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NOTES ON THE JEWS OF GORTYNA AND CRETE

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A copy of the well-known proclamation of the Roman Senate in support of the Jews which was dispatched to various countries and cities at the request of Simon Maccabee was also addressed to Gortyna;¹⁾ it is thus assumed by scholars of Hellenistic Judaism that one of the oldest Jewish communities in the Greek world was established in this important Cretan city by the middle of the second century B.C.²⁾ and it is indeed highly probable that Jews had settled there in the Hellenistic Age. In fact, as a result of Alexander's epoch-making eastern campaigns Crete found itself strategically located at the center of the Mediterranean Empires of the Diadochi and Epigoni³⁾ and, as a stepping stone to the Aegean and Greece and a leading exporter of mercenary soldiers, drew the attention of the Great Hellenistic powers and of the Ptolemies in particular who virtually converted it into an Egyptian protectorates.⁴⁾ The close association of Crete with Ptolemaic Egypt, that leading center of Hellenistic Judaism, is noteworthy. Cretan mercenaries, administrators and colonists flocked into Egypt,⁵⁾ while the Ptolemaic presence in Crete is attested not only in the establishment of an Egyptian naval base and garrison at Itanos, but throughout the island. Egyptian ties with Gortyna, whose harbors on the southern coast of the island faced the African continent, were especially close and durable. Strabo informs us that Ptolemy Philopator had become involved in the construction of Gortynian fortifications⁶⁾ and numerous inscriptions and monuments manifest the wide extent of the Egyptian influence in the city: a list of native Egyptian priests, soldiers or ambassadors,⁷⁾ an inscription of a Ptolemaic soldier,⁸⁾ the temples of Isis and Sarapis, the

1) I Macc. 15.23. Other Greek cities mentioned are Sparta, Sicyon and the island of Cyprus.

2) See e.g. Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (New York, 1970), p.291 and cf. *Encyclopedia Judaica*, s.v. Crete.

3) H. van Effenterre, *La Crète et le monde grec de Platon à Polybe* (Paris, 1948), p.114.

4) The Egyptian occupation of the Cretan city of Itanos and the influence of the Ptolemies in Crete generally are discussed in S.Spyridakis, *Ptolemaic Itanos and Hellenistic Crete* (Berkeley, 1970).

5) The vast majority of Cretans overseas are found in Egypt where they served the Ptolemies in various capacities. See S.Spyridakis, "Cretan Soldiers Overseas: A Prosopography," *Κρητολογία* 12-13 (1981) pp.4-83.

6) Strabo, 10.478.

7) I.Cret., IV,195b.

8) I.Cret., IV,215c.

statues of Anubis,⁹⁾ etc. It is likely, then, that the vibrant Jewish community of Egypt which played such a vital role in Ptolemaic society and culture,¹⁰⁾ also reached this important outpost of the Empire at this time. The statement of the author of the Sibylline Oracles which attests that by 140 B.C. the entire land and sea was "full of Jews"¹¹⁾ certainly cannot exempt Crete with its central location in the eastern Mediterranean. Besides, the Alexandrian sage Philo Judaeus informs us that Crete was among the countries with a large Jewish population by the early years of the Roman Empire.¹²⁾

Gortyna, which served as the seat of the Cretan Concilium provinciae after the conquest of Crete by Caecilius Metellus¹³⁾ and the capital of the Senatorial province of Crete and Cyrene after 27 A.D.¹⁴⁾ now became an important provincial administrative center and its association with Cyrenaica naturally explains the further increase of the Hebrew population of the island as implied in the ancient sources.¹⁵⁾ We may, then, assume that the Jewish population of the island in Hellenistic and Roman times was centered in Gortyna and that the Jews of ancient Crete came mostly¹⁶⁾ from Egypt and

9) See M.Guarducci's discussion of the Iseum and Serapeum of Gortyna in IC, p.10; also two studies by G.Oliverio, "Scoperta del santuario del divinita egizie in Gortina," Ann.Scuola Atene I (1914), p.376f. and "Sanctuario delle divinita egizie in Gortina" Ann.Scuola Atene II (1915), p.309f. Also Regina Salditt-Trappmann, *Tempel der ägyptischen Götter in Griechenland* (Leiden 1970) 54-66.

10) For the role of the Egyptian Jews in administration, the military etc., see Aryeh Kasher, *The Jews in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt: The Struggle for Equal Rights* (Tübingen, 1985).

