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Plutarch and Plato's Cretan City

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In Plutarch's *Moralia* and *Vitae* which Donald A. Russell considered to be "among the formative books of western civilization," there are many references to, paraphrases of, and quotations from Plato's *Laws*.¹ They are almost ninety in number, and though some of these "quotations" are in the spurious *De musica*, most are in the genuine *Moralia* and *Vitae*.² Given their sheer number, all passages where Plutarch uses the *Laws* for his own literary and philosophical purposes, cannot be examined here. This study's goal is rather to give a synopsis of the importance that Plato's *Laws* and its Cretan setting had for Plutarch, and to consider sometimes overlooked aspects of his Platonism.

I. Plutarch and the Academic Discovery of Crete

In 1960 Glenn R. Morrow's *Plato's Cretan City* was published by Princeton University Press, and for a 1993 reprinting Charles H. Kahn wrote a foreword in which he hailed Morrow's work as a "landmark of Platonic scholarship" which has helped in understanding the *Laws* not as an utopia or sketch for an ideal *polis*, but as legislation for a "Cretan city with a definite location in time and space."³ Besides Morrow's insights into the *Laws* and the centrality of politics in Plato's philosophy, he also gave attention to Crete's significance for the Academy: Aristotle, for example, while still a member,

¹ Russell 1973, vii.

² For a list of quotations from the *Laws*, see Helmbold and O'Neil 1958 57-58; see also O'Neil's posthumous 2004, 456-8. Although *De musica* is a most valuable source for knowledge of ancient Greek music, Plutarch is not its author. See Ziegler ²1964, 179 [= *RE* 1951, 815-6].

³ Morrow 1993, xvii. Kahn's forward is a good summary and critique of Morrow's insights into the *Laws*.

may have gathered information for his now lost *Constitution of the Cretans*, and for Bk. II of his *Politics* with its comparison of Cretan and Spartan institutions.⁴ The *Minos*, if not written by Plato himself, probably had an Academic origin, and in it Crete's legendary king is defended against negative portrayals by Athenian dramatists. Morrow also observed that Academic interest in Crete's history was only "one phase of what has been called the 'discovery of Crete'" which began about the middle of the fourth century B.C.E.⁵ For example, Ephoros of Cyme whose histories were known to Plutarch, contributed to this discovery,⁶ but the *Laws* and *Minos* alone could have easily sparked a later Platonist's interest in Crete, an interest demonstrable from Plutarch's writings and adherence to the Academy some three hundred years after Plato's death ca. 347 B.C.E.

At the VII International Plutarch conference in Rethymnon, 2005, Jane Francis and George W. M. Harrison presented a study on "Plutarch's Crete" with attention to his personal knowledge of second century Greco-Roman Crete, and supporting archaeological evidence. In their collaborative work, mention was made of the *Minos*, but not of the *Laws*, a very important work for Plutarch's interest in Crete. They also gave brief attention to Plutarch's status as a priest of the Delphic Apollo, and noted that, according to the *Homeric Hymn to Pythian Apollo*, 388 ff. and 427 ff., the god himself first chose Cretans as his priests at Delphi. Quite possibly Plutarch thought himself connected to Crete by his Delphic priesthood. In any case, his admiration for the "divine" Plato's interest in Crete probably had as much influence on him as Delphi.⁷

As textual evidence that Plutarch visited Crete, Francis and Harrison referred to a few passages in the *Moralia*. But before turning to these, the possibility that Plutarch traveled to Crete in imitation of Plato, deserves an excursus. Such a journey, if made in the steps of a revered teacher, would not be unusual. After all, the Muslim *hadji* to Mecca or Christian pilgrimages to Jerusalem, are emblematic of the devotion disciples often have for a teacher. In any case, in *Plato's Cretan City*, Morrow examined the possibility that Plato visited Crete thereby getting firsthand knowledge of the island. But, as Morrow observes, there is no mention in the tradition about Plato's travels that he went to Crete.⁸ Moreover, Morrow further observed that Plato's knowledge of Crete could easily derive from written documents, Cretan mercenaries (archers, for example,

⁴ See Morrow 1993, 20.

