I

The Cretan Renaissance

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The island of Crete, situated at the crossroads of three continents, has experienced three long periods of foreign occupation in medieval and modern times. The Arab occupation, from 827 to 961, left almost nothing in the way of material remains and little or no evidence of cultural interchange. The Arabs fortified the main town with a deep defensive ditch which gave its name to the town: El Khandak, or in Greek Chandax. In the form Candia this appellation came to be applied to both the town and the whole island in the later Middle Ages. The second occupation, by the Most Serene Republic of Venice, is by far the longest of the three and the subject of this book. It lasted from 1211, when the Venetians finally succeeded in taking possession of the prize for which they had paid 1,000 marks to Boniface of Montferrat, until the Fall of Candia in 1669, after a siege lasting twenty-one years. Thus began the third period of occupation, by the Ottoman Turks, which was to end only in 1897. The physical evidence of the Turkish occupation is, of course, still visible in Crete today: domestic architecture and fortifications, as well as much of the paraphernalia of everyday life, bear witness in Crete, as in other parts of Greece, to the centuries of Ottoman domination. But while there are undisputed similarities between Greek and Ottoman culture at a popular level, there was remarkably little contact at the level of higher culture. This is in marked contrast to the situation which had developed by the end of the Venetian period of Cretan history; the nature and extent of cultural cross-fertilisation in the period now generally referred to as ‘the Cretan Renaissance’ will be a recurring theme in the pages which follow.

Throughout the history of the Greek-speaking people there have repeatedly been periods of intense cultural activity generated by contact with an outside culture, whether of the East or of the West. This happened for the first time in the so-called orientalising period of archaic Greece (c. 750–650 B.C.), in which contact with eastern culture, particularly that of the Phoenicians, precipitated rapid and far-reaching developments in art, religion and literature, as well as in material culture. Again in the Hellenistic period, renewed contact with the East played a large part in the evolution of a new literary form, the novel (Hägg 1983: 100–1). The Christianisation of Greek culture following the conversion of Constantine the Great is again an example of fruitful interaction with an external stimulus. In all these cases we are not dealing with a cultural ‘takeover’ by outsiders, but an opening-up of traditional cultural
forms and attitudes in response to the impact of unfamiliar beliefs, aesthetic conventions and techniques. The old is not swept away, but adapted to a new and challenging set of conventions.

The impact of Venetian culture on Crete was neither immediate nor decisive. In fact it is only in the last hundred years or so of Venetian rule that the processes we have been describing come to fruition, principally in the fields of painting and dramatic, pastoral and narrative poetry. It would be truer to say that Venice acted as a channel for the dissemination of the achievements of the Italian Renaissance to Crete, as happened in other Venetian possessions in Dalmatia and the Greek islands. None the less, Crete is the place *par excellence* where the meeting of the West with the Greek East took place.

For Venice Crete was primarily of importance as a trading base and stopping-point on her routes to the East. She acquired the privilege of free trade in Crete from the Byzantine Emperor John II shortly after 1126 (Nicol 1988: 81, 85–6). As a direct result of the Fourth Crusade Venice became master of a quarter and a half of a quarter of the Byzantine Empire. The Republic’s possessions in the aftermath of the commercial coup of 1204 included not only Crete, but also the Ionian islands of Corfú, Lefkadha, Ithaca, Zakynthos and Kefallonia, the Western Peloponnese including the ports of Methoni and Koroni (Modon and Coron), parts of Euboia (Negroponte) and the islands of Salamis, Aegina and Andros. The number and extent of Venetian possessions underwent considerable ebb and flow in the following centuries, but among the more important territories held for part of the period which concerns us were Cyprus (1489–1571), Naupaktos (Lepanto, 1497–99), Patras (1408–13, 1417–19), Monemvasia (1464–1540), Naupliu (1388–1540), Kythira (Cerigo, 1363–1797) and Naxos (1437–1500 and 1511–17).1 The events of 1204 made Venice a maritime empire, within which Crete occupied a vital strategic position for four and a half centuries.

The political, administrative and social history of the Venetian occupation of Crete is dealt with in Chapter 2 of this volume. Here we shall merely highlight some aspects of the intellectual and cultural contacts between Crete and Venice, as background to the detailed discussion of Cretan literary activities which are the subject of the succeeding chapters.