11) Or.Sib. 3.271.

12) Philo, *Leg. ad Gaium*, 282.

13) M.Van der Mijnsbrugge, *The Cretan Koinon* (New York, 1931), p.72. During the war Metellus had destroyed Cnossus, the traditional antagonist of Gortyna; henceforth, Gortyna enjoyed an unchallenged supremacy on the island.

14) Strabo, 17.3.25; Dio Cassius, 53.12.4. During the early years of the Empire an imperial mint was established in Gortyna. Cf. S.Spyridakis, *Ptolemaic Itanos and Hellenistic Crete*, p.87 and I.F.Sanders, *Roman Crete* (Warminster, 1982) p.5. For a brief discussion of Roman Gortyna see L.Pernier, "Gortina, capitale della provincia Cretae et Cyrenarum", *Atene e Roma*. 18 (1915), p.59f.

15) The residence of Cretan Jews in Jerusalem is attested in the New Testament (Acts 2:11) while Josephus married in Rome a woman belonging to a Cretan Jewish family (*Life*, 427). The spread of Cretan Jews as far as Jerusalem and Rome, the centers of their spiritual and temporal worlds respectively, provide good evidence for the vitality of their Cretan community at this time.

16) We should not ignore, however, the possible settlement in Crete of Jews taken prisoners during the Hasmonean revolt Cretan mercenaries in Seleucid service had fought in Palestine and Crete was one of the leading centers of piracy and the slave trade in the eastern Mediterranean throughout the Hellenistic Age. In fact, the mention in the *Suda* (s.v.) of a Δούλων, which is traced back to the Hellenistic local Cretan historian Sosic-

Cyrenaica.

The continuous existence of a Jewish community on the island in late antiquity is attested in three Cretan inscriptions. One text, unfortunately rather enigmatic, reads (I.Cret. IV 509):

-]υρικατυρωθε·[-
 -]·ιερευ Μωσῆ ἄρχω[-
 -]ήκαα ἐν πόνοις --
 -]οις σωτηρίαν --

Line one could be restored κ]υρι Κατύρω Θεο[δῶ-]/[ρο]υ or Θεο[δού]/[λο]υ?

κ]υρι (=κυρίω), nom. κύρις is most likely the epithet of respect prefixed to a man's name, comparable to modern Greek κύρ, feminine κυρά and not the vocative κύριε, an invocation to God. Line two probably has three dative forms as well, i.e. ἱερεῦ (= ἱερεῖ), Μωσῆ and ἄρχων[τι] (= ἄρχον[τι]).

Line three could be a nominative of the participle [ζητ]ήκαα or second person aorist singular [ἐζήτ]ηκαα, although the supplement [ζητ] is uncertain. Line four may be read [πολλ]οῖς, but this supplement is also questionable.

This sepulchral? inscription which was found at Hagioi Deka, in the region of ancient Gortyna, is dated in the fifth century A.D. Halbherr and Guarducci considered it to be Christian and this view was recently revived by Nystrom¹⁷⁾ who further speculated that the stone was dedicated by a certain Satyros and commemorates the death of a Christian priest named Moses. A.Bandy, on the other hand, reads line three [ζητ]ήκαα(ι) and sees in the text the possible commemoration of the death of two individuals, a priest Satyros, son of Theodoulos and Moses, the head of a synagogue "who sought salvation with many toils." Bandy, however, rightly classifies this inscription as Jewish on the ground that the customary Christian vocabulary and phraseology employed in Cretan sepulchral epigraphic texts is entirely absent from this document.¹⁸⁾ It should be further noted that, although the taking of biblical names by Christian priests and bishops was and is a common practice, the rendition of the Hebrew name Moses by the formal ecclesiastical Greek Μωϋσῆς (not Μωσῆς) should be expected in the case of its adoption by a Christian priest in this inscription.

B. (I.Cret. I, v, 17 p.12 "from the area of Arcades")

rates, most likely refers to one of the slave markets of the island. See S. Spyridakis, Ptolemaic Itanos and Hellenistic Crete, p.39, n.162 and P.Brulé, La piraterie crétoise hellénistique (Paris, 1978), p.25. Two inscriptions from Delphi (Corp.Inscr.Jud. nos. 709, 710, cf. 711) dated c. 170-157 B.C. which reveal the emancipation of Jewish slaves, possibly prisoners of war (Tcherikover, Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews, p.291) suggest that Crete could have also received some Jewish war prisoners-slaves at this time.

