

# EPIMENIDES OF CRETE: Some Notes on his Life, Works and the Verse «Κρηῆτες ἀεὶ ψεύσται»\*

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## SUMMARY

*This paper analyzes some thoughts regarding Epimenides' life and works in the light of the literary fragments and testimonies which have been preserved. The Cretan priest, healer, purifier and prophet was attributed by the ancients qualities of a superhuman being. This is probably because of his very early and unusually long life and due to the ancient belief that his homeland, Crete, was a sacred place. Epimenides is known through his epic poetry, mythological works and local histories of Crete. He was also viewed by later sources as the author of the controversial saying «Cretans are ever liars». Here, an examination of various interpretations of this verse is presented.*

Epimenides is the best known of all the ancient local historians of Crete. The large number of his fragments, preserved by later writers, demonstrate his popularity as an author of Cretan affairs. But another,

\* This article is based upon my dissertation *The Historians of Ancient Crete: A Study in Regional Historiography* (Ph. D. dissertation, University of California, 1988). It is dedicated to my parents with gratitude.

perhaps stronger, factor could also explain Epimenides' reputation: his miraculous life and career.

One might wonder why more fragments of Epimenides' writings remain in existence than of others' who wrote about the history of ancient Crete<sup>1</sup>. Time is often cruel to the literary or archaeological documents of the past, and this is true in the case of Epimenides and other historians. It is reasonable, however, to argue that the existence of more *fragmenta* and *testimonia* about Epimenides and his work is closely related to his extraordinary life as a seer, religious teacher, purifier, and literary figure.

Epimenides is presented in ancient sources as a man with qualities that usually accompany mythical or even divine figures. He was reputed to have lived an unusually long life, and to have slept for many years, during which time he acquired cathartic and other miraculous powers. There has always been a tendency to mythologize or idealize individuals to a higher level than the human sphere, if they lived in a remote age and if their career seemed to be one that indicated a superhuman nature.

This attitude of ancient authors towards Epimenides is related to the prevailing view about Crete –the homeland of this religious man<sup>2</sup>– as the place where cathartic rites originated<sup>3</sup>. Furthermore, the island was regarded by Cretans and Greeks in general as the birthplace of the Greek pagan pantheon, and especially of Zeus, the father of gods and men<sup>4</sup>. The sacredness of Crete, thus, was naturally extended to certain charismatic figures like Epimenides, who was said to be able to perform religious rites in order to purify<sup>5</sup> or expiate a polluted area or even to prophesy future events<sup>6</sup>. To the ancients, Epimenides played an active role in such religious trends. He was an important link between the sacred island –where

<sup>1</sup> The historians of Ancient Crete are: Dosiadas, Echemenes, Sosikrates, Xenion, Laosthenidas, Antenor, Petellidas, Deinarchos, Pyrgion. They all wrote *Κρητικά*, that is, local histories of Crete. The preserved fragments of these histories are analyzed in my dissertation. For a collection of the historians' fragments, see F. Jacoby's monumental work *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker* (Berlin, 1923).

<sup>2</sup> Diog. Laert. 1.109.

<sup>3</sup> Diod. 5.77.3.

<sup>4</sup> Diod. 5.74.4; 5.72.4; 5.72.5.

<sup>5</sup> Diog. L. 1.110; Arist. *'Αθην. Πολ.* 1.2.1.

<sup>6</sup> Diog. L. 1.114.

a dream was believed to have transformed him into a seer<sup>7</sup>—and Greece proper when the latter, acknowledging his capacities, sought assistance from him to resolve problems of many kinds<sup>8</sup>.

Diogenes Laertius, the major authority on Epimenides' life, describes the Athenian request of the Cretan priest to cleanse the city from the *κυλώνειον ἄγος*<sup>9</sup>. The murder of Cylon's followers by the Alcmaeonids was interpreted by the ancients as the cause of the plague<sup>10</sup>. In his *Life of Solon*<sup>11</sup> Plutarch stresses the need for the purification of Athens according to the advice of seers. Epimenides was called for, because he rather than Periander was considered by some the seventh Wise Man<sup>12</sup>. His reputation among the people as a man *θεοφιλῆς καὶ σοφὸς περὶ τὰ θεῖα τὴν ἐνθουσιαστικὴν καὶ τελεστικὴν σοφίαν* justifies the Athenian preference of him over other purifiers<sup>13</sup>. Neither Herodotus<sup>14</sup> nor Thucydides<sup>15</sup> mentions Epimenides' name or his visit to Athens. According to Jacoby<sup>16</sup>, perhaps it was the intention of the two historians to conceal the expiatory action, since both of them defended the Alcmaeonid party, that of the murderers.

Although it is a fact that Epimenides came to Athens in order to purify it from the *κυλώνειον ἄγος*<sup>17</sup>, there are conflicting views with res-

<sup>7</sup> *FGrH* III B 457 T4f Ders. ebd. p. 439. S. Marinatos offers an enlightening theory about the Cretan caves functioning as religious academies. He explains Epimenides' sleep by arguing that Epimenides actually spent his life in a Cretan cave learning from a priest «τὰ ἐκεῖ θεολογούμενα», the theological doctrines of Cretan religion, which were taught there: «The Cult of the Cretan Caves» in *Review of Religion* 5(1940-41) 123-136.

<sup>8</sup> *FGrH* III B 457 T4e: *Schol. Clem. 1.1.* p. 305, 3 Stahlin: οὗτος Κρήης μὲν ἦν τὸ γένος, ἱερεὺς Διὸς καὶ Ῥέας, [καὶ] καθαίρειν ἐπαγγελλόμενος παντὸς οὐτινοσοῦν βλαπτικοῦ, εἴτε περὶ σῶμα εἴτε περὶ ψυχὴν, τελεταῖς τισι καὶ τὸ αἴτιον εἰπεῖν... ἦν δὲ Κρήης τῷ γένει καὶ σοφώτατος.

