

# Orphans at Cretan *Syssitia*

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ON THE CUSTOM of *syssitia* (common messes) in ancient Crete, some information has down come to us from Ephorus, Aristotle, Plato, and Plutarch.<sup>1</sup> The surviving Cretan literature, on the other hand, that refers to this custom and its conduct is quite fragmentary. Specifically, one source is Dosiadas, a Hellenistic historian from Kydonia.<sup>2</sup> His book on Crete (*Kretika*) is lost, but its most extensive fragment offers fairly detailed information about the conduct of *syssitia* in the city of Lyttos.<sup>3</sup> A second source on *syssitia* in Crete is Pyrgion, also a historian from Crete, who like Dosiadas is dated to the Hellenistic period. Pyrgion offers very little and very specific information about *syssitia* in the single fragment preserved from his lost *Kretika Nomima* (*Cretan Customs*):<sup>4</sup>

Πυργίων δ' ἐν τρίτῳ Κρητικῶν Νομίμων “ἐν τοῖς συσσιτίοις”  
φησὶν “οἱ Κρήτες καθήμενοι συσσιτοῦσι.” καὶ ὅτι ἀβαμβάκευτα

<sup>1</sup> Ephorus, preserved by Strabo at 10.4.20 (*FGrHist* 70 F 149), Aristotle (*Pol.* 1272a12–21), Plato (*Leg.* 626A, 842B), Plutarch (*Lyc.* 12). The custom of *syssitia* was also practiced in Sparta, where it was called *phiditia* (Strab. 10.4.17, 19; Pl. *Leg.* 842B, Arist. *Pol.* 1271b 40, Plut. *Lyc.* 10).

<sup>2</sup> *FGrHist* 458 F 2. For an extended discussion of the Dosiadas fragment see A. Strataridaki, “The Historians of Ancient Crete: A Study in Regional Historiography,” *KretChron* 28–29 (1988–1989) 137–193, esp. 145–146.

<sup>3</sup> Dosiadas refers to the distribution of the citizens of Lyttos in groups (*hetaireiai*), so that the men participated in *syssitia*. He also offers details about the contributions to *syssitia* by citizens and slaves, as well as about the participation of boys, who sat by their fathers at the common meals.

<sup>4</sup> *FGrHist* 467 F 1 (from Ath. 143E). In his commentary (p.341) Jacoby states that perhaps Pyrgion attempted to complement Dosiadas in his account of the Cretan public messes. For discussion of the work of Pyrgion see Strataridaki, *KretChron* 28–29 (1988–1989) 146.

τοῖς ὀρφανοῖς παρατίθεται· καὶ ὅτι οἱ νεώτατοι αὐτῶν ἐφεστᾶσι διακονοῦντες· καὶ ὅτι μετ' εὐφημίας σπείσαντες τοῖς θεοῖς μερίζουσι τῶν παρατιθεμένων ἅπασιν. “ἀπονέμουσι δὲ καὶ τοῖς υἱοῖς κατὰ τὸν θάκον τὸν τοῦ πατρὸς ὑφιζάνουσιν ἐξ ἡμσείας τῶν τοῖς ἀνδράσι παρατιθεμένων.” τοὺς δ' ὀρφανούς ἰσομερεῖς εἶναι “παρατίθεται δ' αὐτοῖς ἀβαμβάκευτα τῆι κράσει καθ' ἕκαστα τῶν νενομισμένων.” ἦσαν δὲ καὶ ξενικοὶ θάκοι καὶ τράπεζα τρίτη δεξιᾶς εἰσιόντων εἰς τὰ ἀνδρεία, ἦν Ξενίου τε Διὸς Ξενίαν τε προσηγόρευον.

Thus Pyrgion mentions the participants (men/citizens and boys) in *sysstitia* and the food (quantity and type) that was served, but he gives no hint as to where the custom took place. Among the boys, according to the author, orphans also were present. Regarding the maintenance of Cretan *sysstitia*, Aristotle (*Pol.* 1272a13–21) and Dosiadas (F 2) state that this institution depended on public revenues, on the male participants' private contribution to it, and on the contribution of the slaves.