17) "Inscr. Cret. IV, 509: An Ancient Christian Priest?" ZPE 50 (1983), p.122.

18) A.Bandy, The Greek Christian Inscriptions of Crete (Athens, 1970), p.140.

Ἰώσηφος
 Θεοδώρου
 Ἰούδα τῷ υ-
 ἰῶ αὐτοῦ
 5 (μ)νείας χάρι-
 ν· ἐτῶν ᾧ.

This clearly legible sepulchral stele (note, however, the cutting λc instead of μ in line five) is definitely Jewish as the Hebrew names Ἰώσηφος and Ἰούδαc indicate. The inscription which is dated by Guarducci in the third or fourth century A.D. documents the presence of Jews in the region of ancient Arcades (modern Kassanoi, 43.5 kilometers south-east of Heraklion). It is noteworthy that the stele was found in an area of Kassanoi now called ἐβροί (= ἐβραῖοι), the reputed site of a Jewish cemetery.¹⁹⁾ Do the ancient Jewish inscription of Arcades and the modern Hebrew toponym suggest the existence of a long-lived Jewish community in this central region of Crete?

C.

Σοφία Γορτυνί-
 α πρεσβυτέρα,
 κὲ ἀρχικυναγώ-
 γισσα Κισάμου ἔν
 5 θα. Μνήμη δικέας
 ἵc ἐῶνα. Ἀμήν

This sepulchral plaque,²⁰⁾ dated by Robert²¹⁾ in the fourth or fifth century A.D. was found at Kastelli Kisamou, on the isolated westernmost region of the island and marks the grave of a certain Sophia who is identified as an ἀρχικυναγώγισσα, i.e. a leader of the synagogue or the wife of the "head of the synagogue" (ἀρχικυνάγωγος). This document is surprising since it reveals the existence of a Jewish community in a remote part of the island where it should be least expected. Moreover, Sophia is identified as a native of Gortyna (Γορτυνία), thus providing us with another proof of the existence of a Jewish community in that important city in late antiquity.

One can only speculate why Sophia left Gortyna, the metropolis of the island, to settle in faraway Kisamos in the fifth century A.D., a time that perhaps coincides with the reign of Theodosius II (408-50),²²⁾ the Eastern

19) Bandy, op.cit., p.142.

20) Bandy, op.cit., pp.142-3.

21) L.Robert, REG 77 (1964), pp.215-16.

22) For the religious policies of this Emperor see especially J.W.Parkes, *The Conflict of the Church and the Synagogue: a study in the origins of antisemitism* (New York, 1974).

Roman Emperor who severely oppressed the Jews of Crete. Could Sophia's emigration to obscure, remote Kisamos²³⁾ from the administrative center of Gortyna, represent an attempt to escape this oppression? The establishment of a Jewish synagogue in the distant region of Kisamos may well be a direct consequence of this official persecution.

The Cretan epigraphic sources of late antiquity clearly point to Gortyna as the metropolis of the Hebrew community of the island since two of the three extant Jewish inscriptions of this period are directly related to this city and the third, found at Kassanoi, also comes from the central area of Crete where Gortyna was located. As a matter of fact, the Jewish presence in the region of Gortyna can be traced down to the years of Venetian rule, long after the ancient Greco-Roman city had ceased to exist, when the Jews of Castel Nuovo, on a peak of a steep hill to the west of the defunct city, were massacred during the Greek rebellion of 1364.²⁴⁾

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23) Kisamos is mentioned by Hierocles in late antiquity (Synecd. 650.13), when it served as an episcopal seat (Notitiae Graecae episcop. 3.450; 10.561). Cf. also Geographus Ray. 5.21.

24) For the Jews in Venetian Crete see especially C.Roth, *History of the Jews in Venice* (New York, 1930), pp.297f., and Zvi Ankori, "Jews and the Jewish Community in the History of Medieval Crete," *Πεπραγμένα τοῦ Β' Διεθνoῦς Κρητολογικοῦ Συνεδρίου III* (Athens, 1968), pp.312-67 and the older work of S.Xanthudides, "Οἱ Ἑβραῖοι ἐν Κρήτῃ ἐπὶ Ἑνετοκρατίας" *Kretike Stoa II* (1909), pp.203-25.