<sup>9</sup> Diog. L. 1.110; Plut. *Sol.* 12.9.

<sup>10</sup> Diog. L. 1.110.

<sup>11</sup> Plut. *Sol.* 12.6.

<sup>12</sup> Plut. *Sol.* 12.7.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> 5.71.

<sup>15</sup> I. 126, III-XII.

<sup>16</sup> *Atthis*, p. 186.

<sup>17</sup> *FGrH* III B 457 T4e: *Schol. Clem. 1.1.* p. 305,3 Stahlin:-- οὗτος ἐκάθηρε τὰς Ἀθήνας.

pect to the exact year of his arrival to the city of Athens<sup>18</sup> or even to the reason for his trip<sup>19</sup>. According to Plato, Epimenides came to Athens ten years before the Persian Wars, in 500 B.C.<sup>20</sup> Aristotle, on the other hand, places Epimenides' purification a generation later than Cylon's coup, and this indirect reference seems to be true<sup>21</sup>.

One can understand why there are controversies around Epimenides' life and career. There is the question concerning the exact period of his life because of the early times<sup>22</sup> in which he lived. A sound factor for the diversity of views on Epimenides' time might relate to his long lifespan. Diogenes Laertius writes that, according to Phlegon, the Cretan seer lived 157 years<sup>23</sup>. For the Cretans his lifespan was 199 years, whereas Xenophanes of Colophon mentions 154<sup>24</sup>. Of course, the great number of years which Epimenides is said to have lived indicates that he was a rare individual. It is said that Epimenides' fifty-seven-year sleep in a cave transformed him into a figure with prophetic and cathartic powers<sup>25</sup>. Pausanias<sup>26</sup> speaks of Epimenides' sleep occurring in his fortieth year. But even if there is no

<sup>18</sup> Diog. L. 1,110; Suidas s.v. 'Επιμενίδης; Arist. 'Αθην. Πολ. 4.1.

<sup>19</sup> Diog. L. 1.110; Plut. *Sol.* 12; Arist. 'Αθην. Πολ. 1; cf. Pl. *Leg.* I.642 D.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> 'Αθην. Πολ. 1: Μύρωνος, καθ' ἱερῶν ὁμόσαντες ἀριστίνδην. καταγνωσθέντος δὲ τοῦ ἄγους, αὐτοὶ μὲν ἐκ τῶν τάφων ἐξεβλήθησαν, τὸ δὲ γένος αὐτῶν ἔφυγεν ἀειφυγίαν. 'Επιμενίδης δ' ὁ Κρήτης ἐπὶ τούτοις ἐκάθηρε τὴν πόλιν. P. J. RHODES (*A Commentary on the Aristotelian Athenaiōn Politeia* (1981) p. 84) explains that «Cylon's coup must be placed in one of the Olympic years between his victory in 640/39 and Draco's legislation in 621/0», thus the purification, which for Aristotle took place a generation later, occurred probably c. 600 B.C. This date is plausible especially when considering Rhodes' remark that Epimenides seemed to be «connected with Delphi before the Sacred War» (p. 83). The date of the war in early sixth century makes Aristotle's date for the cleansing from the *agos* more acceptable than Plato's. Plutarch follows the Aristotelian tradition, as he probably used the *Athenian Constitution: Sol.* 12. See also Rhodes, pp. 55-56, 118.

<sup>22</sup> Suidas s.v. 'Επιμενίδης... μὲν ὀλυμπ.(604/1) γηραιὸς ᾧν; Diog. L. 1.110: ὀλυμπιάδι τεσσαρακοστῇ ἔκτῃ, (596/3); Arist. 'Αθηναίων Πολ. 4.1: μετὰ δὲ ταῦτα χρόνου τινός οὐ πολλοῦ διελθόντος,... Δράκων τοὺς θεσμοὺς ἔθηκεν. Pl. *Leg.* I. 642 D.

<sup>23</sup> Diog. L. 1.111.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Diog. L. 1.109. Expressing scepticism about Epimenides' long sleep is a natural reaction. However, Marinatos' argument that the alleged sleep probably corresponds to Epimenides' theological education in a cave constitutes a reasonable interpretation of the testimony: Marinatos, «Cult of Cretan Caves», *RR* 5 (1940-41) 123-136.

<sup>26</sup> 1.14.4.

agreement about the date of his sleep his miraculous capacities made him *θεοφιλέστατον* among the Greeks<sup>27</sup>. His reputation as a religious person who was divinely inspired by a dream<sup>28</sup> was spread to Greece to such a degree that Epimenides was held in high esteem along with other extraordinary men like Empedocles of Acragas and Abaris the Hyperborean<sup>29</sup>.

In relation to Epimenides' sleep, moreover, Huxley offers an interesting interpretation of the fragment in which the Cretan seer considers himself a descendant of the Moon<sup>30</sup>. Epimenides who slept in a cave for many years<sup>31</sup> may have viewed himself as another Endymion<sup>32</sup>, who was put to eternal sleep by Zeus because he had fallen in love with Hera<sup>33</sup>.

According to some, Epimenides did not sleep; he is viewed as *ἀσχολούμενος* *περὶ ῥιζοτομίαν*<sup>34</sup>. This might be in accordance with his role as a healer, especially if it is taken into account that plant roots were used as medication by Asclepius<sup>35</sup>.

Edelstein's collection of the testimonies of Asclepius constitutes a valuable source for an appreciation of the art of divination and healing in antiquity<sup>36</sup>. The work offers sufficient evidence to account indirectly for the knowledge of medicinal plants among wise men like Epimenides. This evidence is strong in suggesting a long ancient healing tradition in the Greek world, based upon the usage of herbs.

