BETWEEN BYZANTIUM AND VENICE:
ICON PAINTING IN VENETIAN CRETE IN THE
FIFTEENTH AND SIXTEENTH CENTURIES

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On November 23, 1400, the painter Nikolaos Philanthropinos, a resident of Candia (modern-day Heraklion) in Crete, entered into a three-year equal partnership with his Venetian colleague Nicolo Storlado. A few days later, on December 2, he agreed to take on the young Georgios Moussouros for a three-year apprenticeship to learn the art of painting. Philanthropinos was originally from Constantinople and quite possibly related to the later ecumenical patriarch Joseph II (1416–39), who played a leading role in the discussions about the union of the churches at the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438–39). We can follow Philanthropinos’s individual career as a painter through contracts for paintings and commissions for icons, altarpieces, and costly curtains. Somewhat unexpectedly, we meet the Cretan “Nikolaus Philastropino” in Venice in 1435, signing a contract as magister artis mosaicae in ecclesia Sancti Marcii, that is to say a master mosaicist at St. Mark’s.

The case of Nikolaos Philanthropinos, on which the archival researches of Mario Cattapan and Maria Constantoudaki-Kritomilides have thrown so much light, is in many ways the ideal starting point for a discussion of the various elements that helped to shape the character of Cretan icon painting. Unfortunately, not a single work of his survives to enable us to ascertain how the historical information that has helped us build up a profile of him determined his creativity as a painter. Nevertheless, the locations involved, the period, and the painter’s range of activities are all emblematic of the course of Cretan painting. Philanthropinos maintained links with Constantinople and traveled there at least once. In Candia he collaborated with a Venetian fellow painter and taught painting, passing on to his pupil certain trends, styles, and iconography that had come from the Byzantine metropolitan art of the period. The work he understood, whether secular or religious, was characterized by an interesting diversity and, most importantly, as can be seen from the type of commissions he received, was destined for both Orthodox and Catholic patrons. His subsequent presence in Venice as a mosaicist at St. Mark’s is even more striking. Constantinople, Candia, and Venice define the geographical space in which Philanthropinos moved, at the same time constituting the basic reference points of a whole network of activities and exchanges that determined the nature of Venetian Crete.

Crete

A Venetian possession from 1211 after the Fourth Crusade, Crete was in many respects an ideal place for many Greeks to relocate to as they left the last remnants of the Byzantine Empire. After constant uprisings led by Cretan Greek nobles throughout the thirteenth century, the political situation on the island gradually settled down in the fourteenth century. Crete began to enjoy stability and economic prosperity, which were reflected in an explosion in the number of monuments with wall paintings created during the fourteenth century all over the island, even in remote mountainous regions. Patrons came from the Cretan nobility and from the island’s rural communities. All of these monuments are in the Cretan countryside, but the main focus of artistic creativity, especially so far as the Venetian overlords were concerned, was in Crete’s urban centers. However, this is where the picture becomes extremely obscure. Apart from the architectural remains of the late Venetian period, scarcely anything in the towns by way of painting has been preserved in situ (see the essay by Olga Grazziou in this catalogue). The wall paintings, altarpieces, banners, and devotional works in the most important churches, which would undoubtedly have served as models for the numerous commissions undertaken by Cretan painters—indeed, in other words, what the official art of the island looked like—cannot be reconstructed. Painted monuments and important Byzantine devotional panels scattered around the island (cat. nos. 1, 2) date from the late fourteenth to the early fifteenth century, and, although they are the most part unsigned, their high quality confirms that the lines of communication with Constantinople remained open and that there were important Constantinopolitan artists abroad at the latest developments working in Crete. What, on the other hand, was going on with Italian art? Which models were adopted from Western art, when were they first taken up, and through what routes did they reach Crete? And, even more importantly, which features of this art did the Cretan artists choose to make part of their repertoire and why?

