

Abstract

Violence and Polis Formation on Crete in the Age of Hoplite Warfare, 700-400 BCE

by

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This dissertation presents a new understanding of organized violence, or warfare, on the Greek island of Crete in the Archaic and Classical periods and explores how violence impacted the development of some of the earliest Greek city-states, or poleis. At a crossroads between the Aegean and the rest of the Mediterranean, Crete has the earliest Greek law codes and some of the earliest pieces of the hoplite panoply. However, the relationship between these two developments, war and politics, has never been explored in depth. In part, the hesitancy of the academy is due to the hoplite orthodoxy and a narrow reading of our literary sources. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, scholars have begun to challenge and dismantle these entrenched paradigms. The evidence for violence on Crete between 700 and 400 BCE, what Anthony Snodgrass describes as the Age of Hoplite Warfare, remained immense and disjointed, across many different subfields. To address this complexity, I collected, managed, and studied this evidence using a digital database. Through a detailed analysis of the archaeological, historical, literary, epigraphic, and artistic data, I develop a new model for Greek warfare, propose a new way to bridge the conflicting narratives in our evidence, and trace the history of Cretan warfare over the Archaic and Classical periods.

Through network analysis and statistical modeling, the database for violence on Crete illustrates that Cretan warfare was a collection of beliefs and practices, a series of ideologies. Rather surprisingly, there is no evidence for combatants or real battles on Crete until the very end of this period and a plethora of evidence for wealthy warrior elites. This evidence presents two remarkably different types of combat styles and military practices embedded within two different archaeological contexts – extra-urban versus urban sanctuaries. A third ideology of violence emerged once poleis began to institutionalize ancient warfare in the late sixth and fifth centuries BCE.

All three ideologies of violence promoted certain world views about warriorhood, masculinity, and eliteness both on and off the battlefield. In extra-urban ritual spaces, warriors practiced a collaborative style of warfare in which every warrior, regardless of their political

affiliation, was seen as an equal. These warriors had lighter equipment, omphalos-type shields, and were depicted working together against a common natural or mythological enemy. Artists illustrated these characters with the shield-as-body motif – their shields completely obstructed their torsos, leaving the viewer with the impression that they were inhuman shield people with arms, legs, weapons, and heads. These warriors were identity-less and nonanatomic, meaning that they had no indicators of biological sex such as genitalia or facial hair.

I refer to the ideology evidenced at extra-urban sanctuaries as the “ideology of camaraderie” and argue that the anonymity of warriorhood was tied to the isolation and inaccessibility of extra-urban sanctuaries themselves. Many of these ritual spaces were high in the mountains, far from any urban infrastructure, and participating in rituals within these spaces would have cost a certain amount of starting capital. If someone could afford to travel to an extra-urban sanctuary, make a dedication, and participate in the seasonal rituals, then they were welcome to consider themselves part of this nonanatomic warrior elite.

Warfare in urban ritual spaces, on the other hand, was heavy, exclusive, and individualistic. Urban warriors advertised their personal wealth and prowess in defeating other urban warriors. Their armor celebrated their male anatomic features, especially their torsos and groins. They claimed to be independent juggernauts, and covered themselves with encumbering armor that would have obstructed their mobility, sight, and hearing. To actually fight in this way, they needed to rely on a team of attendants and supporters, but the art in urban spaces never depicts these lower-class individuals. According to the urban ideology of violence, warfare was only accessible to elites.

This highly competitive ideology of violence emerges in our evidence alongside the earliest poleis. Elites, it seems, used organized violence as a means to establish and enforce strict social hierarchies between elites and non-elites. This system used combat as a means to forge positive bonds with non-elites by targeting other elites and celebrating their defeat. In the urban sanctuaries, however, elite warriors excluded non-elites and portrayed violence as an elite-only activity, thereby forging positive bonds with other privileged elites who already had access to these limited ritual spaces. Urban warfare, therefore, was tied to the social functioning of the earliest poleis and created a delicate system whereby elites used inter-elite competition and violence to maintain their privileged status.

Moreover, these elites appear to have navigated both the extra-urban and urban ideologies simultaneously. Although we might expect these ideologies to be at odds, they seem to have complimented each other and even appear in mortuary contexts side-by-side. The consistent thread in both urban and extra-urban spaces was that organized violence was an elite-only activity: only elites could afford the regular pilgrimage to extra-urban spaces and only elites could afford the full bronze armor panoply. I argue that elites monopolized violence both within and beyond their poleis to gatekeep membership into their elite group, what many scholars call the *andreion* and Gunnar Seelentag has recently described as a cartel. They set the entry cost of warriorhood extremely high to maintain control over their communities and retain a monopoly over violence. Although elites could present themselves as egalitarian in extra-urban spaces, they

celebrated their martial skill within their polis to prove that they deserved to be in the elite cartel. Through this cartel, they crafted predatory laws that guaranteed their privileged positions within the community and elicited consent for the continuation of this system from non-elites.

However, the invention of coinage and the economic intensification of the island in the late sixth century BCE led to the gradual institutionalization of elite violence. This process was piecemeal and inconsistent, but several poleis evidently sought to preserve their economic and military security. Elites were enlisted to protect their poleis, and poleis began to control how elites dedicated their war booty, which had become a focal point for elite competition within the urban space. This seems to be an attempt on behalf of the community to direct the economic benefits of organized violence towards sanctuaries that the polis could control and draw from during economic emergencies, rather than distant sanctuaries beyond their reach. This institutionalization of war booty created the third and final system of organized violence that emerges in our evidence in these periods.

Cretan poleis never attempted to control how or where elites committed organized violence. Indeed, the gradual institutionalization of violence follows the ideological trajectory of the earlier systems. But by the late fifth century BCE, Cretan warfare was not a financially beneficial practice for individual warriors because in some cases, all the war booty was seized by the polis. Yet our Athenian sources report that Cretans were particularly focused on collecting war booty and eager to fight for profit. Within the history of the Cretan ideologies of violence, this inconsistency makes sense: for Cretan elites, the accumulation of wealth through violence was the best way to achieve social recognition and prove belonging within elite groups. Rather than a means to impose political will, Cretan warfare was an important avenue for elite competition through the accumulation of war booty.

The ideological history of Cretan warfare and its role in the formation of ancient poleis has dramatic implications for our understanding of violence and politics in ancient Greece. The Weberian model of the ancient city-state requires reassessment, as the earliest Cretan poleis seem not to have had a monopoly over the legitimate use of force. Indeed, Cretan elites monopolized violence, and the institutionalization of organized violence was extremely patchwork. Moreover, Cretan warriors had a dramatic impact on mainland Greek communities. In the late fifth and early fourth centuries BCE, elite Cretan warriors fought alongside the Athenians, Spartans, and Persians as highly organized, reliable, and adaptable warriors. They had an outsized influence in ancient conflicts because their socio-political systems incentivized the leisured class to pursue martial success and war booty by conflating eliteness and warriorhood. The success of the Cretans in the armies of the Athenians and Spartans seems to have contributed to the widespread adoption of professional military groups within Greece. Half a century later, Alexander the Great would use an army of professional forces to conquer Persia. The ideologies of violence on Crete are important to this story because they explain why Cretan elites were so committed to organized violence, emphasize the political power of warriorhood within Greek poleis, and illustrate how ancient warfare could directly impact the history of the eastern Mediterranean more broadly.