<sup>27</sup> Diog. L. 1.110

<sup>28</sup> Max. Tyr. *Diss.* 10 p. 110 Hobein:... *ἐν Δικταίου Διὸς τῷ ἄντρῳ κείμενος ὕπνῳ βαθεῖ ἔτη συχνά, ὄναρ ἔφη ἐντυχεῖν αὐτὸς θεοῖς καὶ θεῶν Λόγοις καὶ Ἀληθείᾳ καὶ Δίκῃ. Ibid.: Ders. ebd. 38 p. 439:...Κρής ἀνήρ ὄνομα Ἐπιμενίδης, οὐδὲ οὗτος ἔσχεν εἰπεῖν αὐτῷ διδάσκαλον, ἀλλ' ἦν μὲν δεινὸς τὰ θεῖα... δεινὸς δὲ ἦν ταῦτα οὐ μαθὼν, ἀλλ' ὕπνον αὐτῷ διηγείτο μακρὸν καὶ ὄνειρον διδάσκαλον.*

<sup>29</sup> Iamblichus, *Vit. Pyth.* 135.

<sup>30</sup> G.L. HUXLEY, *Greek Epic Poetry from Eumelos to Panyassis* (Cambridge, 1969), p. 83.

<sup>31</sup> Paus. 1.14.4; Diog. L. 1.109.

<sup>32</sup> HUXLEY, *GEP*, *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *FGrH* III B 457 F10.

<sup>34</sup> Diog. L. 1.112.

<sup>35</sup> Diod. Sic. 5.74.6: *Ἀπόλλωνος δὲ καὶ Κορωνίδος Ἀσκληπιὸν γεννηθέντα καὶ πολλὰ παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς τῶν εἰς ἰατρικὴν μαθόντα, προσεξευρεῖν... καὶ ῥιζῶν δυνάμεις...*

<sup>36</sup> E.J. EDELSTEIN AND L. EDELSTEIN, *Asclepius: A Collection and Interpretation of the Testimonies*, I & II (Baltimore, 1945).

Epimenides was a *μάντις* and a healer, and, to the ancients, these two vocations were closely connected<sup>37</sup>. We should emphasize Epimenides' knowledge of herbs and their medicinal value. A testimony from Ps. Galenus informs us that *πρὸ δὲ Ἀσκληπιοῦ τέχνη μὲν ἰατρικὴ οὕτω ἦν ἐν ἀνθρώποις, ἐμπειρίαν δὲ τινα οἱ παλαιοὶ εἶχον φαρμάκων καὶ βοτανῶν, ὅσα παρ' Ἑλλήσι Χείρων ὁ κένταυρος ἠπίστατο καὶ οἱ ὑπὸ τούτου παιδευθέντες ἤρωες, ὅσα τε εἰς Ἀρισταίον καὶ Μελάμποδα καὶ Πολύειδον ἀναφέρεται*<sup>38</sup>. Epimenides' reputation as a seer and sage and his long life enable us to appreciate his expertise in plants and herbs, and their healing qualities.

On the other hand, Epimenides' usage of herbs in medicine is parallel to that by Asclepius<sup>39</sup>. Moreover, there is evidence in Pliny on the authorship of a book on plants by Pythagoras<sup>40</sup>. Can this testimony not be linked with the encounter of Epimenides and Pythagoras upon the latter's visit to Crete and his initiation into Zeus Cretagenes' cult in the Idaean cave?<sup>41</sup> It is very probable that Pythagoras gained much of his knowledge about herbs and plants from Epimenides' expertise.

The unique personality of Epimenides in the religious sector was readily recognized by the ancients<sup>42</sup>. Diogenes Laertius describes a tradition according to which the Cretans offered sacrifices to Epimenides as a god,

<sup>37</sup> E.J. EDELSTEIN & L. EDELSTEIN *Asclepius: Testimonies*, I: T366: Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii*, III, 44: ...καὶ τὰ τῶν ἰοβόλων δὲ ἄκη καὶ τὸ τοῖς ἰοβόλοις αὐτοῖς εἰς πολλὰ τῶν νοσημάτων χρῆσθαι τίς ἀφαιρήσεται τὴν μαντικὴν; ...See also Edelstein's *Asclepius: Interpretation of the Testimonies*, II, p. 104.

<sup>38</sup> EDELSTEIN, I, T356: Ps. Galenus, *Introductio*, Cp. 1 [XIV, p. 674K.].

<sup>39</sup> EDELSTEIN, *Asclepius*: T91: Eutecnius, *Metaphrasis Theriacorum Nicandri*, 685-88: "Ἄθρει δὴ καὶ ταύτην τὴν βοτάνην, ἧς ἐστὶν εὐρετῆς Ἀσκληπιός, ὄνομα δὲ ἐπιλέγεται τὸ ταύτης πάνακες ... There is a large number of testimonies on the ancient tradition of the medicinal value of herbs and plants. An illustration of this tradition appears in T197: Eustathius, *Comm. ad Hom. II. XIII*. 830: ...Ποδαλείριος, οὐ μόνον, ... ὁ ἀνθρώπος διὰ τὸ εὐτυχές, ἀλλὰ καὶ τὰ ἀνθούonta περιοδεύων ἰατρὸς γὰρ ἦν ῥιζοτόμος τὰ πολλὰ, ὡς εἰκός. In another testimony Podaleirius is Asclepius' son: T159: *Schol. in Lycoph. ad Alex.* 1047. According to the evidence, all descendants of Asclepius utilized herbs for healing; e.g. T171: Eustathius, *Comm. ad Hom. II. XI*, 517: "Ὅτι δὲ καὶ πατρώα τέχνη τῷ Μαχάονι τὸ ἰατρεύειν... εἰπὼν αὐτὸν Ἀσκληπιοῦ υἱόν....

<sup>40</sup> Plin. *NH XXV*. 2(5). 13: «Pythagoras clarus sapientia primus volumen de effectu earum composuit, Apollini, Aesculapio...».