The discussion of Cretan icons usually starts, highly symbolically, from the year when Philanthropinos went into partnership with Storlado and took the young Georgios Moussouros on as an apprentice, about 1400. This is the time when Byzantine artists are documented as arriving on the island and was the period from which some exceptional Cretan icons—which indicate the direction that icon production in Crete would take in the next two centuries—have been preserved. Nevertheless, even though I chose to start my text with this date, I think it is impossible to give a satisfactory explanation of the already mature form that characterizes some early fifteenth-century Cretan icons of mixed style without referring to the earlier period. The highly developed interpretation of both Byzantine and Late Gothic painting seen in the icons in the Latis Collection (cat. nos. 5, 6) and, a little later, the creative duality of the icons signed by
Angelos (cat. nos. 9, 10), or the profound familiarity with Late Gothic art seen in his signed icon of the Pietà from the Museo Correr (fig. 1), will be hard to explain if we do not look back to some Cretan monuments of the fourteenth century and to aspects of official Byzantine art from the same period.

A small group of fourteenth-century painted monuments in a mountainous region of western Crete provides the necessary precedent for the fifteenth-century Cretan icons. Although their complete publication remains a desideratum for research, the wall paintings of Christ in Temenia, Saint Demetrios in Livada, and Saint Photis in Agioi Anargyroi are characterized by a mature mixture of features from Byzantine and Gothic painting, while similar features are found more sporadically in a host of other fourteenth-century Cretan wall paintings. In addition to the instantly recognizable Western iconographical features in the rendering of the scenes, the theological disputes that can be glimpsed behind some choices in the iconographic program are even more interesting. The emphasis on an extended Passion cycle at Temenia, although common in contemporary Palaiologan painting, takes on a special complexion in this Cretan monument (fig. 2). In the development of the scenes, Christ's torments are highlighted, and any triumphalist tendency gives way to a highly emotive, heart-rending depiction of his humiliation and pain, intended to evoke instant compassion and contemplation in the believer. These preoccupations dominate the theology of the West in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and above all in the preaching of the mendicant orders, especially the Franciscans and the Dominicans, whose activities throughout the Levant and particularly in Crete has already been noted (see also Olga Gratiou's essay in this catalogue).

The character of these wall paintings, though provincial in form, provides the necessary foundation for understanding the fully developed artistic diglossia that characterizes Cretan icon painters in the early fifteenth century. Nevertheless, the entirely predictable existence of Western and Western-style works of art in Venetian Crete is just one aspect of the question, and the most self-evident. There is another, perhaps less well-studied factor, which has scarcely featured in the debate about Cretan painting, found in certain aspects of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Byzantine art proper. A significant group of Palaiologan works demonstrate that a significant part of late Byzantine society, and especially its aristocracy, were familiar with Late Gothic, mainly Italian, art and, even more importantly, had developed an aesthetic that admired and was expressed through works with a distinctly Western or mixed style.

**Byzantium**

Even after the recapture of Constantinople from the Franks in 1261 and the restoration of the Byzantine state, the Venetians, Genoese, and Catalans continued to maintain a strong presence in the region, as they possessed large parts of what had once been Byzantine territory. However, as well as keeping their conquests, the Westerners made their presence felt in the life of late Byzantium in many different ways. Mixed marriages between members of the Western and Byzantine aristocracies and, indeed, members of the imperial family were a widespread political practice in the Palaiologan period, and these marriages, like all diplomatic acts, were sealed with an ostentatious exchange of luxurious gifts on all sides. It is also well known that there had been for centuries in Constantinople thriving colonies of Venetians and Genoese who lived and worked and traded in all kinds of products.
Information from the written sources confirms that Greek traders collaborated with their Italian colleagues without let or hindrance; at the same time, we know that a large number of Byzantines undertaking commercial enterprises came from the ranks of the aristocracy. These facts indicate the many ways in which the Byzantines were in touch with and absorbed the ways of the West. This mingling is clearly reflected in silverware and wood carving, as well as in icons and painted monuments in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when a host of Western features were copied in different styles to a greater or lesser extent and at different levels of appropriation.