The cultural and intellectual traditions of Crete at the beginning of the Venetian period are essentially those of Byzantium.2 Given the turbulent history of the first two centuries of Venetian rule in Crete, it is hardly surprising that there is little evidence of intellectual contacts between native

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1 It would be difficult to depict, on a single map, the extent of Venetian possessions in the Eastern Mediterranean. The territories concerned changed hands at various different dates, some of them several times. In addition there were islands held by Venetian families, for example in the Cyclades, but not ruled directly by Venice.

2 It is indicative that the names of Byzantine emperors continued to be mentioned in inscriptions in rural Orthodox churches for two centuries after the conquest.
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Cretans and Venetians in this period. The Greeks, smarting under the harsh ecclesiastical policies of Venice and economic and political repression, for the most part continued to identify their religious and cultural attitudes with those of Byzantium. Literacy, on the available evidence, was at a low ebb, although the healthy first signs of an emerging vernacular literature are noted as early as the last decades of the fourteenth century (see Chapter 3). In general Venetian intellectuals who found themselves in Crete remained as ignorant of the learned Greek language as Cretans did of classical Latin and its literature. Nevertheless, there are sporadic indications that the study of classical Greek and its literature continued in Crete in the fourteenth century. Most significant is the information that around 1350 a Greek from Calabria by the name of Leontius Pilatus spent several years in Crete improving his knowledge of Greek. Leontius was later associated with Petrarch (to whom he briefly gave Greek lessons) and through him came to know Boccaccio well (see Pertusi 1961/2). The inference is that Leontius found in Crete facilities for studying classical Greek which were not available in Southern Italy. The existence of numerous manuscripts of classical and Byzantine authors copied in Crete in the fourteenth century is further evidence that by the second half of the century, if not earlier, Crete had become an important cultural centre. We may note in passing the interesting case of Petros Philarges, who received his basic education from the Franciscans in Crete before going on to study in the West. After studying at Oxford and Padua (1357) he taught as a professor in the University of Paris, and at the end of his career was elected pope as Alexander V (1409–10), the only Greek to ascend the papal throne since early medieval times (Geanakoplos 1976: 194, 201, 209).

In the fifteenth century Crete figures in the itineraries of numerous scholars in transit from Byzantium to the West, where they contributed significantly to the development of Renaissance scholarship as teachers of Greek, manuscript copyists and editors and correctors for the printing-houses of Venice and other European cities. Others, like Michael Apostolitis, settled in Crete (in his case not without reluctance and frequent complaint). Apostolitis (1420–80) fled from Constantinople to Crete after the Fall and spent most of his remaining years there, teaching, copying manuscripts and training young copyists in the scriptorium which he founded in Kastro. He also made frequent journeys to Constantinople to collect manuscripts and visited Italy several times. His son Arsenios (1468/9–1535) continued his work in Crete before emigrating to Italy. He was active as a copyist in Florence and as an editor/publisher in Venice, from where he revisited Crete (1497–9), probably to collect manuscripts for Aldus Manutius. Another Constantinopolitan who sought temporary refuge in Crete after the Fall was the young Ianos Laskaris (Janus Lascaris, 1445–1534). Befriended by the Venetian prefect of Crete Thomas Celso, he went on to Venice 'lured by the gifts distributed by Bessarion to promising young Greeks', to become one of the foremost scholars of his generation (Geanakoplos 1962: 49).
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These and other refugees from the Byzantine Empire undoubtedly played a part in the rapid growth of scholarly activity which has been noted in Crete in the second half of the fifteenth century, although the role of Venetian administrators as patrons and the growing interest in Greek scholarship in Venice itself are also significant factors (Geanakoplos 1962: 51). At the same time there was a growing number of native Cretans who evinced scholarly inclinations and contributed to this movement, both in Crete itself and in Venice and beyond. In the early part of the fifteenth century, a group of scholars gathered around the learned Ioannis Symeonakis, protopapas of Candia. A productive copyist, he continued the best traditions of Byzantine scholarship and numbered among his pupils a major Italian scholar, Rinuccio of Arezzo. Others of his group were George of Trebizond (born in Crete in 1395), who later distinguished himself in Venice as an Aristotelian scholar and teacher of Latin, and the copyist Michael Lygizos, who composed one of the first commentaries on Thucydides. Cretan copyists of the fifteenth and the first half of the sixteenth centuries played a significant role in the dissemination of classical texts to the West, many of them also functioning as teachers of Greek and as editors.