<sup>41</sup> Porph. *Vit. Pyth.* 17.

<sup>42</sup> Plut. *Sol.* 12.12: μάλιστα θαυμασθεῖς, καὶ χρήματα... καὶ τιμὰς μεγάλας...

since, according to their beliefs, he could predict the future<sup>43</sup>. Even Epimenides himself reinforced this charisma by first calling himself Aeacus<sup>44</sup> «as though he were with Rhadamanthys a keeper of the House of Hades»<sup>45</sup>. In addition, Epimenides was believed to subsist on special food which the Nymphs had given to him<sup>46</sup>. He seemed to be associated with a cult of Zeus, according to Theopompus, who talked about the Cretan priest as being divinely exhorted to build a shrine to Zeus<sup>47</sup>. His relation to Zeus Cretagenes, perhaps as an attendant or priest of the god, could be inferred by his epithet of new Kouros (Koures)<sup>48</sup>. This symbolic appellation of Epimenides was only used by the ancients to define his role: a new defender and follower of Zeus<sup>49</sup>.

Since Epimenides was regarded divine by his fellow-countrymen and other Greeks, it would not have been extraordinary for them to believe that his skin was found to be tattooed with letters after his death<sup>50</sup>. Diogenes mentions that τὸ Ἐπιμενίδειον δέριμα was kept by the Lacedaemonians<sup>51</sup>. D.M. Leahy offers an interesting interpretation of the Epimenidean skin<sup>52</sup>; he relates the skin to a parchment with Epimenides' oracles on it. Because Cleomenes, the Spartan king, was believed to own such a document, and because, according to a story, he had flayed the founder of Anthana<sup>53</sup> and inscribed oracles on his skin, the two stories were com-

<sup>43</sup> Diog. L. 1.114: λέγουσι δέ τινες ὅτι Κρήτες αὐτῷ θύουσι ὡς θεῷ. φασὶ γὰρ καὶ προγνωστικώτατον γεγονέναι.

<sup>44</sup> Diog. L. 1.115.

<sup>45</sup> G. HUXLEY, *GEP*, p. 83.

<sup>46</sup> Diog. L. 1.114.

<sup>47</sup> Diog. L. 1.115: μὴ Νυμφῶν ἀλλὰ Διός.

<sup>48</sup> Diog. L. 1.115: Μυρωνιανὸς δὲ ἐν Ὁμοίοις φησὶν ὅτι Κούρητα νέον αὐτὸν ἐκάλουν Κρήτες. Plut. *Sol.* 12.7: Κούρητα νέον... οἱ τότε ἄνθρωποι προσηγόρευον.

<sup>49</sup> See Harrison's discussion of the Kouretes and Epimenides in her *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (New York, 1962). Cf. K. FREEMAN, *Presocratic Philosophers; A Companion to Diels* (Oxford, 1949), p. 28, where she associates Epimenides with the Dionysiac cult.

<sup>50</sup> Suidas s.v. Ἐπιμενίδης.

<sup>51</sup> Prov. 8.28; Diog. L. 1.115: Καὶ τὸ σῶμα αὐτοῦ φυλάττουσι Λακεδαιμόνιοι παρ' ἑαυτοῖς.

<sup>52</sup> «The Spartan Defeat at Orchomenus» *Phoenix* 12, no. 4 (1958), pp. 141-165.

<sup>53</sup> Steph. Byz. s.v. Ἀνθάνα, πόλις Λακωνική... κέκληται δέ, ὡς Φιλοστέφανος, παρὰ Ἄσθην τὸν Ποσειδῶνος, ὃν Κλεομένης ὁ Λεωνίδου ἀδελφός

bined in a confusing manner so that the skin bearing the oracles was thought to be originally human and, thus, belonging to Epimenides.

Epimenides' career as a religious man is vividly reflected in his literary works. Diogenes Laertius is again the single informant about the Cretan man's books: the epic *Origin of the Kouretes and Korybantes and Theogony* in 5.000 lines; the poem *The Building of Argo and Jason's Voyage to Colchoi* in 6.500 lines; the prose *Sacrifices and the Cretan Constitution*; the epic *Minos and Rhadamanthys* in 4.000 lines. Most of the fragments that have survived come from the *Theogony* and the *Krētika*, but both works only provide mythological information on the Greek gods, who the ancients believed to have originated in Crete<sup>54</sup>.

A careful examination of Epimenides' *Theogony* and the homonymous poem by Hesiod reveals several similarities. According to Epimenides, all things are composed from Air and Night<sup>55</sup>. Kirk and Raven have observed that «with the exception of Ἄηρ in Epimenides, the cosmic figures involved are all to be found in the Hesiodic cosmogony proper; and even Ἄηρ implying mist and darkness rather than the transparent stuff we call «Air» is an element of the Hesiodic description although it does not achieve personification»<sup>56</sup>. In a fragment of Epimenides' *Theogony* Damascius stated that Νύξ and Ἄηρ beget Tartarus<sup>57</sup>. Kirk and Raven interpret the statement as an instance of a trend in the late seventh or sixth century B.C., in which composers of *Theogonies* «were working strictly within the limits of the Hesiodic formulation—at least down to the production of the egg»<sup>58</sup>. Thus, they conclude in their discussion about the egg in early Greek *Theogonies* that «while the Hesiodic elements are clear enough the egg is non-Hesiodic»<sup>59</sup>. To them the egg appeared in later *Theogonies* than the so-called Orphic ones, which did not include the egg as a cosmogonic element<sup>60</sup>.

ἀνελών καὶ ἐκδείρας ἔγραψεν ἐν τῷ δέρματι τοὺς χρησμούς ᾧδε τηρεῖσθαι....

<sup>54</sup> FGrH III B 457 pp. 390-394.