Closer both in style and date to the Cretan icons that interest us, a famous early fifteenth-century icon, the celebrated Volpi Nativity, constitutes an ideal example of mixing different elements (fig. 3). This icon is a superbly painted composition that incorporates iconographic subjects found in a series of high-quality fourteenth-century Byzantine monuments from the Chora Monastery in Constantinople and the Holy Apostles in Thessaloniki to the Pirei leptos Church in Mistra, to which it is most closely related. However, this Byzantine iconography is strongly marked by the tender beauty of the International Gothic style. The depiction of animals and of expanses of water is done in a naturalistic fashion foreign to the Byzantine tradition, behind which lie ground-breaking artistic practices and ideas. There can be no doubt that the anonymous artist of the Volpi icon was Greek, most probably from Constantinople. But it is equally certain that he was very well acquainted with the latest developments in and preoccupations of contemporary Italian painting. We have no way of knowing if his contemporary in Candia, Nikolas Philanthropinos, was a correspondingly high-quality artist, although his high level of remuneration, the self-confidence revealed in the sources, and his later involvement in the mosaics of Venice’s symbolic monument of Saint Mark’s leave few doubts as to his considerable achievements. Indeed, his dual artistic personality may have been a requisite for his work on a church that is a hymn to the allied Byzantine and Venetian traditions. In any case, what is certain, in my opinion, is that the Constantinopolitan artists who moved to Crete in the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries were already familiar with Late Gothic art. They were ready to meet the requirements of the ethically and religiously mixed clientele found in Crete.

Venice

It was precisely the official ideology of Venice itself, with its singular colonial character, that facilitated or promoted the development of a hybrid artistic language in its overseas possessions. Moreover, the character of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Venetian art itself is similarly composite and binary in its makeup, full of ideological connotations and messages, faithfully reflecting Venice’s cultural policy, in which Byzantine elements go hand in hand with a more up-to-date understanding of contemporary trends from Florence and Siena. All of this helped to shape the much-discussed special nature of the Venetian Renaissance. By appropriating Byzantine tradition regarding symbols and forms of artistic expression, La Serenissima made systematic efforts to become not just the new, almighty conqueror of the former Byzantine territories, but also the self-appointed legitimate heir and successor to the Eastern Roman Empire. In Venetian possessions such as Crete, which was inhabited by a Greek Orthodox population (the Venetians always being in a minority there), maintaining the special, ideological umbilical cord that the Venetians intentionally cultivated with Byzantium often required a very fine balance. As long as there was a Byzantine emperor in Constantinople who gave political weight to the authority of the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarchate, there was always the risk of anti-Venetian uprisings being stirred up in Crete. After 1453, once the Byzantine state had been definitively overthrown by the Ottoman Turks, the likely political support for insurgency against the Venetians disappeared. The Ottomans became the great enemy of Venice and of its Greek subjects alike, at least for the urban centers. Venice’s role as the successor to Byzantium became clearer and more acceptable to their Greek subjects once the divided loyalties created by the political existence of the Byzantine state were a thing of the past.

The impact of the capture of Constantinople by the Ottomans, apart from its strictly political and ideological effects, led to a renewal of interest in Byzantine culture. The refugees from among the upper classes and the intellectuals of Byzantium who fled to Italy or to the Venetian-held areas of the former Byzantine world brought with them devotional objects, Greek manuscripts, and works of art. These enjoyed considerable veneration in fifteenth-century Italian society, especially among the Venetians, who were already familiar with and ideologically oriented toward the East.
In this climate of respect for and veneration of Byzantine culture, we must recognize the great demand in the second half of the fifteenth century for icons in the traditional Byzantine style. Cretan artists had all the necessary qualities to meet this demand in the best possible way: they had impeccable technical training and a complete iconographic repertoire, and they occupied a key location in an important trading post, which facilitated the direct channeling of their icons to the international market. At the same time, their familiarity with Western themes also allowed them to meet the demand for traditional Late Gothic images, especially paintings of the Mother and Child, in established iconographic variants. The way their workshops were organized, in the manner of urban craftsmen, also facilitated the undertaking of large commissions, with clear guidelines as to subject matter and style. And they carried these orders out by organizing production in such a way as to respond to the requirements of mass production. All of this information is available in abundance in the archives of the Regno di Candia, now kept in Venice, and it allows us to understand something of the numerous surviving Cretan icons and to place them in the social environment in which they were created.

