the naming of pottery types: I find that the “high-necked” cups of Eleutherna are similar to the “low-necked” cups of Knossos, whereas the Eleuthernian “low-necked” cups are close to the Knossian “bellied” cups. Also, readers would have been better served by the direct linking of Erickson’s Knossian and Eleuthernian types to established Early Iron Age types. A few of Erickson’s Eleuthernian low-necked cups look suspiciously close to a class of local cups dating ca. 800 B.C.E. (A. Kotsonas, The Archaeology of Tomb A1K1: The Early Iron Age Pottery [Athens 2008] 206). Lastly, one of the most diagnostic and widespread types Erickson identifies is a cup with stepped-profile underfoot, which he dates to the late sixth century on the basis of a small Knossian deposit. However, all 18 Knossian pieces he catalogues were found in deposits of (slightly) later date and the possibility that the production of these cups persisted longer should have been explored.

I think that Erickson’s approach would also benefit from a close, rather than a “macroscopic view” (xv) of the sites he discusses. For example, his discussion of the cemetery of Eleutherna overlooks the correspondence between the shift he identifies in the types of imported ceramics and the centrifugal pattern in the spatial distribution of the material, both from ca. 500 B.C.E. Likewise, the Lakonian krater from the excavations in 1929 he refers to (27) has not only been published, it had already stimulated a debate in the 1930s (references are collected in A. Kotsonas, “The Discovery of Eleutherna: From the Formation of the Modern Cretan State to Humphry Payne’s Excavations (1899–1929),” BSA 103 [2008] 289). In the case of Praisian pottery, dating is complicated by Erickson’s different interpretation for site 14, by contrast to that of Whitley (“Archaeology in Greece 2003–2004,” AR 50 [2004] 88), which is missed here. Another notable omission is a deposit from Gortyn dating ca. 600 B.C.E., published by Santaniello (“Produzione ceramica a Gortyna tra età orientalizzante e arcaica: I rinvenimenti dell’oikopedo SAIA,” ASAtene 82 [2004] 443–75).

In the remaining chapters, Erickson gradually moves from classifying pottery to discussing the history of Crete and contextualizing it within current discourses on archaic Greek society. In chapters 9 and 11, he documents successfully the intra-island circulation of ceramics and demonstrates that from the early sixth century, the island’s trade networks were reoriented from the eastern Mediterranean to the Peloponnesian. Commendably, discussion takes in a site-specific, regional, and island-wide scale and brings in other classes of clay and metal finds (but misses the evidence of imported transport amphoras). The thematic link between these two chapters makes the important, intervening chapter 10 appear intrusive. In this, the author provides detailed support to the general assumption that the record of most Cretan sites shows no hiatus during the period discussed, but rather a decrease in archaeological visibility. Exceptions include only Knossos and Prinias, which, he claims, were destroyed by the Gortynians early in the sixth century. This view is questionable. Leaving inscriptions aside, the archaeological record of sixth-century Gortyn is almost as poor as that of Knossos. Besides, as Erickson admits, Knossos has produced one of the extremely few pieces of monumental stone sculpture known from sixth-century Crete, and this dates from the middle of the period of the city’s supposed destruction (the missing reference is J. Whitley, “Archaeology in Greece 2002–2003,” AR 49 [2003] 81–2, fig. 134). The neat chronological alignment of events in Knossos and Prinias, moreover, is challenged by evidence in Prinias: La città arcaica sulla Patella (G. Rizza [Catania 2008] 298–302).

In chapters 10 and 11, Erickson entertains different possibilities for what he eventually concludes was a deliberate shift of many Cre tan communities toward a culture of austerity in the early sixth century. Similar arguments have gained popularity (e.g., S. Wallace, Ancient Crete: From Successful Collapse to Democracy’s Alternatives, Twelfth to Fifth Centuries BC [Cambridge and New York 2010] 327–38). Erickson (ch. 12) argues that the culture of austerity was institutionalized through the andreion and was most pervasive in central Crete. Instead of an epilogue, he postulates that this Cretan austerity was the model for the notorious Spartan austerity. This well-argued
assertion may not convince all classicists, but it will certainly raise discussion. The book closes with an extensive index, reflecting the wealth of information dealt with throughout.

Rich in data and interpretation, but traditional in method and approach, Erickson’s book will definitely serve the purpose of a standard reference work on the archaeology of Crete during the historical period. Not only has the author offered a working chronology and typology of archaic and classical Crete, he has convincingly demonstrated that the island’s sixth and fifth centuries are a “period of silence” for those who only care for loud tones.

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