Venice was the natural destination of large numbers of Greek scholars, both from the Byzantine lands and from Crete and other Venetian possessions. There had been Greeks living in Venice since the city’s infancy, but it is only from the fifteenth century that it is possible to speak of an organised Greek community. The fact that many parts of the former Byzantine Empire were now under Venetian rule, with consequent ease of communications, drew many Greeks to the Serenissima in the years before and after the Fall of Constantinople. By 1478 it is estimated that there were already some 4,000 Greeks living in Venice. According to one report (perhaps exaggerated) their numbers had swollen to 15,000 by 1580 (Geanakoplos 1962: 60–1). The community’s relations with the Venetian authorities were in large measure determined by the prevailing ecclesiastical climate; intolerance and persecution frequently manifested themselves when an issue of policy arose. From 1456 onwards the Greeks repeatedly petitioned for the right to establish their own church; finally, in 1539 the cornerstone of the Church of San Giorgio dei Greci was laid and in 1573 the building was completed.4

From an analysis of the membership registers of the Greek Confraternity or Scuola (established in 1498), we have valuable information about the origins and occupations of Greeks living in Venice. In the years from 1498 to 1530 Greeks of Cypriot origin constituted the most numerous group among the

3 At its peak about 1570 the total population of Venice numbered nearly 190,000 (Lane 1973: 333).
4 From 1470 the Greeks, officially Uniates, had been allowed the use of a side-chapel in the Church of San Biagio; from 1527 they worshipped in a temporary church (see Geanakoplos 1962: 62–6, with some inconsistencies). For a detailed account of the establishment of the Greek church in Venice see now Manoussacas 1989.
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membership of the *Scuola*, followed by Cretans. Between 1533 and 1562 the Cretans took third place behind Greeks from Nafplio and Corfu. A wide variety of trades and professions is represented: tailors, sword-makers, gold workers (*tiraori* and *batiori*), barbers and barber-surgeons, cloth-workers (*simadori*), painters and craftsmen of all kinds, *specieri* (who purveyed perfumes, spices, oil, wax etc.), caulkers, builders and carpenters are the occupational groups who participated most actively in the affairs of the *Scuola*. Among women members we find nuns, seamstresses, wet-nurses and housekeepers, although the largest group describe themselves as housewives. We also find a significant number of scholarly men, including copyists, printers and teachers. Finally there are numerous mercenary soldiers (*stradioti*), sailors and merchants (see Mavroedidi 1976). Since male membership of the *Scuola* was limited (initially to 250), these registers do not present a complete picture of the Greek community of Venice, but they do indicate the range and diversity of the Greeks’ participation in the economy of sixteenth-century Venice.

The newly established printing industry provided employment for many Greek scholars and artisans. In the last quarter of the fifteenth century Venice was the busiest centre of printing in the whole of Europe; it produced over half the books printed in Italy before 1500. It was the presence in Venice of a substantial number of skilled Greek copyists and textual scholars, together with the fact that Venice was an important centre in the trade of Greek manuscripts, that led Aldus Manutius to establish his printing-press there in 1490. The first book containing Greek characters to be printed in Venice was the 1471 edition of the *Erotetmata* of Manuel Chrysoloras. Between 1471 and 1476 Nicolas Jenson printed a number of Latin texts which contained Greek quotations, but the first printed book entirely in Greek was produced not in Venice (as was once thought), but in Milan. This was another grammatical work, the *Epitome* of Konstantinos Laskaris, printed in 1476 with type designed by the Cretan Dhimitrios Dhamilas (da Milano) (Vranoussis 1986: 31–3). Venice was, however, the location for another pioneering venture in Greek printing. In 1486 the Cretans Laonikos Kavvadjatos, *protopapas* of Chania, and Alexander, the son of George the priest, of Candia, each printed a Greek work: the pseudo-Homerian *Battrachomyomachia* and a *Psalter*. Laonikos was a pupil of the renowned Michael Apostolis, but little else is known about these two enterprising Cretans; they do not appear to have printed any more books.

