

The Island Crete

Crete is the largest and most populous of the Greek islands, the fifth largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, and one of the thirteen administrative regions of Greece. It forms a significant part of the economy and cultural heritage of Greece while retaining its own local cultural traits (such as its own dialect, poetry, and music). Crete was the centre of the Minoan civilization (c. 2700–1420 BC), the earliest "high culture" civilization in Europe, which built the first palaces in Europe.

The island is first referred to as *Kaptara* in texts from the Syrian city of Mari dating from the 18th century BC, repeated later in Neo-Assyrian records and the Bible (*Caphtor*). It was also known in ancient Egyptian as *Keftiu*, strongly suggesting some form similar to both was the Minoan name for the island.

The Mycenaean Greek name for Crete is unknown; it is not mentioned in extant Linear B texts. The name Crete (Κρήτη) first appears in Homer's *Odyssey*. Its etymology is unknown. One speculative proposal derives it from a hypothetical Luvian word **kursatta* (cf. *kursawar* "island", *kursattar* "cutting, sliver"). In Latin, it became *Creta*.

The original Arabic name of Crete was *Iqrīṭīš* (Arabic: اقریطش < (της) Κρήτης), but after the Emirate of Crete's establishment of its new capital at رابڤ قڤنڤلا ضڤبر *Rabḍ al-ḥandaq* (modern Iraklion), both the city and the island became known as Χάνδαξ (Khandhax) or Χάνδακας (Khandhakas), which gave Latin and Venetian *Candia*, from which French *Candie* and English *Candy* or *Candia*. Under Ottoman rule, in Ottoman Turkish, Crete was called *Girit* (Ottoman Turkish: گيرت, as recorded by Piri Reis).

Crete is the largest island in Greece and the second largest in the eastern Mediterranean Sea (after Cyprus). It is located in the southern part of the Aegean Sea separating the Aegean from the Libyan Sea.

The island has an elongated shape: it spans 260 km (160 mi) from east to west, is 60 km (37 mi) at its widest point, and narrows to as little as 12 km (7.5 mi) (close to Ierapetra). Crete covers an area of 8,336 km² (3,219 sq mi), with a coastline of 1,046 km (650 mi); to the north, it broaches the Sea of Crete (Greek: Κρητικό Πέλαγος); to the south, the Libyan Sea (Greek: Λιβυκό Πέλαγος); in the west, the Myrtoan Sea, and toward the east the Karpation Sea. It lies approximately 160 km (99 mi) south of the Greek mainland.

Mountains and valleys

Crete is extremely mountainous, and its character is defined by a high mountain range crossing from west to east, formed by three different groups of mountains:

- The White Mountains or Lefka Ori 2,452 m (8,045 ft)
- The Idi Range (Psiloritis) 2456 m (8,058 ft)
- The Dikti Mountains 2,148 m (7,047 ft)
- Kedros 1,777 m (5,830 ft)
- Thripti 1,489 m (4,885 ft)

These mountains gifted Crete with valleys, such as Amari valley, fertile plateaus, such as Lasithi plateau, Omalos and Nidha; caves, such as Diktaion and Idaion (the birthplace of the ancient Greek god Zeus) and a number of gorges.

Gorges, rivers, and lakes

The island has a number of gorges such as the famous gorge of Samaria, Imbros gorge, Kourtaliotiko gorge, Ha gorge, Platania gorge, the Gorge of the Dead (at Kato Zakros, Sitia) and Richtis Gorge and waterfall at Exo Moulia in Sitia.

The rivers of Crete include the Ieropotamos River, the Koiliaris, the Anapodiaris, the Almiros, and Megas Potamos. There are only two freshwater lakes: Lake Kournas and Lake Agia, which are both in Chania prefecture. Lake Voulismeni at the coast, at Aghios Nikolaos, was formerly a sweetwater lake but is now connected to the sea, in Lasithi.

Surrounding islands

A large number of islands, islets, and rocks hug the coast of Crete. Many are visited by tourists, some are visited only by archaeologists and biologists. Some are environmentally protected. A small sample of the islands includes:

- Gramvousa (Kissamos, Chania) the pirate island opposite the Balo lagoon.
- Elafonisi (Chania), which commemorates a shipwreck and an Ottoman massacre.
- Chrysi island (Ierapetra, Lasithi), which hosts the largest natural Lebanon cedar forest in Europe.
- Paximadia island (Agia Galini, Rethymno) where the god Apollo and the goddess Artemis were born.
- The Venetian fort and leper colony at Spinalonga opposite the beach and shallow waters of Elounda (Ag. Nikolaos, Lasithi).
- Dionysades islands which are in an environmentally protected region together the Palm Beach Forest of Vai in the municipality of Sitia, Lasithi.