Icon Painting in Crete in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries

All of the extant Cretan icons were made in workshops established in Candia and the other urban centers on the island and were for the most part the result of personal commissions from nobles or bourgeois patrons. It is no coincidence that the infrequent occurrence, indeed the almost total lack, of new wall paintings in Crete after the middle of the fifteenth century, coincides with a corresponding explosion in the production of icons by urban icon workshops. The new ideas that were taking root in Crete, along with the gradual emergence of a middle class and the ongoing contacts with the West, are reflected in corresponding developments in the forms of religious expression. Nevertheless, commissioning icons seems to have remained very costly for rural populations, which struggled to meet the expense. A typical example is an agreement of 1516 between Ioannis Styllitzas, priest and painter of Candia, and four villagers from Galiste, in which the latter collectively promise to pay five gold ducats within twenty days for an icon of Saint Paraskevi, which the artist had already handed over.  

The way in which work was organized in Cretan icon workshops, the types of commissions they received, and the iconographical and stylistic characteristics of the icons they produced can all be seen in fully developed form by the early fifteenth century. Although in the highly intriguing case of Philanthropinos no identifiable work has as yet brought his attested artistic career to life, his near contemporary Angelos has much in common with him but at the same time left us a host of signed or securely attributed icons (cat. nos. 7-10). Research in the archival sources has suggested that Angelos is to be identified with Angelos Akotantas, an important painter in the first half of the fifteenth century. A man of a certain social standing in Candia—he was appointed first cantor in 1449—Akotantas, like Philanthropinos, traveled at least once to Constantinople. He consorti with important people on the island, and the self-assurance that distinguished him as an artist is best attested in the simple but immediately recognizable form of signature he used: ΧΕΙΡ ΑΤΕΛΕΟΥ (by the hand of Angelos) and ANGELUS PINXIT. Angelos had complete mastery of Palaiologan painting and was equally competent with the Venetian Gothic tradition of the trecento. The purely Late Gothic Pietà, which he signed in Latin, was evidently intended for a Western patron and confirms just how confidently he could handle a Western iconographic model (fig. 1). But there are other features of his work that provide evidence of his artistic experiments. A recent publication offering a comprehensive technical analysis of seven of his signed icons charted precisely the materials, the working methods, and the techniques he employed. Among other things, it established a special preparatory technique in the wooden support, not known in other Cretan icons though widespread in contemporary Italian painting. Moreover, it recorded the partial use of oil in two of his icons. It is worth remembering that in this same period a combination of egg and oil as a binding medium (tempera grasse) was used in certain works by Masaccio and Masolino. These two technical features, combined with the stylistic characteristics of his painting, demonstrate that Angelos was not simply aware of the artistic trends of his day, but that he was experimenting, in parallel with his Italian colleagues, in the search for new means of expression. Entirely in step with his pioneering approach to art was his ability to respond to the theological requirements of the commissions he undertook. The part he played in devising the iconography for the newly minted cult of Saint Phanourios in Crete was decisive (cat. nos. 7, 8), whereas in other works it has been asserted that he was expressing the ideas of pro-Union circles, in a period when the union of the churches was a dominant theological and political problem.

One step behind the Volpi Nativity, Angelos broadened the dialogue between late Byzantine painting and Western art. His saints have an earthly physicality, which suggests a different approach to Late Gothic art from that expressed in the ethereal and immaterial substance of the figures in the two icons from the Latis Collection (cat. nos. 5, 6). The way he models the faces is purely Palaiologan, but for animals and drapery he confidently uses both techniques. And yet, despite this eclectic dualism, his works are characterized by an exceptional unity of style. The individual elements have been completely assimilated and set out in the form of a fully developed proposal for a new artistic idiom.

A group of Cretan icons, in which purely Byzantine and purely Western figures are depicted side by side, reveals a different sort of coexistence between Western and Byzantine models. The earliest and undoubtedly the highest-quality example is an early fifteenth-century monumental altarpiece from the church of San Stefano in Monopoli in Apulia, now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (fig. 4). Intended for a Catholic church, the altarpiece combines saints, iconography, and style from both Palaiologan and Venetian painting, but the origins of each figure remain absolutely distinct, from both an iconographical and a
stylistic point of view: for example, the Virgin and Child, Saint Nicholas, and Saint John the Baptist are entirely Byzantine, whereas Saints Stephen and Augustine are equally straightforwardly Western. The artist who painted the work, probably a Cretan, used a variety of models from the range of examples he had at his disposal from the two traditions in order to execute the commission.