⁵ Morrow 1993, 21.

⁶ On Ephoros' role in the "discovery of Crete," Morrow 1993, 21-2. For a list of Plutarch's references to and quotations from Ephoros, see Helmbold and O'Neil 1958, 27.

⁷ Plutarch calls Plato "divine" at *De capienda ex inimicis utilitate* 90C. At *Quaest. conv.* 700B Plato is lauded as a philosopher "pre-eminent in reputation and influence." Certainly the god Apollo and his oracle at Delphi had importance for Plato; see, for example, *Apol.* 20e f. where Socrates cites the oracle in his defense.

⁸ Morrow 1993, 25.

who participated in almost all late fifth-fourth century battles), merchants and travelers, especially philosophical visitors to the Academy.⁹

Given the lack of evidence for Plato's visit to Crete, it seems unlikely that a precedent was set for members of the middle Academy to which Plutarch belonged. Nonetheless, Plutarch could have journeyed to Crete, and the evidence Francis and Harrison use to support this claim, deserves careful scrutiny. One passage which they discuss is at *Bruta animalia ratione uti* 989E, a work of doubtful authenticity, and even if by Plutarch, hardly proves that he himself visited Crete. Gryllos, a fictional character, says to the renowned Odysseus: "then chancing upon you as I recall in Crete decked out festively in casual attire ..." The lines are in a dialogue sometimes described as a youthful *jeu d'esprit*, or as a satire in Menippean style.¹⁰ But whatever the dialogue's assessment, Gryllos' Epicurean sentiments hardly suggest that he was Plutarch's spokesman.¹¹ As Plutarch's anti-Epicurean treatises demonstrate, he was much opposed to the *horti porci*.

With a similar disregard for text and context, Francis and Harrison cite *De defectu oraculorum* 917B to prove that Plutarch spent "considerable time" on Crete. But whatever "considerable time" (*chronos sychnos*) means, it is Kleombrotos, the Spartan participant in the dialogue, who spent time on Crete after his return from Egypt and the Red Sea. To be sure, Kleombrotos is described as a "holy man" (*hieros aner*), much traveled, and interested in theological matters, a description which might apply to Plutarch. But there are problems in identifying Kleombrotos with Plutarch. First, a far better candidate in *De defectu* is Lamprias, Plutarch's brother, who narrates the dialogue. Second, Konrat Ziegler rightly considered Kleombrotos to be an historical person who belonged to Plutarch's "Freundeskreis."¹² But more important, at 426A-C Kleombrotos sides with Stoic beliefs on the existence and nature of *daimones*. And although he joins Ammonius, Plutarch's Athenian teacher, in rejecting Epicurean *eidola*, Kleombrotos is, as Daniel Babut well argued, essentially a Stoic.¹³ And given Plutarch's polemics against Stoicism, Kleombrotos seems to be no more Plutarch's spokesman than the fictional (Epicurean?) Gryllos in *Bruta animalia*.

II. Sources for Plutarch's Knowledge of Crete

Given his visit to Alexandria (*Quaestiones convivales* 678E), Plutarch could have stayed on Crete to or from his voyage to Egypt, but it seems odd that this is not mentioned

⁹ Morrow 1993, 26.

¹⁰ See, for example, Ziegler ²1964, 104-7 [= *RE* 1951, 740-3].

¹¹ Ziegler ²1964, 104 [= *RE* 1951, 740-1], correctly notes that "die gedanken, die gryllos äussert, sind zum Teil den Epikureern entlehnt, so vor allem die Einteilung der Begierden ... und die Definition der menschlichen Tapferkeit ...".

¹² Ziegler ²1964, 41 [= *RE* 1951, 677].