It is quite interesting that the preserved information in Pyrgion refers not only to the participants in *sysstitia* but also to the quantity and type of food which they received. Pyrgion writes of whole-portion meals<sup>5</sup> served to the men and half-portion meals served to their sons. He places emphasis on the food offered to the orphans;<sup>6</sup> the meals offered to them were ἀβαμ-

<sup>5</sup> A relation between age and food certainly existed in antiquity and particularly in Crete. As Sallares holds (R. Sallares, *The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World* [New York 1991] 173), “an age class system may regulate access to food ... In the Cretan messes old men received larger portions of food than young men.”

<sup>6</sup> The Greek word *orphanos* means a fatherless child: S. Pomeroy, “Infanticide in Hellenistic Greece,” in A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (eds.), *Images of Women in Antiquity*<sup>2</sup> (London 1993) 207–222, esp. 216; and *Families in Classical and Hellenistic Greece: Representations and Realities* (Oxford 1997) 172. The fragment makes no mention of the cause of death of the orphans' fathers, but war was a frequent cause for men in antiquity. In fact, in the Hellenistic age Crete suffered from constant wars among its cities. Greek cities in general supported war orphans. It seems that Crete would not have been an exception; orphans would probably have been sustained by the state until they had reached maturity. A clear example of public support for war orphans comes from Athens, and this support extended μέχρι ἡβης. For an excellent discussion of the economic aid offered by the Athenian state to its war

βάκευτα, a term meaning, at a first glance, “unseasoned.”<sup>7</sup> It is noteworthy that the orphans were served whole-portion meals. Thus the sons received half-portion meals, seasoned, while the orphans had whole-portion meals, but unseasoned. This distinction in food, as described by Pyrgion, has been recognized by historians of ancient Crete, who however have not proceeded to explain the reasons for the practice.<sup>8</sup> I argue here that the unseasoned whole-portion meals given to orphans substituted for the absence of seasoning for those meals, and that the distinct food portions and meal types could have promoted sentiments of equality among all boys at *sysitia*. In this way all potential citizens were encouraged to take part in this custom—a military, political, and social institution—which set for its participants one goal, to learn how to best serve the state.

In attempting to explain why the meals of the young participants (sons and orphans) in *sysitia* were different in type and quantity, it is helpful to address the following questions: (a) What is the true meaning of the word ἀβαμβάκευτα in this context, and what does it imply? (b) What is the age of the sons and the orphans participating in *sysitia*? (c) Why were the orphans given a whole-portion meal (like the men), but unseasoned? (The boys whose fathers were also present at *sysitia* were given half the men’s portion, apparently seasoned: ἐξ ἡμισείας τῶν τοῖς ἀνδράσι παρατιθεμένων.)

On the first question, the adjective ἀβαμβάκευτα is a derivative of βάμβρα<sup>9</sup> or βάμμα.<sup>10</sup> Pyrgion’s use of this word denotes

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orphans see R. S. Stroud, “Greek Inscriptions. Theozotides and the Athenian Orphans,” *Hesperia* 40 (1971) 280–301, esp. 288.

<sup>7</sup> LSJ s.v.: “not seasoned, of food.” The word appears only in Pyrgion.

<sup>8</sup> In general, Pyrgion has received little comment. At *FGHist* p.341 Jacoby only states that the meaning of ἀβαμβάκευτα is not clear. See also A. Mandalaki, *Koinonia kai oikonomia kata tin archaiki kai klassiki epochi* (Heraklion 2004) 216, who holds that it is not easy to explain the purpose of this distinction.

<sup>9</sup> LSJ s.v.: “= βάμμα (Syrac.), Hsch.”