Climate

Crete straddles two climatic zones, the Mediterranean and the North African, mainly falling within the former. As such, the climate in Crete is primarily temperate. The atmosphere can be quite humid, depending on the proximity to the sea, while winter is fairly mild. Snowfall is common on the mountains between November and May, but rare in the low lying areas. While mountain tops remain snow-capped year long, near the coast snow only stays on the ground for a few minutes or hours. However, a truly exceptional cold snap swept the island in February 2004, during which period the whole island was blanketed with snow. During the Cretan summer, average temperatures reach the high 20s-low 30s Celsius (mid 80s to mid 90s Fahrenheit), with maxima touching the upper 30s-mid 40s.

The south coast, including the Mesara Plain and Asterousia Mountains, falls in the North African climatic zone, and thus enjoys significantly more sunny days and high temperatures throughout the year. There, date palms bear fruit, and swallows remain year-round rather than migrate to Africa. The fertile region around Ierapetra, on the southeastern corner of the island, is renowned for its exceptional year-round agricultural production, with all kinds of summer vegetables and fruit produced in greenhouses throughout the winter.

Human geography

Crete is the most populous island in Greece with a population of more than 600,000 people. Approximately 42% live in Crete's main cities and towns whilst 45% live in rural areas.

Heraklion is the largest city and capital of Crete. The principal cities are:

- Heraklion (*Iraklion* or *Candia*) (130,914 inhabitants)
- Chania (*Haniá*) (53,373 inhabitants)
- Rethymno (27,868 inhabitants)
- Ierapetra (23,707 inhabitants)
- Aghios Nikolaos (19,462 inhabitants)
- Sitia (14,338 inhabitants)

Culture

The Greek language spoken on the island has a distinct Cretan Greek dialect with an extended vocabulary that is Crete-specific. Crete has its own distinctive Mantinades poetry. The island is known for its Mantinades-based music (typically performed with the Cretan lyra and the laouto) and has many indigenous dances, the most noted of which is the Pentozali.

Cretan authors have made important contributions to Greek Literature throughout the modern period; major names include Vikentios Kornaros, creator of the 17th century epic romance *Erotokritos* (Greek *Ερωτόκριτος*), and in the 20th century Nikos Kazantzakis. In the Renaissance, Crete was the home of the Cretan School of icon painting, which influenced El Greco and through him subsequent European painting.

Cretans are fiercely proud of their island and customs, and men often don elements of traditional dress in everyday life: knee-high black riding boots (*stivania*), *vráka* breeches tucked into the boots at the knee, black shirt and black headdress consisting of a fishnet-weave kerchief worn wrapped around the head or draped on the shoulders (the *sariki*). Black is the color of mourning, and since Cretan families are notionally considered so extended as to include great-grandparents or second cousins (although they may have little actual contact) as well as all their respective in-laws, one is theoretically justified to be in continuous mourning for some relative or other, however distant. On festive occasions those who are not in mourning wear white, most notably white boots and headdress. In the small villages in the mountains some men unabashedly carry weapons including knives and guns which also appear at special occasions such as weddings.

Cretan society is well known for notorious family and clan vendettas which remain on the island to date. Cretans also have a tradition of keeping firearms at home, a tradition lasting from the era of resistance against the Ottoman Empire. Nearly every rural household on Crete has at least one unregistered gun. Guns are subject to strict regulation from the Greek government, yet the authorities turn a blind eye, accepting gun possession as their tradition.

Transport infrastructure

The island has three significant airports, Nikos Kazantzakis at Heraklion, the Daskalogiannis airport at Chania and a smaller one in Sitia. The first two serve international routes, as the main gateways to the island for travellers.

The island is served by ferries mostly from Athens by ferry companies such as Minoan Lines and ANEK Lines.