¹³ Babut 1969, 144 *et passim*.

in his extant works. Why would Plutarch have used the fictional Gryllos or the Spartan Kleombrotos as *porte-paroles* when he otherwise mentions most, if not all, of his travels? For example, he often refers to his Athenian visits, and at *Quaest. conv.* 628A even states that he became an adopted member of the *phyle* Leontis.¹⁴ At *Praecepta gerendae reipublicae* 861E Plutarch also reports that after his study in Athens, he returned to his native Chaironeia, and was entrusted with a mission to the proconsul of Achaia. And following in Plato's footsteps he traveled westward where his goal was not Syracuse, but Rome. And the importance of the imperial city in Plutarch's life and work is quite clear.¹⁵ As a priest of Apollo, Plutarch most likely traveled to Delphi with some frequency. That he visited the towns of his native Boeotia can be documented from his works. Why, then, is there no mention of a stay in Crete?

As suggested previously, had Plutarch visited Crete, it most likely occurred either before or after his stay in Alexandria which probably took place in his younger years. It was at Alexandria that Plutarch acquired his knowledge of Egyptian religious beliefs, and met Klea, a Priestess of Isis, to whom he dedicated his *De Iside et Osiride*. Plutarch's interest in Egypt was probably awakened by the works of the "divine" Plato,¹⁶ and further encouraged by Ammonius, his teacher in the Academy at Athens, and who hailed from Alexandria. It is also likely that Plato's works, especially the *Laws*, prompted Plutarch to write his *Life* of Lykourgos and to visit Sparta (see *Lyk.* 18.2). And as already mentioned, the *Laws* with Kleinias, its Cretan interlocutor, no doubt influenced Plutarch's interest in Crete. But just as there is no evidence that Plato ever journeyed to Crete, so there is none that Plutarch himself spent time there.

In brief, Plutarch may have visited Crete on his journey to and from Egypt, but the passages from *Bruta animalia* and *De defectu* cited by Francis and Harrison, are hardly proof. Even when at *Mulierum virtutes* 247D Plutarch mentions the Cretan towns of Chernisos and Lyttos, Francis and Harrison admit that there is no evidence that Plutarch ever visited these places. Lastly, Plutarch's many references to the Cretan customs and institutions, its flora and fauna, and its legends, seem to be no more firsthand than those of Plato before him. For example, when Plutarch discusses the Minotaur and labyrinth (*Thes.* 15-16), he mentions Philochoros, a famous 4th century attidographer, and Aristotle's lost *Constitution of Bottiaea*. According to Plutarch, both Philochoros and Aristotle agreed that Minos did not execute the Athenian youths sent to Crete: Philochoros reported that they were kept in a prison, while Aristotle believed

¹⁴ I am much indebted to Ziegler ²1964, 17-21 [= *RE* 1951, 653-7] who gives a fine survey of Plutarch's known "Reisen".

¹⁵ Jones 1971 remains an excellent study of Rome's influence on Plutarch.

¹⁶ At *De Is.* 354D Plutarch mentions Plato as one of the thinkers who visited Egypt, but Griffins (1970, 285) noted in Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* that there is no reason to think that this and reports by other ancient authors, belong to a time when "the Greeks had succumbed to Egyptomania".

that they were held in slavery. In the *Theseus* passage Plutarch also quotes a fragment from a lost play of Euripides, noting the hostility of Athenian dramatists toward Minos. This passage suggests that he drew from the *Minos* attributed to Plato. But his reference to Minos' war with Athens is quite similar to that of Plato's *Laws* 706a-d.

