

Circus Factions in Sixth-Century Crete

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AMONG the numerous epigraphic remains of the Cretan City of Gortyn, a sixth-century inscription merits the attention of students of late antiquity and Byzantium:

✱Νίκα ἡ τύχ[η
Πρασίνων
[-----]
καὶ Ἰωάννη[ς].

The inscription was found in the vicinity of the praetorium of the city and was first identified by F. Halbherr, the well-known Italian epigrapher who had pioneered archaeological research in Crete. M. Guarducci, a student of Halbherr, published it in her monumental edition of the Cretan inscriptions and dated it in the sixth century.¹ The importance of this document, which provides the only evidence for the existence of circus factions in Crete, has hitherto gone unnoticed.

Apparently, the rallying cry, *Νίκα* ‘vanquish’, figures at the top of the inscription, which hailed the important faction of the *Prasinoi* (‘Greens’) and two of their charioteers—Ioannes and a colleague whose anonymity is the result of the mutilated state of the letters of line 3.

Gortyn, which had become the seat of the Cretan *Concilium provinciae* after the conquest of the island by Metellus² and the capital of the senatorial province of Crete and Cyrene in 27 B.C.,³ had not lost its importance in the sixth century. During the reign of Justinian,

¹ *Inscriptiones Creticae* IV (Rome 1950) 513.

² M. Van der Mijnsbrugge, *The Cretan Koinon* (New York 1931) 72. Q. Metellus, the conqueror of Crete, destroyed Cnossus, the traditional Cretan antagonist of Gortyn. Cnossus became a Roman colony and was officially designated as *Colonia Julia Nobilis Cnosus*. Henceforth, Gortyn enjoyed an unchallenged supremacy on the island.

³ Strabo 17.3.25; Cassius Dio 53.12.4. During the early years of the Empire an imperial mint was established at Gortyn. The Roman coins of this period are discussed in N. Svoronos, *Numismatique de la Crète ancienne* (Macon 1890) 337f.

Hierocles states, the city was the *metropolis*⁴ of Crete and, consequently, the most important of the twenty-two cities of the island.

The inscription under consideration not only bestows credence to the statement of Hierocles, since the life of the city was modelled after that of Constantinople, but encourages a number of interesting assumptions worthy of scholarly investigation by students concerned with this period of Near Eastern history.

As it is widely known, historians today hold the view that the circus factions of the late Empire represent *inter alia* religious, political and class interests.⁵ In the sixth century the faction of the Greens was associated with the lower strata of society⁶ and the heretical Monophysite forces which opposed the orthodox Byzantine aristocracy. In view of these observations, would it be reasonable to assume that Monophysitism had found adherents among the populace of Crete which, in turn, would point to the fact that the heresy was not confined to the eastern provinces of the Empire but had penetrated even its European territories?

Furthermore, since the Greens of Constantinople had constituted the nucleus of the anti-Justinian forces during the Nika revolt, is it reasonable to suspect that their Gortynian confrères followed the same policy and expressed similar anti-government tendencies? If this interpretation is correct, the historian may argue that popular discontent in sixth-century Byzantium was not limited to the capital city and the restless eastern provinces but was extended to the Aegean area, if not beyond.

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⁴ *Synecd.* 649.5.

⁵ G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* (Oxford 1956) 61f; E. Stein, *Histoire du Bas-Empire I* (Bruges 1949) 436.

⁶ A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire I* (Madison 1964) 155.