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## A New *Epistomion* from Sfakaki, near Rethymno

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**Abstract:** Publication of a new gold *epistomion* unearthed during rescue excavations in the property of IRIS Hotel Inc. in the Sfakaki region near Rethymno. The new *epistomion* from Grave 7 belongs to category E, the so-called chaire-texts, and is identical to that incised on E4, bringing the total number of *epistomia* from Crete to sixteen (see Appendix).

**Keywords:** Bacchic, Orphic, Crete, *epistomion*, Phersephone, Plouton, Underworld.

During rescue excavations by the Ephorate of Antiquities in Rethymno in the property of the IRIS Hotel Inc. in the region of Sfakaki, thirty-eight graves came to light. In the same area and to the west of this property, earlier rescue excavations in the properties of Markos Polioudakis and Michalis Pyrgaroussis revealed twenty-seven and thirty graves respectively, apparently all part of a cemetery by the seashore to the N of the modern highway. The region Sfakaki, ca 8 km east of Rethymno and 10 km north from ancient Eleutherna, is in close proximity to the archaeologically better-known sites of Stavromenos and Chamalevri, where thanks to the excavations by the Rethymno Ephorate of Antiquities extensive settlement(s) and burial sites have come to light.<sup>1</sup> The area of Sfakaki-Stavromenos-Chamalevri probably constitutes the territory of an ancient city-state, whose name is uncertain, but its existence is confirmed by a 2nd century BCE inscription that refers to the institution of a city's *kosmoi* who were in charge of a sanctuary's renovation.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, evidence from Sfakaki is still too inconclusive to support its identification with one of Eleutherna's seaports in the north shore or some other settlement by the sea (fig. 1).

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<sup>1</sup> Tsatsaki/Flevari 2015; Tzifopoulos 2010, 53–59 (topography).

<sup>2</sup> Martínez Fernández/Tsatsaki/Kapranos 2008, 38–40; Tsatsaki 2020, 377–378.

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**Context and Chronology.** The thirty-eight graves in the property of IRIS Hotel Inc. are cut at two different levels and belong to four different types: sixteen are tile-graves, twenty-one cist-graves (fourteen simple and seven built) and one is a pit-grave (fig. 2). All graves were oriented on the E-W axis and eight extended to the eastern adjacent property where more were buried. Although most skeletal remains were found decomposed due to sea-corrosion, the deceased were in a supine position with head to the E with only one exception of a skull to the W in grave 20. Most of the grave-goods are 233 closed and small clay vessels of very few types (unguentaria, small amphorai and phialai, ladles, wine-jars, loom-weights), but also glass vessels, objects and beads, a pin, metal objects and jewelry (mainly bronze but a few of gold, iron, and lead), a number of silver and bronze coins, bone and stone objects, an obsidian flake, and an incised gold *epistomion*.

Based on the type of the graves and their grave-goods, the chronology for the thirty-eight graves covers the Hellenistic period to the middle of the 1st century CE, with the earliest burial belonging to the early 3rd BCE.

**Grave 7** (figs. 3 and 4). Cist-grave 7 was found intact covered with limestone slabs in second use. The grave is oriented W-E measuring 2,00 m x 0,88 m. Its floor consists of the local yellowish earth and its dimensions after the excavation are 1,50 m. x 0,51 m. (east) and 0,45 m. (west). The deceased was placed in a supine position with head to the E and hands parallel to the body. The *epistomion* was found under the lower jaw and spinal vertebrae and must have been placed on the lips of the deceased during the burial rites (fig. 5). The deceased's grave-goods include clay, glass and metal objects, among them: four clay bulbous unguentaria (fig. 6), similar to those found in Grave 1 of Polioudakis' plot at Sfakaki and dated to the last quarter of the 1st century BCE and the first half of the 1st century CE;<sup>3</sup> a lead pyxis with its lid (fig. 7),<sup>4</sup> similar to the one from Grave 3 in Polioudakis' plot; a pair of gold earrings with tiny fayence beads (fig. 8); a gold ring with a standing female in the type of Aphrodite Anadyomene; and the unfolded gold *epistomion* (figs. 9 and 10). The types of grave goods indicate that the deceased was probably a female.