<sup>55</sup> FGrH III B 457 F4b.

<sup>56</sup> G.S. KIRK & J.E. RAVEN, *Presocratic Philosophers* (Cambridge, 1957), p. 19.

<sup>57</sup> FGrH III B 457 F4a.

<sup>58</sup> KIRK, p. 19.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 26-29. Nevertheless, the myth of the Primal Egg as the original substance of all genesis is part of the Orphic cosmology. The Primal Egg seems to be of Eas-



In her book on the Presocratic K. Freeman offers a suggestion that Epimenides probably originally thought of the Dioscuri as a male and a female<sup>61</sup>. For, to Laurentius Lydus<sup>62</sup>, the followers of Epimenides held the same view; that is, those two principles were Time, represented by the Monad, and Nature represented by the Dyad; subsequently the Monad and the Dyad created the life-giving numbers. This explanation is in agreement with Neo-Pythagoreanism or Neo-Platonism, according to Freeman. Perhaps the similarities between the Epimenidean *Theogony* and the homonymous Hesiodic poem prompted two of Epimenides' «biographers»<sup>63</sup> to add to his life details strikingly reminiscent of Hesiod's: tending sheep at the foot of Mt. Helicon<sup>64</sup>, and being taught by a deity: Hesiod was taught by the Muses to sing of the gods; Epimenides was taught the secrets of catharsis by *Dikē* and *Alētheia* as he slept in a cave on the Dictaeon Mountain. Are these similarities emphasized in order to raise Epimenides' reputation as a poet to the status of Hesiod? Such an assumption is not unreasonable.

The mythological information which Epimenides employed in order to write his *Theogony* was extended to a *History of Crete*<sup>65</sup>. Three fragments of the later work have survived, but only one of them seems to be clearly historical<sup>66</sup>. For Jacoby *Κρητικά* is under the mythopoeic influence of the «theologian» Epimenides and his *Theogony*<sup>67</sup>. Perhaps a prose work under his name made its appearance in the fourth century B.C. The book contains information about Cretan customs and laws, and it seems to be the literary piece which Diodorus Siculus had in mind when he placed Epimenides among the other historians of the island<sup>68</sup>. And this *Κρητικά* may have been consulted by Aristotle<sup>69</sup>, who without men-

tern origin, since the Phoenicians and other ancient Near Eastern peoples shared similar cosmogonic myths. See J. LINDSAY, *Origins of Astrology* (1971), p. 116.

<sup>61</sup> *Presocratic Philosophers*, p. 31.

<sup>62</sup> *FGrH* III B 457 F15.

<sup>63</sup> *FGrH* III B 457 T1: Diog. L., and T4f: Maxim. Tyr.

<sup>64</sup> M.L. WEST, *Hesiod: Theogony* (Oxford, 1966), p. 57.

<sup>65</sup> According to D.L. the Cretan Epimenides did not compose a history of Rhodes *γεγονέναι δὲ καὶ Ἐπιμενίδαι ἄλλοι δύο, ὃ τε γενεαλόγος, καὶ τρίτος ὁ Δωρίδι γεγραφῶς Περὶ Ῥόδου*. 1.115.

<sup>66</sup> *FGrH* III B 457 F20.

<sup>67</sup> *FGrH* b, *Kommentar*, p. 308-309.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *FGrH* III B 457 F20.

tioning the title to Epimenides' work cites Epimenides' name. In his *Politics*, then<sup>70</sup>, the philosopher talks about the household which, naturally formed for close cooperation towards meeting their needs, consists of the «stable-companions», using the Epimenidean term for the members of such an association<sup>71</sup>.

The two remaining fragments from *Krētika* attempt to explain how the constellations of the *Crown* and of the *Aigokerōs* originated<sup>72</sup>. Epimenides' association of the constellations with Cretan figures, *Aigipas* on one hand, and Ariadne on the other, must reflect the existing tradition –perhaps oral?– on the island of pondering questions about the kosmos. Epimenides must have been interested in this local tradition since he made efforts to preserve it. And it is reasonable to expect at the time of Epimenides a literary tradition that is composed of mythological elements; for in the seventh or sixth century B.C., before the Ionian philosophers introduced rational thinking to their inquiry into natural phenomena, answers to questions concerning the universe were sought in myths exclusively.

Even if the surviving fragments of Epimenides on Crete are clearly mythological, his impact on the continuation of the local tradition was significant. In Laurentius Lydus' fragment<sup>73</sup> the phrase «οἱ περὶ τὸν Ἐπιμενίδην» does allude to a number of followers of the Cretan seer but without, unfortunately, identifying them.

Furthermore, Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* seems to have affinities with Epimenides' homonymous book<sup>74</sup>. «The earliest complete work on the Argonautic expedition of which we hear is a sixth-century poem ascribed to Epimenides of Crete...<sup>75</sup>». Apollonius, whose *floruit* was in the third century B.C., might have consulted Epimenides' book besides using Eumelus' account as his major source<sup>76</sup>. However, «we can tell from

<sup>70</sup> 1.1.6 p.1252b12.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *FGrH* III B 457 F19 and F18.

<sup>73</sup> *FGrH* III B 457 F 15.

<sup>74</sup> D.L. 1.112: [Ἐπιμενίδης] ἐποίησε... Ἄργοῦς ναυπηγῶν τε καὶ Ἰάσονος εἰς Κόλλουσις ἀπόπλουον ἔτη ἑξακισχίλια πεντακόσια.

<sup>75</sup> P. E. EASTERLING & B.M.W. KNOX (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, I (Cambridge, 1985), p. 587.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

the fragments of Eumelus, from what little is recorded about the work of the Cretan Epimenides, and from the allusive manner of Apollonius' epic that the Argonautic story continued to be a favourite subject for poetry»<sup>77</sup>.