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Hsch. s.v. βάμμα· τὸ χρώμα. καὶ μύρου τι γένος. καὶ τὸ ἔμβαμμα. LSJ s.v. βάμμα, “that in which a thing is dipped,” ἔμβαμμα “sauce.” Thus ἀβαμβάκευτος would denote food without sauces, i.e. unseasoned. See also

that the orphans' meals lacked some sort of seasoning or additives, which were included in the other participants' meals. What those additives may have been will be discussed below with the third question.

Concerning the age of the younger participants in *sysstitia*, the men's sons were minors, as Pyrgion calls them οἱ νεώτατοι.<sup>11</sup> Although the orphans are not characterized clearly as νεώτατοι, they must have been of the same age as the other boys. This is clear from the phrase ἀπονέμουσι δὲ καὶ τοῖς υἱοῖς, which should be interpreted in relation to τοὺς δ' ὀρφανούς in the following sentence. The contrasted meaning would be: the sons were given half portion, whereas the orphans were given whole portion but unseasoned. This contrast leads to the inference that the two groups of boys (sons and orphans) were of the same age.

Then the third question: why were the orphans given whole-portion food, like the adults, but without seasoning, while the other boys were served half-portion food, which was seasoned? First, it seems reasonable that an orphan, as a son of a citizen or *hetairos* (a member of a *hetaireia*) who had passed away, would be entitled to the half-portion food which all sons received. This, like all portions provided to the participants in *sysstitia*, came from the public revenues<sup>12</sup> that sustained the institution. Second, the extra half-portion meal for the orphans was added to the half portion which they as minors were eligible to receive; it was probably provided by the state and must have signified the state's care for the orphans, as will be discussed below.

<sup>11</sup> A. Dalby, *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z* (London/New York 2003) 293 s.v. "sauce."

<sup>11</sup> οἱ νεώτατοι here is the equivalent of τοῖς νεωτέροις, which is employed by Dosiadas F 2 speaking also of the citizens' sons.

<sup>12</sup> According to Ephorus F 149, all citizens, wealthy and poor, had their meals at the *andreia*, ὅπως τῶν ἴσων μετὰσχοιεν τοῖς εὐπόροις οἱ πενέστεροι δημοσίᾳ τρεφόμενοι. In fact, according to Dosiadas F 2 and Aristotle *Pol.* 1272a13–21, the public revenues were distributed to the citizens' *oikoi*, and then the citizens contributed their share to their *hetaireia*. Cf. Mandalaki, *Koinonia* 189 ff., and R. F. Willetts, *Aristocratic Society in Ancient Crete* (London 1955) 20–29.

The reason for the unseasoned food given to the orphans remains to be considered. Pyrgion uses ἀβαμβάκευτα to refer apparently to plain food, without any additives or extras that would presumably make it tastier. In an attempt to define those additives, two interpretations are proposed here. The first would involve food known as ὄψον. ὄψα were plant and animal proteins, such as olives, vegetables, cheese, figs, meat, fish, which in small quantities, and whenever possible, supplemented the basic, staple food of the Greeks,<sup>13</sup> which was bread (or any type of cereal base food, such as barley cake). The staple food became tastier if supplemented with ὄψα, which could also be called ἡδύσματα.<sup>14</sup> Thus, ὄψα could have been the seasoning added to the Cretans' staple food. So the word ἀβαμβάκευτα might denote "basic food without ὄψα."

A second interpretation of ἀβαμβάκευτα would relate it to the native herbs of Crete, which have been used for taste in cooking up to the present day.<sup>15</sup> Might one deduce that the

<sup>13</sup> A. Hug, "ὄψον," *RE* 18 (1939) 959–960. For an extended discussion of the ancient Greeks' diet, see J. Wilkins and S. Hill, *Food in the Ancient World* (Oxford 2006) 112 ff.

<sup>14</sup> LSJ s.v.: "relish." See J. Davidson, "Opsophagia. Revolutionary Eating at Athens," in J. Wilkins, D. Harvey, and M. Dobson (eds.), *Food in Antiquity* (Exeter 1995) 204–213, esp. 206 on making food more palatable: "Opson is an additional extra, a mere garnish." So Socrates of the ideal society: "I forgot that they will have *opson* too: salt and oil and cheese and whatever vegetables are to be gathered from the fields for the kitchen" (*Pl. Resp.* 372c).