Tourism

Crete is one of the most popular holiday destinations in Greece. Fifteen percent of all arrivals in Greece come through the city of Heraklion (port and airport), while charter journeys to Heraklion last year made up 20% of all charter flights in Greece. Today, the island's tourism infrastructure caters to all tastes, including a very wide range of accommodation; the island's facilities take in large luxury hotels with their complete facilities, swimming pools, sports and recreation, smaller family-owned apartments, camping facilities and others. Visitors reach the island via two international airports in Heraklion and Chania and a smaller airport in Sitia (international charter and domestic flights starting May 2012) or by boat to the main ports of Heraklion, Chania, Rethimno, Aghios Nikolaos and Sitia. Popular tourist attractions include the archaeological sites of the Minoan civilization, the Venetian old city and port of Chania, the Venetian castle at Rethymno, the gorge of Samaria, the islands of Chrysi, Elafonisi, Gramvousa, and Spinalonga and the Palm Beach of Vai, which is the largest natural palm forest in Europe.

Sport

Crete has a lot of football clubs engaged on the local leagues: OFI Crete, which plays at Theodoros Vardinogiannis Stadium (Iraklion), and Ergotelis F.C., which plays at the Pankritio Stadium (Iraklion) are both members of Superleague Greece.

Archaeological sites and museums

There are a significant number of monasteries in the island. Gouverneto Monastery and the historical Monastery of Arkadi.

There are a large number of archaeological sites which include the Minoan sites of Knossos and Phaistos, the classical site of Gortys, and the diverse archaeology of the island of Koufonisi which includes Minoan, Roman, and World War II ruins.

There are a number of museums throughout Crete. The Heraklion Archaeological Museum displays most of the archaeological finds of the Minoan era.

Environmentally protected areas

There are a number of environmentally protected areas. One such area is located at the island of Elafonisi on the coast of southwestern Crete. Also, the palm forest of Vai in eastern Crete and the Dionysades (both in the municipality of Sitia, Lasithi), have diverse animal and plant life. Vai has a palm beach and is the largest natural palm forest in Europe. The island of Chrysi, 15 km south of Ierapetra, has the largest naturally grown Lebanon Cedar forest in Europe. Samaria Gorge is a World Biosphere Reserve and Richtis Gorge is protected for its landscape diversity.

Holiday homes and immigration

Crete's mild climate attracts interest from northern Europeans who want a holiday home or residence on the island. EU citizens have the right to freely buy property and reside with little formality.^[21] A growing number of real estate companies cater to mainly British expatriates, followed by German, Dutch, Scandinavian and other European nationalities wishing to own a home in Crete. The British expatriates are

concentrated in the western prefectures of Chania and Rethymno and to a lesser extent in Heraklion and Lasithi.

Fauna and flora

The Kri-kri (the Cretan ibex) lives in protected natural parks at the gorge of Samaria and the island of Agios Theodoros.

The moorish gecko crawls across walls when it gets dark.

A pair of Xylophagous insects, called *Tzitzikia* locally and referred to as *Cicada* in America

The loggerhead sea turtle nests and hatches along the beaches of Rethymno and Chania and the gulf of Mesara.

Crete is isolated from mainland Europe, Asia, and Africa, and this is reflected in the diversity of the fauna and flora. As a result the fauna and flora of Crete have many clues to the evolution of species. There are no animals that are dangerous to humans on the island of Crete compared to other parts of Greece. Indeed, the ancient Greeks attributed the lack of large mammals such as bears, wolves, jackals, and poisonous snakes, to the labour of Hercules (who took a live Cretan bull to the Peloponnese). Hercules wanted to honor the birthplace of Zeus by removing all "harmful" and "poisonous" animals from Crete. Later, Cretans believed that the island was cleared of dangerous creatures by the Apostle Paul, who lived on the island of Crete for two years, with his exorcisms and blessings. There is a Natural History Museum operating under the direction of the University of Crete and two aquariums - Aquaworld in Hersonissos and Cretaquarium displaying sea creatures common in Cretan waters.

Prehistoric fauna

Dwarf elephants, dwarf hippopotamus, and dwarf deer were native to Pleistocene Crete.

Mammals

Mammals of Crete include the vulnerable Kri-kri, *Capra Aegagrus Creticus* that can be seen in the national park of the Samaria Gorge and on Thodorou, Dia and Agioi Pantas, (islets off the north coast), the Cretan wildcat and the Cretan spiny mouse. Other terrestrial mammals include subspecies of the Cretan marten, the Cretan weasel, the Cretan badger, the long-eared hedgehog, the edible dormouse, and the Cretan shrew, a unique endemic species of mammal in Greece, that is unfortunately threatened with extinction.