Yet, Epimenides' *Argonautica* is significant in that it constitutes the earliest attempt at the composition of this poem. This work by Epimenides may reflect Jason's landing on Crete, a story that was perhaps connected with the local myth of the hero's union with Demeter, which, as the Sacred Marriage in the vegetation-cycle ritual, took place on the island<sup>78</sup>.

Epimenides is regarded the author of the well-known verse «Cretans are ever liars, evil beasts, lazy bellies»<sup>79</sup>. It appeared for the first time, in Callimachus' *Hymn to Zeus*<sup>80</sup>, and later, in the Christian era, Paul the Apostle mentioned it in his epistle to Titus<sup>81</sup>. This verse has become controversial because of questions relating to its origin and/or its context, and because of the relation between its supposed author and the bad reputation of the Cretans<sup>82</sup>.

It is important to consider first the context in which the hexameter was used. If indeed Epimenides composed the two verses of Callimachus' poem, he must have agreed with the Cyrenaean poet that Cretans are

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>78</sup> According to Hyginus (*Astron.*, 2.4), Hermippus has recorded the Cretan myth of the union of Jason and Demeter, as it is told by the Knossian historian Petellidas.

<sup>79</sup> *Schol. Lukian.* p. 110, 6 Rabe: ὁ Ἐπιμενίδης Κρήτης ἦν χρησιμολόγος, οὐ καὶ τὸ «Κρήτες ἀεὶ ψευσταὶ» λόγιον.

<sup>80</sup> V. 8. The Cretans' bad name was revealed in Greek literature quite early: Homer, *Hymn to Zeus*, 123; Herod. I.2.

<sup>81</sup> Paulus, *Ep. ad Titum* 1.12.

<sup>82</sup> A number of interpretations have been offered by modern scholarship dealing with these questions: See *inter alia* Sir Arthur EVANS, *The Earlier Religion of Greece in the Light of Cretan Discoveries* (Cambridge, 1973) p. 17; J.R. HARRIS, «St. Paul and Epimenides» in *The Expositor* (1912) pp. 384-53; *Scholía in Callim. Iov.* I. 8-9; G.R. MCLENNAN, *Callimachus: Hymn to Zeus, Introduction and Commentary* (London, 1975) pp. 35-40; W.M. RAMSAY, *Asiatic Elements in Greek Civilization* (London, 1928) pp. 20-39; Pan. CHRISTOU, Ἱστορικά στοιχεῖα περὶ Κρήτης ἐν τῇ πρὸς Τίτον ἐπιστολῇ» in *Κρητικά Χρονικά* (1950) 281-293; I. STRATEGAKIS, Ἱστορία τῆς Κρήτης (1967) pp. 414-423; S. SPYRIDAKIS «Zeus is dead: Euhemerus and Crete» in *CJ* 63, 8 (1968) 337-40; H. VAN EFFENTERRE, *La Crète et le monde grec de Platon à Polybe* (1968) pp. 275-312.

liars because they have buried Zeus<sup>83</sup>. But for Callimachus<sup>84</sup>, no god, especially the father of gods and men, ever dies or has a tomb. Would Epimenides share the same religious doctrine with the Greeks of the mainland? It could not be so. Why would he call his fellow countrymen liars, then? I shall examine this below.

Epimenides was a priest of Zeus Cretagenes and of his mother Rhea<sup>85</sup>. These two deities are no other than the Great Mother Goddess, the major Minoan divinity, and her son who, in the Minoan religion, was also her consort<sup>86</sup>.

The young Zeus falls in the pattern of the vegetation-god cycle; he descends to the earth and returns to the upper world every year<sup>87</sup>. A symbolic representation of the annual revival of nature in all its forms and the continuation of life after the temporary recess during the winter months of each year is created by men in the image of the young male god, who, lying with the Great Goddess, generates life anew<sup>88</sup>. The sacred marriage of the Minoan King with the Queen or the priestess of the Mother Goddess was an act reminiscent of the young god and the female deity of fertility.

Following the Dorian settlement in Crete in the eleventh and tenth centuries B.C. cultural interactions occurred between the invaders and the native population of the island. It was natural, then, that religious exchanges also took place<sup>89</sup>. Greek religious influence on Cretan beliefs cannot be ignored. The chief god of the Greeks, Zeus, did have an impact upon the Minoan male deity. Zeus Cretagenes gradually gained prominence over the Great Mother Goddess without losing, however, his

<sup>83</sup> *Hymn to Zeus* I, v. 8-9.

<sup>84</sup> M.P. NILSSON, *The Minoan-Mycenaean Religion* (2nd ed., N.Y., 1971), p. 554: «Zeus died annually, but this was in such violent opposition to all Greek ideas that it was neither understood nor thought worth reading».

<sup>85</sup> *FGrH* III B 457 T4c: *Schol. Clem. 1.1.* p.305,3 Stahlin: *ἱερεὺς Διὸς καὶ Ρέας*.

<sup>86</sup> WILLETTS, *Cretan Cults and Festivals*, p. 251 (about Velchanos, the young male god in Crete); NILSSON, *MMR*, p. 401 ; L. R. FARNELL «Cretan influence in Greek Religion» in S. CASSON's *Essays in Aegean Archaeology* (Oxford, 1927) p. 11.

<sup>87</sup> NILSSON, *MMR*, p. 403.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 403 ff.