The establishment of the Aldine Press is of course a major landmark in the history of Greek printing. Before Manutius began his work, only a dozen Greek books had been printed in the whole of Italy. His first editions were probably the *Hero and Leander* of Musaeus and the *Galeomyomachia* of

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5 A further practical consideration may have been the existence of a flourishing paper industry at nearby Padua.
Theodore Prodromus, produced in 1494. From then until 1515, with a lull from 1506 to 1508 because of the troubled political situation, he was engaged in the printing of classical Greek texts – although he also produced important editions of Latin and vernacular authors, including Dante, Petrarch and Bembo. For his Greek editions he soon had a competitor in the person of the Cretan Zacharias Kalliergis, whose first publication is dated 1499. Unlike Aldus, Kalliergis was concerned exclusively with Greek books. His first four publications, produced in 1499 and 1500 in partnership with the wealthy Cretan Nikolaos Vlastos, were all editions of lesser known works on the Greek language, philosophy and medicine. For the first of these, the *Etymologicum Magnum*, another Cretan, Markos Mousouros, acted as editor. Kalliergis was living in Padua from 1501, but he resumed printing in Venice in 1509 with three books of an ecclesiastical nature. His preface to his edition of the *Horologion* is addressed ‘to all Orthodox Christians everywhere’, and marks the beginning of an important project to print a series of liturgical texts for the use of Orthodox Christians. Kalliergis was prevented from completing this programme himself. The baton passed to Andreas Kounadhis, a merchant from Patras, who in 1521 entered into an agreement with the da Sabbio family of printers to produce a series of Greek editions. By 1523 three editions had appeared: a *Psalter*, a *Parakleitike* and a *Triodion*. Despite the death of Kounadhis in that year, the da Sabbio found other backers and continued their work until the middle of the century, producing more than seventy Greek editions. Most importantly they were responsible for the first concerted attempt to print editions of literary works in vernacular Greek.

The first vernacular text had in fact appeared in print in 1509. It was a Cretan poem, the *Apokopos* of Bergadhis (see further Chapter 3). Until recently it was thought that the first edition of this work was published in 1519. The discovery of a copy of a 1509 edition, printed in Venice by Nikolaos Kalliergis, the son of Zacharias, has radically revised the early history of Greek printing, at least as far as vernacular works are concerned (see Layton 1990). A second edition of the *Apokopoulos* issued from the da Sabbio press in 1534. Other Cretan works printed by the da Sabbio family include the *Theseid*, *Apollonios*, the *Chapbook of the Donkey* and *Belisarios*.

The inauguration of the printing of demotic literature is an important development in Modern Greek cultural history. The connection with Venice made this possible. Vernacular works by Cretan poets, and indeed by poets from the Ionian Isles, Koroni and elsewhere, could now reach a wide audience throughout the Greek-speaking world. These works, and the liturgical texts, provided the Greeks with their principal reading matter, and also teaching material for acquiring basic literacy, over the next two or three centuries.

6 On Mousouros (c. 1470–1517), the most influential of the Greek scholars who pursued careers in the West, see Geanakoplos 1962: 110–66.
7 For a recent discussion on the problem of the date and provenance of the first edition of the *Apokopos* see Luciani 1987, now superseded by Layton 1990.
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Another magnet attracting Greeks to Northern Italy was the pursuit of higher education at the University of Padua. Venice had no university of her own, so it was at Padua that her future lawyers, doctors and grammarians acquired their training. It was not until 1463 that a Chair of Greek was established at Padua, the first occupant being the Athenian Demetrius Chalcondyles (1463–71). His successors included the Cretan humanist Markos Mousouros (1503–9); he taught many of the major scholars of his generation, who flocked from all over Europe to hear his lectures. Cretans came to Padua in considerable numbers to seek higher education and professional training. It is estimated that more than a thousand Cretans studied there between 1500 and 1700, and that at least half of the Greeks studying there before 1669 were of Cretan origin. Some fifty-one Cretans are listed in the register of graduates for the sixteenth century (making them by far the largest group of Greeks who graduated from Padua); this figure ignores the much larger number of students who did not proceed to their final examinations (Ploumidhis 1974a: 72). Smaller numbers of young Cretans studied at Verona, Bologna, Ferrara and Milan, while from 1577 others, mainly from the poorer classes, attended the College of St Athanasius in Rome, founded by Pope Gregory XIII exclusively for Greek students. (Between 1577 and 1669 about a third of its students came from Crete.)