Bat species include: Blasius's horseshoe bat, the lesser horseshoe bat, the greater horseshoe bat, the lesser mouse-eared bat, Geoffroy's bat, the whiskered bat, Kuhl's pipistrelle, the common pipistrelle, Savi's pipistrelle, the serotine bat, the long-eared bat, Schreiber's bat, and the European free-tailed bat.

Birds

A large variety of birds includes eagles (can be seen in Lasithi), swallows (throughout Crete but throughout the year in the south of the island), pelicans (along the coast), and cranes (including Gavdos and Gavdopoula). The Cretan mountains and gorges are refuges for the endangered Lammergeier vulture. Bird species include: the golden eagle, Bonelli's eagle, the bearded vulture or Lammergeier, the griffon vulture,

Eleanora's falcon, peregrine falcon, lanner falcon, European kestrel, tawny owl, little owl, hooded crow, alpine chough, red-billed chough, and the hoopoe.

Reptiles and amphibians

Reptiles and tortoises can be seen throughout the island. Snakes can be found hiding under rocks. Toads and frogs reveal themselves when it rains.

Reptiles include the aegean wall lizard, balkan green lizard, european chameleon, ocellated skink, snake-eyed skink, moorish gecko, turkish gecko, Kotschy's gecko, spur-thighed tortoise, and the stripe-necked terrapin.

There are four species of snake on the island and these are not dangerous to humans. The four species include the leopard snake (locally known as Ochendra), the Balkan whip snake (locally called Dendrogallia), the dice snake (called Nerofido in Greek), and the only venomous snake is the nocturnal cat snake which has evolved to deliver its venom in to geckos and small lizards and is not dangerous to humans.

Turtles include the green turtle and the loggerhead turtle which are both endangered species.^[31] The loggerhead turtle nests and hatches on north-coast beaches around Rethymno and Chania, and south-coast beaches along the gulf of Mesara.

Amphibians include the green toad, American toad, common tree frog, and the Cretan marsh frog.

Arthropods

Crete has an unusual variety of insects. Xylophagous, known locally as *Tzitzikia*, make a distinctive repetitive *tzi tzi* noise that becomes louder and more frequent on hot summer days. Butterfly species include the swallowtail butterfly. Moth species include the hummingbird moth. There are several species of scorpion such as *Euscorpius carpathicus* whose venom is generally no more potent than a mosquito bite.

Crustaceans and molluscs

River crabs include the semi-terrestrial potamon potamios crab.^[28] Edible snails are widespread and can cluster in the hundreds waiting for rainfall to reinvigorate them.

Sealife

Apart from terrestrial mammals, the seas around Crete are rich in large marine mammals, a fact unknown to most Greeks, although reported since ancient times. Indeed, the Minoan frescoes depicting dolphins in Queen's Megaron at Knossos, indicate that Minoans knew many things about these creatures and respected them. Apart from the famous endangered Mediterranean monk seal, which lives in almost all the coasts of the country, Greece hosts whales, sperm whales, dolphins and porpoises. These are either permanent residents of the Mediterranean, or just occasional visitors. The area south of Crete, known as the Greek Abyss, hosts many of them. Squid and octopus can be found along the coast and Sea turtles and Hammerhead sharks swim in the sea around the coast. The Cretaquarium and the Aquaworld Aquarium, are two of only three aquariums in Greece, they are located in Heraklion and Hersonissos respectively, and examples of the local sealife can be seen there.

Some of the fish that can be seen in the waters around Crete include: scorpion fish, dusky grouper, east Atlantic peacock wrasse, five-spotted wrasse, weever fish, common stingray, brown ray, mediterranean black goby, pearly razorfish, star-gazer, painted comber, damselfish, and the flying gurnard.

Flora

Common wildflowers include: camomile, daisy, gladioli, hyacinth, iris, poppy, cyclamen and tulip, among others. There are more than 200 different species of wild orchid on the island and this includes 14 varieties of *Ophrys Cretica*. Crete has a rich variety of indigenous herbs including common sage, rosemary, thyme, and oregano. Rare herbs include the endemic Cretan dittany and Ironwort, *Sideritis syriaca L*, known as Malotira (Μαλοτήρα). Varieties of cactus include the edible Prickly Pear. Common trees on the island include the chestnut, cypress, oak, olive tree, pine, plane, and tamarisk. Trees tend to be taller to the west of the island where water is more abundant.