<sup>15</sup> A. Chaniotis, "Milking the Mountains: Economic Activities on the Cretan Uplands in the Classical and Hellenistic Period," in A. Chaniotis (ed.), *From Minoan Farmers to Roman Traders: Sidelights on the Economy of Ancient Crete* (Stuttgart 1999) 181–220, esp. 219–220, cites a list of Cretan herbs used in medicine or cooking. These herbs, some of which are still popular in modern Cretan cuisine, like *origanon*, *skordion*, *prassion*, *tragoriganon*, *thymus*, *sesseli*, most probably could all have been used for seasoning the food of the Cretans. One should not think of spices, like pepper or cinnamon: these came via long-distance trade, which was costly and dangerous; spices were not imported in Greece from the East until after the time of Alexander the Great. (See A. Dalby, *Dangerous Tastes: The Story of Spices* [London 2000].) And after Alexander and by the Roman period, imported spices in Greece were "not used predominantly for food ... imported spices were used in Greece and the Aegean to make perfumes and perfumed oils, to make

orphans' meal lacked herbs? If this were the case, the unseasoned meal of the orphans must have been prepared separately from the others', so as not to contain herbs. That, however, would not have been compatible with the role of *syssitia*, which, according to Ephorus, aimed at educating its participants to live a simple, disciplined, military way of life; only in this type of life could the citizens play their major role, i.e., to best serve the state.<sup>16</sup> Thus it would not have been possible for the orphans to receive separately prepared meals at *syssitia*.

So of the two possible interpretations of ἀβαμβάκευτα, the first (*opsa*) is more convincing than the second (native Cretan herbs). The orphans, then, must have been served staple food, without other dietary supplements. This interpretation is connected to the last question, the reason for the orphans' unseasoned whole-portion meal at *syssitia*. The answer must be sought partly in the private contribution of each citizen to his *hetaireia* for the function of *syssitia*.

Dosiadas says of the *syssitia* in Lyttos that the private contribution of each *hetairos* was a tenth of his own produce.<sup>17</sup> This contribution would probably have consisted of privately produced goods (e.g., fruit, vegetables, cheese) or of game. If we consider this in the context of Pyrgion's mention of ἀβαμβάκευτα, it seems that the citizens' contribution constituted the

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medicines, to make aromatic wines, and, later and less ubiquitously, to flavour food": A. Dalby, *Siren Feasts: A History of Food and Gastronomy in Greece* (London/New York 1996) 137.

<sup>16</sup> The educational role of *syssitia* is clearly indicated in Dosiadas F 2: ἀπὸ δὲ τοῦ δείπνου πρῶτον μὲν εἰώθησθαι βουλευέσθαι περὶ τῶν κοινῶν· εἶτα μετὰ ταῦτα μέμνηται τῶν κατὰ πόλεμον πράξεων ... προτρεπόμενοι τοὺς νεωτέρους εἰς ἀνδραγαθίαν.

<sup>17</sup> ἕκαστος τῶν γινομένων καρπῶν ἀναφέρει τὴν δεκάτην εἰς τὴν ἐταιρίαν (Dosiadas F 2); the *syssitia* in Lyttos was sustained through the public revenues, the contribution of the citizens, and a tax on the slaves. Aristotle, on the other hand, does not mention the existence of private lands (which would allow the citizens to make their own contributions), yet those lands were probably taken for granted by him, as he mentions a kind of joint ownership (*Pol.* 1271a28–29). See also *I.Cret.* IV 184.8–11: φέρειν δὲ τὸν ἐν Καυδοῖ φοικίοντανς τῶν γινομένων πάντων ἐν ταῖ χώραι δεκάταν καθὼς οἱ Γορτύνιοι, πλὴν θνατῶν καὶ τῶν λιμένων τὰς προσόδω καὶ λαχάνων.