Thus far we have been concentrating on the opportunities opened up by the link with Venice for Greeks, and Cretans in particular, to study and work in Italy. What of Crete itself? The existence of private tutors offering rudimentary education in the principal towns of Crete is well documented (see Chapter 2). Soon after the Fall of Constantinople a school was founded in Candia, under the control of the Greek Uniates, on the instructions of Cardinal Bessarion. This school continued to function throughout the sixteenth century, but its rigid Catholic orientation meant that Orthodox parents would have been reluctant to send their children there. In 1501 a group of Candiot nobles petitioned the authorities to appoint a public teacher of Latin and Greek, but apparently to no effect.8 Cretan parents therefore had to choose between private tutors, some of whom opened their own schools in the cities, or the school endowed by Bessarion. Notwithstanding the lack of public educational facilities, by the sixteenth century there is evidence of a generally high level of intellectual and cultural activity in Crete. Students returning from Padua or Rome, Venetian officials and visiting scholars combined to create in Crete a cultural life not too far removed from that of the Italian cities. Literary societies, or academies, eventually existed in each of the three main cities of Crete. The first, the Academy of the Vivi, was established in Rethymno in 1562 by Francesco Barozzi (1537–1604). A Veneto-Cretan noble, Barozzi had studied and taught at Padua before returning to Crete, where he

8 It was not until the last decades of Venetian rule that such a teacher was appointed; see Panagiotakis 1988: 178.
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wrote and published a number of works on mathematics and played a leading part in the intellectual life of the island. His important collection of manuscripts, the codices Barocciani, is now in the Bodleian Library in Oxford (Panagiotakis 1974; see also Bancroft-Marcus 1982/3). The Academy of the Stravaganti was founded in Kastro by Andrea Cornaro in 1591 and has left behind a body of publications and manuscript poetry (Panagiotakis 1968; Panagiotakis and Vincent 1970). It is now widely believed that Vitsentzos Kornaros, the poet of the Erotopirinos, was the brother of the Academy’s founder and himself a member (see further Chapter 9). Finally, Chania had its Academy of the Sterioli, which was certainly in existence in 1632 and may have been functioning for several years, or even decades, before that date (Bancroft-Marcus 1982/3: 49–50). Although there is little direct evidence to connect native Cretans with these academies, it is possible that they provided one of the most important fora for Italian–Greek cultural interchange. Further archive research may shed more light on their activities and the extent to which native Cretans participated in them. For the moment we may simply conclude that the existence of such academies, modelled on the Italian institution, is evidence for a high level of cultural activity in the Cretan towns in the last century of Venetian rule.

Contact with Venice also had a far-reaching effect on Cretan painting, which was of course rooted in the Byzantine tradition. In the second half of the fourteenth century new techniques in fresco painting were already being developed. Towards the end of that century and in the early part of the fifteenth the tradition was renewed with the arrival of craftsmen from Constantinople, contributing distinct classicising tendencies to Cretan painting.

In the years after the Fall of Constantinople we may note the development of a ‘composite style’, in which traditional Byzantine iconographic elements were blended with elements from the Italian Renaissance. The work of the major fifteenth-century painter Angelos Akotandos9 (who used to be dated a century later) already shows the presence of secondary Italian influence grafted on to the Palaeologan tradition. After 1453 many Constantinopolitan painters established themselves in Crete and adapted to the somewhat different expectations of their clients there. By now fresco painting is in decline, and Cretan painters turn their attention to the portable icon; by the end of the fifteenth century there was a flourishing export trade in Cretan icons (Cattapan 1972). The work of Andreas Ritzos (active 1451–92), who produced icons in both Byzantine and Italian styles, had a far-reaching influence on contemporary and later artists. But the tradition of fresco painting did not die out. In the first half of the sixteenth century its principal exponent is Theophanes the Cretan;

9 Akotandos left a fascinating will, in Greek, written in 1436 just before he set off on a trip to Constantinople; in it he gave instructions for the disposition of his paintings and the tools of his trade in the event of his death (Manousakas 1961b).
assisted by his two sons, he was in great demand throughout Greece, and notable examples of his work survive in monasteries of the Meteora, Mount Athos and elsewhere.

In the sixteenth century a number of Cretan artists enriched the tradition, several of them having no difficulty in accommodating the Renaissance and Mannerist tastes of their patrons. Michael Dhamaskinos (born 1530–5, died after 1591) is among the most successful. Born in Kastro, he worked in Venice, and perhaps elsewhere in Italy, as well as in Crete; about a hundred of his paintings survive. His work is distinguished by an eclectic blending of Byzantine and Italian elements, in which however the essential Byzantine conception of the icon remains recognisable. His contemporary Dominikos Theotokopoulos, better known as El Greco (1540/1–1614), received his initial training in Crete before setting off in 1567 to seek his fortune in Venice and, eventually, Toledo. Already described as ‘maestro’ in documents of 1563, Theotokopoulos, like Dhamaskinos, learned to paint in both western and Byzantine styles. By 1566, still in Crete, he had produced icons in the Byzantine tradition, as a document of that year proves (Constantoudaki 1975). At the age of twenty-seven, however, he opted for the West, while Dhamaskinos remained attached to the Cretan tradition, which he enriched immeasurably with elements drawn from a variety of Italian artistic schools. The other major figure of the sixteenth century is Georgios Klontzas (active 1562–1608). His icons are noted for their miniaturist technique, crowded with people and Renaissance-style buildings.