History

Hominids settled in Crete at least 130,000 years ago. In the later Neolithic and Bronze Age period, under the Minoans, Crete had a highly developed, literate civilization. It has been ruled by various ancient Greek entities, the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, the Emirate of Crete, the Republic of Venice and the Ottoman Empire. After a brief period of autonomy (1897–1913) under a provisional Cretan government, it joined the Kingdom of Greece. It was occupied by Nazi Germany during the Second World War.

Prehistoric Crete

The first human settlement in Crete dates before 130,000 years ago, during the Paleolithic age.

Settlements dating to the aceramic Neolithic in the 7th millennium BC, used cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and dogs as well as domesticated cereals and legumes; ancient Knossos was the site of one of these major Neolithic (then later Minoan) sites. Other neolithic settlements include those at Kephala, Magasa, and Trapeza.

Minoan civilization

Crete was the center of Europe's first advanced civilization, the Minoan (c. 2700–1420 BC). This civilization wrote in the undeciphered script known as Linear A. Early Cretan history is replete with legends such as those of King Minos, Theseus, and the Minotaur, passed on orally via poets such as Homer. The Minoan eruption of Thera devastated the Minoan civilization.

Mycenean civilization

Beginning in 1420 BC, the Minoan civilization was overrun by the Mycenaean civilization from mainland Greece. The oldest samples of writing in the Greek language, as identified by Michael Ventris, is the Linear B archive from Knossos, dated approximately to 1425–1375 BC.

Roman rule

Crete was involved in the Mithridatic Wars, initially repelling an attack by Roman general Marcus Antonius Creticus in 71 BCE. Nevertheless, a ferocious three-year

campaign soon followed under Quintus Caecilius Metellus, equipped with three legions and Crete was finally conquered by Rome in 69 BCE, earning for Metellus the title "*Creticus*". Gortyn was made capital of the island, and Crete became a Roman province, along with Cyrenaica that was called Creta et Cyrenaica.

Byzantine Empire – first period

Crete came under the rule of the Byzantine Empire and Crete was separated from Cyrenaica ca. 297. During the first Byzantine period Crete was subjected to an attack by Vandals in 467, the great earthquakes of 365 and 415, a raid by Slavs in 623, Arab raids in 654 and the 670s, and again in the 8th century. Circa 732, the Emperor Leo III the Isaurian transferred the island from the jurisdiction of the Pope to that of the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

Emirate of Crete

In the 820s when Crete was part of the Byzantine Empire, it was captured by Andalusian Arabs led by Abu Hafs who established the Emirate of Crete. Byzantium launched a campaign to take the island back in 842 and 843 under Theoktistos with some success. Further Byzantine campaigns in 911 and 949 failed. In 960/1 Nikephoros Phokas' campaign successfully restored Crete to Byzantium.

Byzantine Empire – second period

In 961, Nikephoros Phokas returned the island to Byzantine rule after sieging and expelling the Arabs. During the Fourth Crusade Crete was granted to Boniface of Montferrat^[48] as a pronoia by the Byzantine emperor Alexios IV Angelos. However, Boniface sold his rights cheaply to the Republic of Venice but the island was seized by Venice's rival the Republic of Genoa and it was not until 1212 that Venice secured Crete as a colony.

Venetian rule

From 1212, during Venice's rule, which lasted more than four centuries, a Renaissance swept through the island as is evident from the plethora of artistic works dating to that period. The most notable representatives of this Cretan renaissance were the painter El Greco and the writers Nicholas Kalliakis (1645–1707), Georgios Kalafatis (professor) (ca. 1652–1720), Andreas Musalus (ca. 1665–1721) and Vitsentzos Kornaros.