The same concurrence of individual figures straight out of the two traditions is characteristic of a number of later fifteenth-century Cretan icons, such as some of Nikolaos Tzafoorais’s works (cat. no. 15), a vita icon of Saint Nicholas in the Andreadis Collection (fig. 5), and two icons of the Mother and Child with surrounding scenes and saints from the Canellopoulos Museum (cat. no. 24) and a private collection in Athens. In these hybrid works, in which the iconographical and stylistic origins of the individual figures are clear, we may suppose that the patrons must have chosen the models themselves for particular reasons. Especially in the case of icons with composite arrangements and vita icons, we can basically assume that they would commission a reproduction of some important devotional work for the central subject. This is the only explanation, for example, for the constant repetition of an enthroned Saint Nicholas in the Late Gothic style on various Cretan icons from the early fifteenth to the seventeenth century (fig. 5). The practice of reproducing an important devotional work for purposes of private or public devotion was an established one in the Byzantine tradition.
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34-39), who in 1574 was invited to decorate the sanctuary, the adjacent prothesis (sacristy), and most of the icons on the iconostasis of the recently built church.

The sixteenth century was marked by the great religious movements of the Reformation and the Counter Reformation, which convulsed Europe. The official Orthodox Church could not remain indifferent in the face of the intense theological disputes in the West, as both sides attempted to win it over. Meanwhile, Cretan society was directly involved in and informed about these burning theological issues. The presence of Protestant literature in the libraries of Crete reveals that Cretan intellectuals were well known, as is the famous trial of the charismatic Cretan literary scholar Francesco Porto by the Inquisition in Venice on charges of heresy in 1558. The theological disputes of the time were directly reflected in the work of Cretan painters, who adapted their repertoire and their icon painting to respond as best they could to the concerns of the age. For example, the revival of the Palaiologian subject of the Restoration of the Icons in the mid-sixteenth century was a response to reservations about the veneration of icons expressed by the pro-Reformation faction (cat. no. 29), while on another level, the didacticism that permeates some Cretan works of this period, such as some highly original compositions by Georgios Klontzas, reflects the spirit of the Counter Reformation.

The artistic developments of the sixteenth century were influenced in Crete, as in the rest of Europe, by the widespread circulation of prints. The works of famous Italian and northern European artists were reproduced in prints, which did a brisk trade at affordable prices. The new medium encouraged not just the reproduction of originals but also combinations of different individual elements and figures, in order to create new compositions with variations originating both in earlier works of the Renaissance period and in contemporary Mannerist pictures. The importance of this development, especially for areas such as Crete that were on the edges of the great artistic centers of the period, was enormous. Although the sources refer to there being original paintings in Candia by the most important Venetian artists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, such as Giovanni Bellini, Palma il Vecchio, Vivarini, and Titian, it is certain that it was only through prints that artists could get to see a host of compositions that would otherwise have remained inaccessible or entirely unknown to them.

Although there was a reduction in large-scale orders, the number of artists recorded in Candia in the sixteenth century increased, and toward the middle of that century, they organized themselves into the Guild of Saint Luke, following the example of the guilds that already existed in a number of Western European cities. At the same time, a gradual change in the attitude of the Cretan community toward painting and its practitioners is observable. Painters began to leave behind the medieval notion of the artisan and to acquire the status of creative artists. This progression coincided with a more comprehensive adoption of Renaissance ideas and the development of a variety of intellectual activities in Crete, which are equally expressed in dazzling achievements in literature and theater.

These developments are similarly reflected in a new self-awareness among artists, who often clearly expressed this in the form of the signatures they used on their works. The traditional forms "Xesp. . . . " (By the hand of . . . ) or "pinc. . . . " (painted this) continued to be used, but the most important painters began to use innovative, more self-conscious signatures, especially on works that they themselves earmarked as being most successful or innovative. It is no coincidence that the most interesting signatures are found on the works of the most important artists in Candia in the second half of the sixteenth century, such as Georgios Klontzas (cat. no. 39), Michael Damaskenos (cat. nos. 34, 35), and Domenikos Theotokopoulos (cat. no. 41). A classicizing spirit and variety of phraseology similar to that found in the works of the three Cretans have also been observed in the signatures of slightly earlier sixteenth-century Venetian artists. Equally in line with the preferences of Venetian artists is the way Theotokopoulos no longer placed his signatures in the lower part of a work but on some feature of the composition, such as the central candlestick in The Domination of the Virgin, the stool with the painting implements in the Saint Luke, and on the step of the building in The Adoration of the Magi (cat. nos. 40-41).