The grave-goods are quite similar to the ones from Grave 1 of Polioudakis' property wherefrom *epistomion* E4 and Grave I of Pyrgaroussis' property wherefrom *epistomion* B12 (Grave I in Pyrgaroussis' plot is dated to the 2nd or early 1st century BCE on the basis of its unguentaria).<sup>5</sup>

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3 Gavrilaki/Tzifopoulos 1998, 345 fig. 4 (II 6624), 346.

4 Gavrilaki 1995, 458, pl. 253y right.

5 Tzifopoulos 2010, 24–29.

**Inscription** (Rethymno, Archaeological Museum, inv. no. M 5596, fig. 10). The incised gold *epistomion* in the shape of the mouth is preserved in excellent condition with only minor wrinkles and tears. As can be surmised, there are no holes through which would pass a string for fastening. It is almost identical to E4, except that instead of being rounded the edges are cut as in the unincised G2,<sup>6</sup> both from graves in Polioudakis' property.

**Bibliography:** Tsatsaki/Flevari 2015, 348–350, figs.7–10.

Dimensions: H. 0.09 m, W. 0.052 m, Th. less than 0.001 m, LH. 0.001–0.002 m.  
25 BCE–50 CE

Πλούτωνι  
Φερσεφόνη.

(Greetings) to Plouton and Persephone.

In line 2 the spelling of Persephone's name with iota omitted in the dative is identical to that in E4. The letters are carefully engraved, although as in E4 they appear pressed, and their shapes are similar to that of other Cretan *epistomia*, especially E4: rectangular epsilon, small 'hanging' omicron, four-bar sigma, and closed omega.<sup>7</sup>

**Commentary.** The new *epistomion* is the sixth from the Sfakaki cemetery (two of them E4 and B12 incised and three unincised G2–4; see Appendix). According to the proposed classification, the new *epistomion* is E6, namely belongs to the category of texts in which the *chaire*-formula is employed or implied in addressing the Underworld deities, either Plouton or Persephone by name or epithet, or both.<sup>8</sup>

This new text brings the total number of Cretan *epistomia* to sixteen (16) (see Appendix): ten deceased buried with an *epistomion* (B3–8, B13–15, E1) in the site Mnemata near the village Alphá – roughly at the midpoint of the approximately 10 km distance from Eleutherna to the north shore – were active from the 3rd to the 1st centuries BCE; and six buried with an *epistomion* in the cemetery at Sfakaki/Stavromenos from the late 2nd century BCE to the middle of the 1st century CE (E4, B12, E6 and the unincised G2–4).<sup>9</sup> What these sixteen burials highlight in

<sup>6</sup> Tzifopoulos 2010, 30.

<sup>7</sup> Tzifopoulos 2010, 24–25 and 60–61.

<sup>8</sup> Tzifopoulos 2010, 93–101.

<sup>9</sup> B3–8, B12, E1, E4 and G2–4: Tzifopoulos 2010, 9–32 (edition), 64–66 (chronology); B13: Tzifopoulos 2010–2013; B14–15: Tegou/Tzifopoulos 2021. For the editions and interpretations of these intriguing texts with extensive previous bibliography, see also: Bernabé/Jiménez San Cristóbal 2008, Edmonds 2011, Graf/Johnston 2013, and Janko 2016; for relation of these texts to Orphic tradition and literature, see Edmonds 2013, Meisner 2018, and Chrysanthou 2020.

a remarkable way is that within a distance of *ca* 10 km north of ancient Eleutherna and in a period of three centuries the initiates in an otherwise homogeneous bachchic-orphic cult did not all conform to identical ways:<sup>10</sup> ten incised ‘extracts’ of the so-called ‘Mnemosyne’- or Underworld-topography-texts (B3–8 and B13–15 from Mnemata, and B12 from Sfakaki), among which three *epistomia* (B6, B12, and B15) betray more or less important differences (see Appendix): whether these three ‘deviations’ from the norm of texts in category B are due to the engraver’s mistake or to the choice of text by the three deceased cannot be answered definitively; three decided not to incise anything (G2–4 from Sfakaki); and three chose the chaire-formula in addressing the Underworld deities (E1 most likely from Mnemata, and E4 and E6 from Sfakaki). The new sixth *epistomion* (E6) of probably a female deceased from the Sfakaki cemetery – identical to *epistomion* E4 of a male from the same cemetery and dated approximately to the same period (could both deceased have been from the same family?) – is a welcome addition to the ever growing orphic-dionysiac corpus of *epistomia* in Crete.