Another literary source from which Plutarch drew his knowledge of Crete is Antenor's *History of Crete*. It is mentioned only at *De Herodoti malignitate* 860B-C, and since the work is lost, it is idle to speculate on its content, or the extent to which Plutarch may have used it. There is further evidence that Plutarch had access to other written sources not named by him: for example, at *De sollertia animalium* 974D (cf. *Bruta animalia* 991E-F), there is a report about Cretan goats' ability to expel arrows (or arrowheads) from their bodies after eating dittany (*organum dictamnus*; see Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* 20.156). This and other reports in *De sollertia* seem taken from lost compendia, the remains of which are also found in Pliny's and Aelian's natural histories. And in his introduction to the *LCL De sollertia*, Helmbold observed that by reading Aelian, Pliny, and Plutarch "side by side", the impression often arises that they drew from the same sources.¹⁷

Besides written documents for his knowledge of Crete, Plutarch had many Greek and Roman friends: Kleombrotos, for example, belonged to his "Freundeskreis," and *Quaestiones convivales* provides good insights into how Plutarch and his learned friends shared information and discussed many topics, all the while stimulating Plutarch's inquisitive mind. For example, at *Quaest. conv.* 724C Praxiteles (identified at 675E as a "guide" or "interpreter" (*periegētēs*) of the Pythian games) reports on the different wreathes awarded at athletic contests, and the Cretan and Spartan sacrifice to Apollo "the Runner" (*Dromaios*). At 724C Plutarch's teacher Ammonius quotes Pindar (frg. 107, Snell) on the Cretan style of dancing. At 618B Plutarch's brother Lamprias mentions the quality of Cretan cypress. In brief, there is little doubt that Plutarch's numerous friends informed him about Crete.

III. Plato's Influence on Plutarch's Interest in Crete

Equally important, is the influence that Plato had on Plutarch's literary and philosophical activity, and the shadowy figure of Epimenides, the Cretan priest and prophet from Phaistos, deserves attention since he was much admired by Pythagoreans with whom Plato and later Plutarch had contact.¹⁸ Indeed, the earliest extant mention of Epimenides is at Plato's *Laws* 642d where the Cretan Kleinias remarks that in obedience to the Delphic oracle, Epimenides predicted to the Athenians ten years before the Persian Wars that the Persians would leave Hellas with more woes than they inflicted.

¹⁷ See the introduction to *De sollertia* in Cherniss and Helmbold 1968, 311.

¹⁸ See, for example, Kirk, Raven and Schofield ³1983, 227-9. To my knowledge there has been no comprehensive study of Epimenides.

Epimenides' association with the Delphic oracle is also mentioned at Plutarch's *De defectu* 409E where the Cretan prophet is said to have inquired about the story of eagles (or swans) flying to Delphi from opposite ends of the earth, thereby showing that Delphi was its center or navel (*omphalos*). At *Septem sapientium convivium* 157D Thales jests about Epimenides' good sense (*eu phronein*) in not wanting to grind his grain and cook it for himself. And at *Sol* 12.4 Epimenides is counted among the seven *sophoi* of Hellas by those who refused Periander a place in the list, the earliest reference to which is at Plato, *Prot.* 343a ff. It is also at *Sol* 12.4 that Epimenides, "beloved by the gods" (*theophilēs*), helps Solon with Athens' legislation and thus paves its way to justice. And at *Praecepta gerendae reipublicae* 820D Epimenides' purification of Athens is mentioned. Clearly Epimenides' importance for Plutarch can readily be traced back to the *Laws* and to the "discovery of Crete" by the Platonic Academy.

After this excursus on Epimenides, an even more detailed examination of Plutarch's knowledge of the *Laws* is in order. That Plutarch studied the *Laws* is suggested both by his many "quotations" from it, and by his mention of its title. There are two explicit references to the *Laws* in Plutarch's extant works. The first is at *Platonicae quaestiones* 1002C where Plutarch cites the *Laws* (898e) as proof that the human soul is "invisible and imperceptible to all the senses," a passage of importance for Plutarch's treatment of the soul as "intelligible" (*noētē*). The second explicit reference to the *Laws* is at *De sollertia* 965E where Aristotimos, probably a student of Plutarch, claims, in accord with Plato, that hunting land animals requires more bravery and skill than hunting aquatic (or sea) animals. Both this passage and that of *Plat. quaest.* strongly suggest that Plutarch not only knew the *Laws* well, but that it was also studied in his own school in Chaironeia.