*opsa*, i.e., the tasty supplements to the meals of both the *hetairoi* and their sons; and it was this very type of food which the orphans' meals lacked because of their fathers' absence.<sup>18</sup> The orphans received a whole-portion meal, though ἀβαμβάκευτα: half portion (i.e., the quantity that all minors received) plus an extra half portion, as a bonus. This extra half-portion, an additional half portion of staple meal, seems to have replaced the *opsa* absent from the orphans' meals, and must have come from the public revenues, reflecting the state's care for that group of minors at *syssitia*.

Moreover, beyond the economic interpretation for the distinct meals offered to boys and orphans, there is a second with social implications: it could be that via different meals the state intended to cultivate sentiments of equality among the younger members of *syssitia*. In other words, the young members' meals could have functioned as the state's exhortation to the boys that they should acknowledge the social hierarchy, which was established among all *syssitia* members, and was based on age.<sup>19</sup> In regard to the orphans, it seems that the unseasoned whole-portion meals might have meant that they were indeed distinct from the other boys. But by receiving whole portions, like the adults, the orphans might have considered themselves the imminent successors to their fathers (i.e., being the heads of their families) and, thus, standing closer to the citizens' status by comparison with the other boys. However, the state would limit such a conviction in the orphans by

<sup>18</sup> Athenaeus (141C) records Dicaearchus (fr.72 W.) stating that the Spartans contributed to their mess "a certain weight of cheese and figs" (transl. Gulick.) The similarities between the Spartan and the Cretan *syssitia* suggest that the Cretans, like the Spartans, would most probably be expected to bring to the *andreion* cheese or figs or game, as part of their tithic contribution to the mess. This implies that, upon the death of a *hetairos*, no one would undertake obligations (economic in nature) of the deceased to the *syssitia*, and thus his son would not receive seasoning or extras with his food.

<sup>19</sup> Willetts, *Aristocratic Society* 7–17, and his *Everyday Life in Ancient Crete* (London/New York 1969) 144–145, 162. In general, on the age class systems in ancient Greece, see Sallares, *Ecology* 160–192, and M. Kleijwegt, *Ancient Youth: The Ambiguity of Youth and the Absence of Adolescence in Greco-Roman Society* (Amsterdam 1991) xii–xv, 43–50.

providing them with unseasoned food. In this manner, the orphans would be reminded that, even though their meal was whole-portioned they were still minors, thus not yet ready to undertake their fathers' roles as citizens; the full citizen status was reflected in whole-portion seasoned meals. The half-portion meals given to the other boys also stood as the state's reminder of their status as minors, even though their meals were seasoned. Consequently, the distinction in food type and portions offered to the participants in *sysstitia* seems to have been part of the social control which the Cretan states exercised upon the boys in *sysstitia*, as part of their *agôgê*, before they joined the *agelae*.<sup>20</sup>

In sum, given the educational role of *sysstitia* to the citizens of Cretan states, Pyrgion sheds more light on this function of the institution: first, the state's care for orphans, so that they would be encouraged to participate in *sysstitia* and not feel inferior to their peers because of being orphans; secondly, the state's measures through distinct meals to alleviate social tensions among minors who participated in *sysstitia*; and third, the great significance of the citizens' private contributions<sup>21</sup> for the maintenance of *sysstitia*.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Dietary measures like these taken by Cretan states may have functioned as additional means of control applied to the young males in the *andreion*, where disputes among the youngsters seem to have been settled, as an inscription from Axos suggests (with ἀνδρηῖο and ἀνήβο): *I.Cret.* II v 25. Another inscription, from Eltynia (*I.Cret.* I x 2.6), allows for similar observations about the *andreia* as places for settling tensions.

<sup>21</sup> The absence of *opsa* from the orphans' meals seems to emphasize this significance, as the word ἀβαμβάχευτα occurs twice in the fragment.

<sup>22</sup> I would like to thank Professor K. J. Rigsby and the anonymous referees for their constructive suggestions on an earlier version of this paper.