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<sup>10</sup> Tzifopoulos 2010, 232–235; Herrero de Jáuregui 2015 for sacred space as metaphor for esoteric religious experience; and Bremmer 2016 for the construction of a personalized eschatology.

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## Appendix: The Sixteen Cretan *Epistomia*

Provenance	Date	Gender	Shape	Position in grave	Coin	Burial and Grave-goods
<b>B3</b> Eleutherna, Crete	III–I c.	not known	rectangular, folded	not known	not known	δίψα αὔος ἐγὼ καὶ ἀπόλλυμαι· ἀλλὰ πιῆμ> μοι   κράνας αἰερώω ἐπὶ δεξιᾶ τῆ, κυφρίζος.   τὶς δ' ἔξι; πῶ δ' ἔξι; Γᾶς υἱός ἦμι καὶ Ὠρανῶ   ἀστερόεντος.
<b>B4</b> Eleutherna, Crete	III–I c.	not known	rectangular, folded	not known	not known	δίψα αὔος ἐγὼ καὶ ἀπόλλυμαι[μᾶ]· ἀλλὰ πιῆμ> μοι   κράνας αἰερώω ἐπὶ δεξιᾶ τῆ, κυφρίζος.   τὶς δ' ἔξι; πῶ δ' ἔξι; Γᾶς υἱός ἦμι καὶ Ὠρανῶ   ἀστερό<ε>ντος.
<b>B5</b> Eleutherna, Crete	III–I c.	not known	rectangular, folded	not known	not known	δίψα αὔος {σαμοσ} ἐγὼ καὶ ἀπόλλυμαι· ἀλλὰ πιῆμ μοι   κράνας <α>ιενᾶω ἐπὶ δεξιᾶ τῆ, κυφρίζος.   τὶς δ' ἔξι; πῶ δ' ἔξι; Γᾶς υἱός ἦμ<ι> καὶ Ὠρανῶ   ἀστερόεντ[ο]ς.
<b>B6</b> Eleutherna, Crete	III–I c.	not known	<i>epistomion</i> , folded?	not known	not known	δίψα δ' ἦμ' αὔος καὶ ἀπόλ<λ>ομαι· ἀλ<λ>ὰ   πιέν μοι κράνας ΑΙΠΙΔΑΩ ἐπὶ   δεξιᾶ τῆ, κυφ<α>ρίζος, τὶς δ' ἔξι; πῶ δ' ἔξι; Γᾶς ἦμι ΓΥΑΤΗΡ καὶ   Ὠρανῶ ἀστερόεντος.

Provenance	Date	Gender	Shape	Position in grave	Coin	Burial and Grave-goods
<b>B7</b> Eleutherna, Crete	III–I c.	not known	rectangular, rolled in cylinder?	not known	not known	δίψαι αὔος ἐγὼ καὶ ἀπόλλυμαι· ἀλ<λ>·ἀ πιέμ {ε} μοι   κράνας ασι<ε>ρ<ό>ω ἐπι<ε> δεξιὰ· τῆ, κυφάριζος,   τίς δ' ἐ[δε] ζι<ε>; πῶ δ' ἐζί;   Ἰᾶς υἰός ἦμι καὶ Ἰω<ρ>ανῶ   ἀστερόεντος.
<b>B8</b> Eleutherna, Crete	III–I c.	not known	rectangular, rolled in cylinder?	not known	not known	δίψαι {α} αὔος ἐγὼ καὶ ἀπόλλ<λ>ομαι· ἀλ<λ>·ἀ πι<ε>μι μο<ε> κράνας αἰενάω ἐπι δ<ε>ξιά· τῆ, κυφάριζος. τίς δ' ἐζί; πῶ   δ' <ε>ζί; Ἰᾶς υἰός ἦμι καὶ Ἰω<ρ>ανῶ ἀστερόεντος {σ}.
<b>B12</b> Sfaakaki, Crete	late III – early I c.	not known	rectangular, unfolded	not known	not known	δίψαι τοι <α>ύος. παρ<α>π<ό>λλυται.   ἀλλ<α>·π<ε>σιέν μοι κράνας <Σ?>αύ<ρ>ου ἐπ' ἀ{α}ρ<ε>τερὰ τὰς κυφα{σ}<ι>ρ<ι>ζω, τ<ε>ξ δ' εἶ ἦ πῶ δ' εἶ; Ἰᾶς ἡμ<ε>τ<ε>, μάτηρ· πῶ; τί ΑΕΤ   [κ]ῆι <Ο>ύρανῶ <α>στε<ρ>όεντος>. τίς; δίψαι το . ΛΤΟΙΥΤΟΟΠΑΣΡΑΤΑΝΗΘ.
<b>B13</b> SEG 52.644	III–I c.	not known	rectangular	not known	not known	δίψαι τοι Ε ΙΤΟΣ παρα- πόλλυται. ἀλ<λ>·ἀ πιέν ἐ{μοι} (vel πιένε < πιέναι) κράνας ᾄτηθ'.