In the generation after Dhamaskinos and Klontzas, some Cretan painters, such as Jeremias Palladhas, Emmanouil Lambardhos and Viktor, consciously rejected Italian models, returning to early sixteenth-century techniques, while others continued the dialogue with western styles. Theodhoros Poulakis, a native of Chania, succeeded in producing work in both conservative and westernising styles, the latter echoing the Baroque. Like many artists of his generation (for example, Emmanouil Tzanes Bounialis), particularly after the beginning of the Cretan War, Poulakis left Crete to pursue his profession in more congenial surroundings, in his case first Venice and later Corfu, where he died in 1692.

The variety and richness of Cretan painting cannot be adequately discussed in the brief space available here. In recent years much new evidence has come to light about the artists themselves, their patrons and their methods of working, as a result of archival research. We now know, for example, a good deal about their organisation, from the sixteenth century if not before, in professional guilds (see Konstandoudaki-Kitromilidhou 1981). Information is also coming to light about the existence in Crete of private collections of both religious and secular art. All this says much about the vitality of Cretan art and its significance in the cultural life of the Cretan urban centres.

The mingling of two cultural traditions which characterises Cretan painting of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is also evident in architecture.
Sebastiano Serlio and Palladio, whose ideas were known in Crete chiefly from their highly influential books, left their mark on many buildings of the time, monastic, public and domestic.

In the field of music, although the evidence is more fragmentary, a somewhat similar process seems to have been at work. Western polyphonic music was not only performed in the monasteries and churches of the Cretan cities, but also exercised an influence on the development of Orthodox church music in Crete. The only Cretan composer of the Venetian period known by name is the Catholic priest Frangiskos Leonaritis (c. 1518–c. 1572). He probably acquired his early musical training in Italy, and from 1536 he was organist of the Catholic church of St Titus in Kastro. He returned to Italy in 1549, becoming a cantore in the choir of St Mark’s Cathedral in Venice. Later his career took him briefly to Padua and then to Germany, where he entered the service of the Duke of Bavaria, Albert V. In 1564 and 1566 he published in Venice two collections of motets; other works of his, including three masses, survive in manuscript. He returned to Crete in 1568 and resumed his former office as a canon of St Titus. Leonaritis’s career is in many ways a fascinating parallel to that of El Greco – indeed he was known as ‘il Greco’ in Italian musical circles – with the difference that he returned to his native island at the end of his life. Leonaritis’s case is unique in Cretan musical history: we know of no other composer who successfully adapted to western music. None the less, evidence is now emerging that Cretan music, both ecclesiastical and secular, experienced a creative dialogue with its western counterpart; the process was not greatly dissimilar in kind to what was happening in literature and painting (Panagiotakis 1988: 291–315).

Our primary concern in this book is with literature. Here we shall not discuss specific works in any detail, but rather try to identify some significant characteristics of the literary production of Crete between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries and to provide some basic information on its language and metre. Most commentators divide Cretan literature into two periods: the first from the late fourteenth century to about 1580, the second spanning the last ninety or so years of Venetian rule. The latter period is easily characterised: Cretan literature comes under the influence of the Italian Renaissance and reaches its maturity in verse dramas covering all the neoclassical types practised in Italy: comic, tragic, pastoral and religious. In addition we find examples of pastoral poetry and epic-romance, for which Guarini and Ariosto are the Cretans’ principal masters.

The earlier period is more difficult to sum up because the range of genres practised is as varied as the poetic competence of the writers. Some works, particularly those of a moralising or didactic kind, can be viewed as a continuation of late Byzantine vernacular poetry. Others reveal an awareness of developments in western poetry, for example the genre of the love dream. Themes characteristic of the folk tradition, such as exile or the Underworld, appear frequently in the work of early Cretan poets, some of whom are also