IV. Plutarch and Plato's *Laws*

There are three passages in Plutarch's works where he cites Plato's *Laws* 715e-716a. All deserve special attention. The first passage is at *De exilio* 601D, an essay addressed by Plutarch to a friend exiled from Sardis (probably Menemachos who is the named recipient of *Praecepta gerendae reipublicae*).¹⁹ In the course of *De exilio*, Plutarch argues that the evil of exile exists only in human opinion (599D, 600D), and even if exile is truly an evil, friends, leisure, and wealth can mitigate it greatly (601F, 602A, 604D). Plutarch also develops a common theme of exile literature: the whole *kosmos* is our native land by nature. Wherever one is, there are the same four elements of earth, air, fire, and water and the same heavenly bodies of sun, moon, planets, and stars. Yet the *kosmos* has only one lord (*basileus*) and ruler (*archōn*), and in support of this conviction Plutarch quotes *Laws* 715e-716a:

¹⁹ See Ziegler ²1964, 42 [= *RE* 1951, 678].

god holding the beginning, middle, end of the universe, proceeds directly as is his nature, in his circuit; upon him follows Justice who visits with punishment those that fall short of the divine law.

This quote seems to be not only a theological reflection, but also a reminder to his exiled friend, and to Plutarch's other readers, many of whom were influential Romans, that Rome held sway over the then known world. Like the whole *kosmos* the *imperium Romanum* had only one *imperator* and lord (*basileus*). And despite Plutarch's occasional criticism of Roman customs and values, he sympathized with Rome and enjoyed the peace it brought.

That Plutarch considered the previous quotation from the *Laws* to have political as well as theological significance is further suggested by a likely reference to or paraphrase of it at *Ad principem ineruditum* 781F where he writes that god "proceeding in accordance with nature in his straight course, reaches his goal." This allusion to the *Laws* passage in *Ad princ. inerud.* occurs in a context where Plutarch asserts that it is neither probable nor fitting that god is, as "some philosophers say," mingled with matter or "things subject to countless necessities, chances, and changes."

That Plutarch thought of the Epicureans at *Ad princ. inerud.* 781F is strongly suggested by another verbatim "quotation" of *Laws* 715e-716a at *Adversus Colotem* 1124F, one of his several treatises against the Epicureans. Before Plutarch quotes the *Laws'* passage in *Adv. Col.*, he argues against the Epicurean Colotes that if teachings such as those of Parmenides and Plato are ignored, together with a society's laws and the government of rulers, humans will lead a very brutish life. And so against Colotes and his fellow Epicureans who "spit on excellence unless pleasure attends it," Plutarch quotes two fragments from lost Hellenic tragedies, and the passage from the *Laws* previously cited.

It is hardly a surprise that Plutarch's condemnation of the Epicureans and their disdain for political involvement accords with his own advocacy of monarchy: the ruler is the image (*eikōn*) of god who governs the *kosmos* (*Ad princ. inerud.* 780E), and at *De unius in respublica dominatione* 827B, Plutarch appeals to Plato in arguing that monarchy is the best form of government. Despite the incompleteness and uncertain authorship of *De unius*, it seems to express Plutarch's views on government found elsewhere in his political writings. As a Platonist of the early Roman empire, Plutarch could criticize the misconduct of emperors such as Nero (see *De sera numina vindicta* 567F ff.) while supporting the principle of monarchy itself.