Provenance	Date	Gender	Shape	Position in grave	Coin	Burial and Grave-goods
<b>B14</b> Eleutherna, Crete	late 2nd – early 1st c.	not known	rectangular folded	affixed to tooth	no	δίψαι αἰῶς ἐγὼ καὶ ἀπόλλυμαι· ἀλλὰ πῆμ ςμο>οι   κράνας αἰερώω ἐπὶ δεξιᾶ· τῆ, κυφάρizος,   τῖς δ' ἐξί; πῶ δ' ἐξί; ἴθς υἰός ἦμι κ<α>ι Ἰβραν(ί)ω   ἀστερ<οε>ντος.
<b>B15</b> Eleutherna, Crete	end of 4th – early 3rd c.	not known	rectangular unfolded	not known	no	δίψαι ΑΤΟΥΓΤΟΣ παρα(πι)- πόλλυται, ἀλλὰ πέν {μ} μοι κρ(ω)άνας<ο> ἀρό[ω] ἐπ' ἀριστερ<α> τᾶς κυφ[αρ]ίζ]- ω, τῖς δ' ἦ πῶ δ' [εἰ; ἴθ'] M... ΜΑΤΡΗΔΕΜ[...4...].
<b>E1</b> Eleutherna, Crete	III–I c.	not known	rectangular	not known	not known	[Πλού]τωνι καὶ Φ- [ερσ]τόνει χαίρεν.
<b>E4</b> Sfakaki, Crete	25 BCE -40 CE	male?	<i>epistomion</i>	on the mouth	bronze on chest	Πλούτωνι Φερσεφόνη. Inhumation in cist-grave (above no. 8). Clay and bronze prochous, clay unguentarium, lekyth- ion, two glass phialae, a bronze strigil, obsidian flake



Provenance	Date	Gender	Shape	Position in grave	Coin	Burial and Grave-goods
E6 Sfakaki, Crete	25 BCE -50 CE	female?	<i>epistomion</i>	cranium	no	Inhumation in cist-grave. Clay, glass and metal objects: clay unguentaria, a lead pyxis, a pair of gold earrings with tiny fayence beads, a gold ring with a standing female in the type of Aphrodite Anadyomene
G2 Sfakaki, Crete	1–50 CE	male?	<i>epistomion</i>	cranium	silver coin	Inhumation in Cist-grave 9. Around the feet from the knees down: clay prochous, four glass cups, glass phiale, bronze lekythion, and bronze strigil
G3 Sfakaki, Crete	50–100 CE	female?	rectangular <i>epistomion</i>	cranium	no	Inhumation in Cist-grave 4. Around the feet: a clay kylix, a clay prochous, four clay unguentaria, glass cup, bronze mirror, lead pyxis, and bronze nails

Provenance	Date	Gender	Shape	Position in grave	Coin	Burial and Grave-goods
G4 Sfakaki, Crete	I c. CE	female?	rectangular <i>epistomion</i>	cervix bones	no	Inhumation in Cist-grave 20. Deceased A buried later than deceased B to the N, and B (an older burial probably of a female) to the S. Around the feet of both: a clay prochous, three arybal- los-shaped lekythia, a clay unguentarium, a clay cup, and a glass phiale; deceased A also a bronze coin; deceased B also <i>epistomion</i> , and between the legs bronze foils (from a wooden pyxis?)