Georgios Klontzas, Michael Damaskenos, and Domenikos Theotokopoulos brought a breath of fresh air into the iconographic repertoire and the style of Cretan painting. All three of them experimented with introducing features from Renaissance art and contemporary Mannerism to the canvas of Cretan tradition, but each of them created an entirely personal, instantly recognizable style of their own. Klontzas, an intellectual, a scribe and a miniaturist, created numerous original compositions with a crowded structure full of movement and intensity, emphasized

![Fig. 6. Georgios Klontzas (attrib.), The Naval Battle of Lepanto. After 1571. National Historical Museum of Greece, Athens, inv. no. 3578 (photo: Leonidas Kourgiantakis).](image-url)
by twisting figures and the lively colors of his palette. His works often offer a visual response to the intense theological debates of the time, but Klontzas also painted contemporary historical events, such as the Naval Battle of Lepanto (1571), in which the allied European forces defeated the Ottoman fleet (fig. 6). This event had considerable repercussions in Crete, as many Cretan ships and crews had taken part in this victory. Whatever the subject matter, in his best miniaturist works Klontzas creates a pulsating universe, which can be read on many levels (cat., nos. 32, 33). They seduce the observer with their charm, while at the same time requiring a certain erudition to decipher their meaning.26

Michael Damaskenos worked for some years in Venice and knew contemporary Venetian painting first hand. As we know from written sources, he owned drawings by Parmigianino and came into direct contact with some of the most important exponents of Venetian Mannerism.27 His figures, unlike those of Klontzas, have an intense monumentality and classicizing beauty. Despite the Mannerist-inspired crowding and movement in many of his works, his icons are marked by balanced composition and a restrained expressiveness, features that for the most part could describe the enduring characteristics of Cretan painting. The continued adherence to these features may perhaps explain the tremendous impact Damaskenos’s compositions had on later Cretan and Ionian painters. His icons were copied over and over again in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, because despite their innovative iconography they coexist easily with the classicizing tendency in Palaiologan painting that the Cretan painters had adopted. The most typical example is an icon of Saint Nicholas from Corfu.28 The central figure of the full-length saint is a work of the first half of the fifteenth century signed by Angelos. In the second half of the sixteenth century, the owner of the icon decided to add to it scenes from the life of the saint, and he turned to Michael Damaskenos to carry out the commission. This choice reflects an appreciation of the merits of the two artists, as well as a wise recognition of the compatibility of their styles.

Domenikos Theotokopoulos is outside the limits of this text, just as he himself broke the bounds of Cretan painting. His initial training as a Cretan icon painter, his early experiments with Italian art, and his subsequent unique career in European painting are the subject of other, more specialized studies (see the essay by Nicos Hadjinicolaou in this catalogue). All that needs to be said here is that the preoccupations Theotokopoulos expressed from his earliest Cretan works can be understood in the light of associated factors that shaped the cultural identity of his birthplace. From Candia, Theotokopoulos moved onto the main stage of European painting through gateways that had been opened up by the long-term coexistence, conflicts, contradictions, and interaction between Greeks and Latins in Venetian Crete.

Notes
3. For a general overview of the history of Crete, see Panayiotakos 1987–88.
20. On the various types of signatures on Venetian works of the 15th and 16th centuries and on the use of the cartellino, see Matthew 1998, esp. 620–29.
22. On the trade in Western books in Crete and in Greece in general, see Dimitrakos 1982, esp. 175–76; Kakelmans 1960, 152–76, and more specifically on the Protestant books of Manousos Manas, p. 133. Indeed, it was not only Manousos Manas but also the physician Ioannis Kassianos and the teacher Francesco Gentile who were tried by the Inquisition in Candia and condemned as heretical supporters of the Reformation (Panayiotakos 1986, 186). On Francesco Porrino, see Manousakas, Panayiotakos 1981, 7–118.