The importance of Plato's *Laws* is not confined to the *Moralia*, and there is at least one example from the *Vitae* where the *Laws* influenced his thought. Both in *Lykourgos* 5.6 and in *Numa* 8.2 Plutarch uses the metaphor of the "feverish state" (*phlegmainousa polis*): the Spartan Lykourgos reforms the "feverish" kingship of his native *polis*, and Numa became king of Rome when it was still a "feverish state." Although this metaphor of a "feverish state" occurs in Plato's *Republic* at 372e, it seems more likely

that Plutarch thought of *Laws* 691e where there is discussion of the “feverish rule” (*archē phlegmainousa*) of Spartan Kings, a rule Lykourgos improved by instituting the *gerousia* of “council of elders.”

As Alan Wardman observed, the *Vitae* of Lykourgos and of Numa are “full of Platonist ideas.”²⁰ Plutarch praised both legislators for creating healthy conditions in Sparta and Rome, and clearly the importance that Lykourgos had for Plutarch can be traced to Plato’s *Laws*. Lykourgos was the author of Sparta’s laws and institutions, such as the *gerousia*, and at 704d (cf. 969b) Lykourgos is called *theios*, an adjective Plutarch used to describe Plato himself. Moreover, as Morrow observed in *Plato’s Cretan City*, Plato’s high regard for Sparta was closely tied to his admiration for Crete: at *Resp.* 544c Socrates cites the “Cretan and Spartan constitution” as an example of the best of “imperfect forms of government”. And not surprisingly in *Lykourgos* 4, Plutarch reports that the Spartans studied various forms of government while on Crete. And some centuries before Plutarch, Herodotus whose *Histories* were well known to him, reported that the proud Spartans believed that Lykourgos’ legislation was derived from Crete (Herod. 1.65). Even the shadowy Epimenides discussed earlier, was said to have written a poem on the Cretan constitution (*Diog. Laert.* 1.112), though his *Krētika* used by Diodoros is considered a later forgery.²¹ There is no evidence that Plutarch read it.

Some conclusions are in order. First, given the almost ninety “quotations” of Plato’s *Laws* and its Cretan setting, there seems no doubt that this work and the fourth century “discovery of Crete” in the Academy, contributed much to Plutarch’s interest in *Krētika*. Second, there is no specific evidence that Plutarch himself visited Crete, and much, if not all, of his knowledge about the island seems derived from earlier writers and from his numerous Hellenic and Roman friends. Third, Plutarch was obviously interested in the Spartan law-giver Lykourgos who studied forms of government while in Crete, and to a lesser extent in Epimenides, the Cretan religious teacher who was associated with Delphi. Plutarch himself was a priest of the Delphic Apollo who first chose Cretans to be his priests. But ultimately it is “Plato’s Cretan City” (to borrow the title of Glenn R. Morrow’s 1960 study of the *Laws*) which helps to understand Plutarch’s many references to Crete.

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²⁰ Wardman 1974, 207.

²¹ Morrow 1993, 21.

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Ο Πλούταρχος και η Κρητική Πολιτεία του Πλάτωνα

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Περίληψη

Το παρόν άρθρο εξετάζει το ενδιαφέρον του Πλουτάρχου για την Κρήτη –ενδιαφέρον που πιστοποιείται από τις συχνές αναφορές του Χαιρωνέα στα κρητικά πράγματα (ανθρώπους, θεσμούς, φυσική ιστορία κτλ.)– και καταλήγει στο συμπέρασμα ότι το ενδιαφέρον αυτό προέρχεται κυρίως από την επίδραση που άσκησαν στον Πλούταρχο οι *Νόμοι* του Πλάτωνα.

Ειδικότερα, απορρίπτεται η πρόσφατη άποψη ότι ο Πλούταρχος είχε επισκεφθεί την Κρήτη, εντοπίζονται διά βραχέων οι πηγές της κρητογνωσίας του Χαιρωνέα, και υποστηρίζεται ότι, τόσο στους *Βίους* όσο και στα *Ηθικά*, η πολιτική κοσμοθεωρία του Πλουτάρχου είναι σημαντικά επηρεασμένη από τους πλατωνικούς *Νόμους*.