# Figures

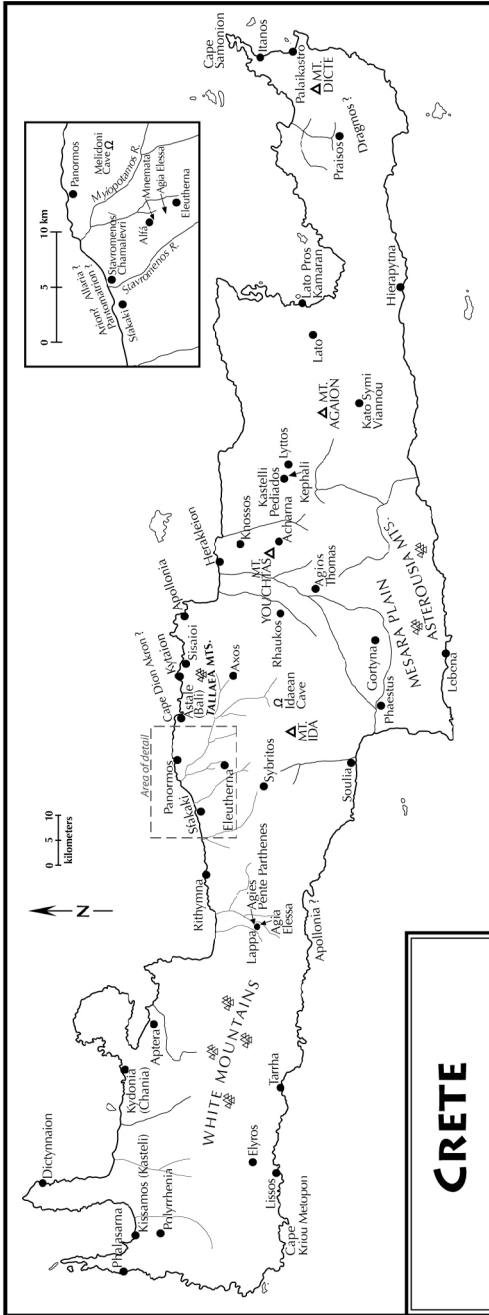


Figure 1. Map of Crete and excavation area (after Tzifopoulos 2010)



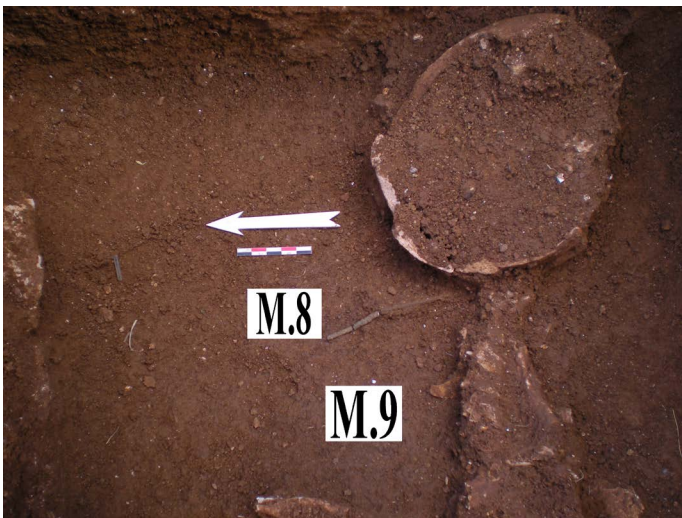
Figure 2. Sfakaki, plot of IRIS Hotel Inc.



Figure 3. Sfakaki, plot of IRIS Hotel Inc., Grave 7.



**Figure 4.** Sfakaki, plot of IRIS Hotel Inc., Grave 7 after completion of the excavation.



**Figure 5.** Sfakaki, plot of IRIS Hotel Inc., Grave 7, skeletal remains and the gold *epistomion* (M9).



Figure 6. Sfakaki, plot of IRIS Hotel Inc., Grave 7, bulbous unguentaria.



Figure 7. Sfakaki, plot of IRIS Hotel Inc., Grave 7, lead pyxis.



**Figure 8.** Sfakaki, plot of IRIS Hotel Inc., Grave 7, gold earrings.



**Figure 9.** The gold *epistomion* (M9) of Grave 7 as found



**Figure 10.** The gold *epistomion* (M9) of Grave 7 after its cleaning.