<sup>89</sup> See FARNELL's article in CASSON's *Essays in Aegean Archaeology* ; NILSSON, *MMR*, p. 576.

direct association with the vegetation cult. The persistence of the cult in Crete is obvious, at least up to the time of Epimenides in the sixth century B.C. The inscription bearing Pythagoras' name on Mt. Ida, which was dedicated by the Greek philosopher to Zeus during the former's initiation into the god's cult testifies for the continuation of its practice<sup>90</sup>. If Epimenides, the *νέος κούρης* escorted Pythagoras to Zeus' grotto, the Cretan priest was apparently involved in the initiation of the Samian philosopher. And the priest of Knossos, an initiate himself in the cult of the Cretan god<sup>91</sup>, must have made known to Pythagoras his belief in a deity which follows the annual cycle of nature of death and rebirth. But Zeus is a temporarily buried, not a dead, god<sup>92</sup>. In his article, West explains why the god has not actually died; he has «'gone to earth' and is now being called to return to Dicte *ἔς ἐνιαυτόν*»<sup>93</sup>. The Hymn itself is the worshippers' invocation to the Greatest Kouros<sup>94</sup>.

In an anthropological interpretation Harrison views the Hymn as a representation, an expression of a ritual, that of tribal initiation<sup>95</sup>. We could, then, perceive Epimenides as an initiate himself, who, being *νέος κούρης*, would also initiate others, like Pythagoras, to the cult of the Cretan Zeus.

It is inconceivable, then, for Epimenides, the very attendant and priest of Zeus, the «new koures», to accept that Zeus was mortal. For, even if to the initiates the god was dead, the followers of the deity must have recognized the immortal element in him<sup>96</sup>. The Cretan Zeus may

<sup>90</sup> D.L. *Pythagoras* 8.3; Porph. *V.P.*, 17.

<sup>91</sup> Plut. *Sol.* 12; Strabo 479; Diog. Laert. I. 115.

<sup>92</sup> See M.L. WEST's «The Dictaeon Hymn to the Kouros» in *JHS* 85 (1965) 149-159.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>95</sup> HARRISON, *ESGR*, pp. 1-29. Concerning initiation ceremonies, the author makes an analogy between the Cretan Kouretes and the Wiradthuri tribe of New South Wales: «The Kouretes are Young Men who have been initiated themselves and will initiate others, will instruct them in tribal duties and tribal dances,... will make away with them by some pretended death and finally bring them back as new-born, grown youths, full members of their tribe.» (p. 19).

<sup>96</sup> *Hymn*, v. 17 *παῖδ' ἀμβροτοῖν*; Lact. 1.11: «an empty monument...»; WEST, p. 156: «It is only the tomb that is spoken of, nor the death, which ought to have been the greater paradox».

have functioned as a lord of the underworld, a chthonic deity<sup>97</sup>, during his «absence» from the upper world; but he did not die—a belief that persisted later<sup>98</sup>.

These doctrines testify for Epimenides' disagreement with Callimachus' verses<sup>99</sup>. Furthermore, Epimenides would not have attacked his fellow Cretans as liars because of the tradition of the Cretan belief in the vegetation god. How, then, did the reputation of the Cretans as liars spread? According to Van Effenterre, no good reason exists for these people to have had a bad name either in their early history or in later times<sup>100</sup>.

This reputation of the Cretans seems to have been created out of caprice by ancient non-Cretans who sought for various reasons to villify the inhabitants of Minos' island. An historian of Crete illustrates the case:<sup>101</sup> Callimachus of Cyrene called the Cretans liars because they presented Zeus as mortal. To the Athenians they were liars for claiming the birth of the gods on the island of Crete. The Romans and the Romanizing Greek writers remained hostile towards the Cretans due to the latter's resistance to Roman imperialism<sup>102</sup>. Regarding Paul the Apostle, he was referring only to the Jews of Crete in his epistle to Titus, as Strategakis explains clearly<sup>103</sup>.

The bad reputation of the Cretans was spread especially in the Hellenistic age, when Cretan soldiers fought as individually-recruited mercenaries for foreign armies<sup>104</sup>. It may be that the Cretans' bad name originated in the fourth century when their mercenary involvement became frequent<sup>105</sup>. However, the Cretans who, while serving as mercenaries abroad,

<sup>97</sup> WEST, «Dictaeon Hymn», p. 158.

<sup>98</sup> The date of the inscribed *Hymn to Dictaeon Zeus* at Palaikastro is about the third century A.D., a proof of the lasting belief in the vegetation deity; also Petellidas' reference to the vegetation goddess Demeter in the first century B.C.: Hyg. *Astr.* 2.4.

<sup>99</sup> Vv. 8-9.

<sup>100</sup> H. VAN EFFENTERRE, *CMG*, pp. 280 ff.

<sup>101</sup> I. STRATEGAKIS, *Ἱστορία τῆς Κρήτης*, pp. 422 ff.

<sup>102</sup> Polyb. 6.46.

<sup>103</sup> *Ἱστορία Κρήτης*, pp. 422 ff.

<sup>104</sup> Plut. *Cleomen.* 21.3; Polyb. 5.53.3; Strabo 10.477. See also S. SPYRIDAKIS «Cretans and Neocretans» in *CJ* 72 (4) (1977) 301.

<sup>105</sup> VAN EFFENTERRE, *CMG*, 281-282.

would also engage in piratical activities as a result of their avarice and greed, were responsible for the negative image of the Cretans in general.

In an interesting interpretation of the distinction between Cretans and Neocretans, Spyridakis explains that Neocretans were the Cretans of pre-Doric origin, who were reduced to serfdom by the Dorian conquerors<sup>106</sup>. But those lower classes were advanced to the ranks of citizens in order to be recruited as mercenaries, since military power was needed by Cretan city-states in Hellenistic times, when they were involved in foreign wars<sup>107</sup>. These enfranchised slaves were the *apetairoi*, of whom Dosiadas and Sosicrates spoke<sup>108</sup>, and who were responsible for the Cretans' bad reputation.

In contrast to this social group were the Doric Cretans, who, like the Spartiates, constituted the citizen body, a minority. They were distinguished from the Neocretans by their conservatism and simplicity of life, qualities praised by Plato<sup>109</sup>.

If, then, practical reasons for denigrating the Cretans do not occur until well past Epimenides' time, we must look at his hexameter from a different viewpoint. Jacoby's interpretation of the verse is worth examining. In his commentary<sup>110</sup> he does not refer at all to the Callimachean context of Zeus' tomb. At first, Jacoby argues that the verse comes from the *Oracles*<sup>111</sup>. Although this work is considered a pseudepigraphon, (if it was not, would not Herodotus have mentioned it?) and it must have been attributed to Epimenides after the fifth century B.C., Jacoby believes that this verse was written after a similar line in the Hesiodic *Theogony*: ποιμένες ἀγραυλοί...<sup>112</sup>; and he argues that even if such a resemblance occurs, the hexameter should actually belong to the *Chrismoi*,

<sup>106</sup> «Cretans...», pp. 299-307.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 305.

<sup>108</sup> *FGrH* III B 458 and 461 respectively.

<sup>109</sup> In his *Laws* the great philosopher exalted the Cretan constitution and considered it a model for his ideal city: 712 C.

<sup>110</sup> *FGrH* IIIb no. 457, p. 332.

<sup>111</sup> Hieron. *Comm. in Pauli Ep. ad Tit.* VII, p. 606 Migne; Cod. Laur. 184; Ἐπιμείδου χρησμός... κέχρηται δὲ καὶ Καλλιμαχος τῇ χρήσει...

<sup>112</sup> *Th.* 26; cf. H. VERBRUGGEN, *Le Zeus Crétois* (Paris, 1981) p. 63. Verbruggen sees the similarity in the sense that Hesiod addresses an indifferent public and Epimenides talks to an audience of rich cultivators.

since it is closer semantically to the Boeotian poet's *Works and Days* than to his *Theogony*<sup>113</sup>. Jacoby views this similarity in the sense that the speaker of «Cretans are liars» ought to be a god. For, as men are not divine, they should be aware of their limitations in understanding and knowing the truth.

Regarding Epimenides' long sleep, which could be a form of divine epiphany, it taught him that he should not rely solely on human knowledge; for only gods know the truth<sup>114</sup> and men should be guided by them<sup>115</sup>. The verse, then, could be interpreted metaphorically: reference to Cretans rather than to men in general can make a point better understood by the Cretan hearer. The emphasis on those supposed characteristics of the Cretans may well be traits of any human; for the aim of the speaker is to stress ephemeral, selfish, and beastly motives in men's lives, which keep people away from the truth and from just behavior that can be achieved through divine instruction.

Apparently, Jacoby places the *Chrimoi* in didactic literature of which the *Works and Days* also forms a part. He is right in this sense, for oracles in antiquity offered advice to those who sought guidance when they visited a *Manteion* at times of indecision or crisis. And the *Chrimoi*, if attri-

<sup>113</sup> JACOBY, *Kommentar*, p. 322.

<sup>114</sup> This very idea is also found in the Hesiodic *Theogony*, where the Muses talked to the poet in a similar manner: *Th.* 25-28.

<sup>115</sup> In this context we can appreciate Epimenides' attack against the Delphic Oracle about the omphalos of the earth (*FGrH* III B 457 T6). His words *θεοῖς δῆλος, θνητοῖσι δ' ἀφαντος* make Jacoby's explanation clear. In his work *Zeus* A.B. COOK accepts W.H. ROSCHER'S views on the ancient Greek conception of the earth «as a flat disk with a central point called its omphalos or «navel», and the claim by many towns that they «possessed this all-important centre». v.II, pt. 1 (1965) p. 167. Regarding Epimenides' denial of Omphalos being at Delphi, he simply referred to the local legend about the Cretan Omphalos. This, to the islanders, was not the central point, but the navel of the infant Zeus, which had fallen to the ground when he was being brought to Crete: COOK, *Zeus*, p. 191. Epimenides' reference to the Cretan Omphalos as «navel» gains credence through the poet Callimachus (*Hymn* I, 42 ff) and Diodorus (5.80.4) who, as Cook shows, have utilized the Cretan as a source.



buted to a religious man, a priest or a *mantis*<sup>116</sup>, could be part of wisdom literature.

On the other hand, one should consider the absence of official oracle centers in Crete. It was generally recognized among the ancients that the god of *κάθαρσις* and *μαντική* was *Zeus Katharsios* in Crete<sup>117</sup>.

Would it not be suitable, then, for Epimenides to offer guidance to those who asked for it? The purification of Athens by the Cretan priest illustrates the point; the Athenians confronted with the pollution that was caused by the *Kyloneion agos* appealed to Epimenides, who established order in the city. It is significant to say that through his life the man stressed the role of the gods' direction of men's lives. Thus, the verse «Cretans [that is, all men] are ever liars» could be seen as the major teaching which Epimenides received through a dream during his stay in a cave<sup>118</sup>; a teaching which he tried to transmit to others, as well.

<sup>116</sup> Aristotle clarified Epimenides' role as a prophet: *Rhet.* 3. 17 p. 1418 a 21: 'Επιμενίδης ὁ Κρήσις... περὶ τῶν ἐσομένων οὐκ ἐμαντεύετο, ἀλλὰ περὶ τῶν γεγενησάντων μὲν, ἀδήλων δέ.

<sup>117</sup> Zeus was also worshipped as a chthonic deity, as mentioned previously; this particular characteristic of the god was associated, according to ancient tradition, with cathartic powers. See Herod. I. 44; Porph. *De Abs.* IV. 19. O. KERN, *Orphicorum Fragmenta* (Berlin, 1964) F183 Ab.; E. RHODE, *Psyche* (London, 1925), pp. 180, 301; M. SWINDLER, *Cretan Elements in the Cults and Ritual of Apollo* (Diss. Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania: The Lord Baltimore Pr., 1913), pp. 48 ff.

<sup>118</sup> *FGrH* III B 457 T4f: *δνειρον διδάσκαλον*.