Under the rule of the Catholic Venetians, the city of Candia was reputed to be the best fortified city of the Eastern Mediterranean.^[52] The three main forts were located at Gramvousa, Spinalonga, and Fortezza. Other fortifications include the Kazarma fortress. In 1492, Jews expelled from Spain settled on the island.^[53] In 1574–77, Crete was under the rule of Giacomo Foscarini as Proveditor General, Sindace and Inquisitor. According to Starr (1942), the rule of Giacomo Foscarini was a dark age for Jews and Greeks. Under his rule, non-Catholics had to pay high taxes with no allowances. In 1627, there were 800 Jews in the city of Candia, about seven percent of the city's population.

Ottoman rule

The Ottomans conquered Crete in 1669, after the siege of Candia. Many Greek Cretans fled to other regions of the Republic of Venice after the Ottoman–Venetian Wars, some even prospering such as the family of Simone Stratigo (ca. 1733 – ca.

1824) who migrated to Dalamatia from Crete in 1669. Islamic presence on the island, aside from the interlude of the Arab occupation, was cemented by the Ottoman conquest. Most Cretan Muslims were local Greek converts who spoke Cretan Greek, but in the island's 19th century political context they came to be viewed by the Christian population as Turks.^[56] Contemporary estimates vary, but on the eve of the Greek War of Independence, as much as 45% of the population of the island may have been Muslim. A number of Sufi orders were widespread throughout the island, the Bektashi order being the most prevalent, possessing at least five tekkes. Many amongst them were crypto-Christians who converted back to Christianity in subsequent years, while many others fled Crete because of the unrest, settling in Turkey, Rhodes, Syria and elsewhere. By 1900, 11% of the population was Muslim. Those remaining were relocated in the 1924 Population exchange between Greece and Turkey.

Uprisings by Christians were met with a fierce response from the Ottoman authorities who executed bishops, regarded as ringleaders on several occasions.

During Easter of 1770, a notable revolt against Ottoman rule, in Crete, was started by Daskalogiannis, a shipowner from Sfakia who was promised support by Orlov's fleet which never arrived. Daskalogiannis eventually surrendered to the Ottoman authorities who skinned him alive. Today, the airport at Chania is named after him.

Crete was left out of the modern Greek state by the London Protocol of 1830, and soon it was yielded to Egypt by the Ottoman sultan. Egyptian rule was short-lived and sovereignty was returned to the Ottoman Empire by the Convention of London on July 3, 1840.

Heraklion was surrounded by high walls and bastions and extended westward and southward by the 17th century. The most opulent area of the city was the northeastern quadrant where all the elite were gathered together. The city had received another name under the rule of the Ottomans, "the deserted city". The urban policy that the Ottoman applied to Candia was a two-pronged approach.^[52] The first was the religious endowments. It made the Ottoman elite contribute to building and rehabilitating the ruined city. The other method was to boost the population and the urban revenue by selling off urban properties. According to Molly Greene (2001) there were numerous records of real-estate transactions during the Ottoman rule. In the deserted city, minorities received equal rights in purchasing property. Christians and Jews were also able to buy and sell in the real-estate market.

Between 1833 and 1897, several more Christian uprisings took place, and in 1898, Crete, a complex autonomous Cretan State under Ottoman suzerainty.

Cretan State

Crete was garrisoned by an international military force, with a High Commissioner (*Armostis*) appointed by the government of Greece, Alexandros Zaimis. The island was partitioned in to four quarters by the four main powers jostling for power at that time. The four quarters were divided between Italy, Russia, the United Kingdom, and France, who controlled Chania, Rethymnon, Heraklion, and Lasithi respectively. Crete was joined in union with Greece on 1 December 1913.

World War II

During World War II, the island was the scene of the famous Battle of Crete in May 1941. German paratroopers sustained almost 7,000 casualties, meeting fierce

resistance from both locals and the British Commonwealth force, commanded by General Sir Bernard Freyberg. As a result, Adolf Hitler forbade further large-scale airborne operations. During the occupation, German firing squads were routinely used to execute male civilians, who were randomly gathered at local villages, in reprisal for the death of German soldiers, such as at Kondomari.

Mythology

Crete has a rich mythology mostly connected with the ancient Greek Gods but also connected with the Minoan civilization.

The Idaion cave at Mount Ida was the birthplace of the god Zeus. The Paximadia islands were the birthplace of the goddess Artemis and the god Apollo. Their mother, the goddess Leto, was worshipped at Phaistos. The goddess Athena bathed in Lake Voulismeni. The ancient Greek god Zeus launched a lightning bolt at a giant lizard that was threatening Crete. The lizard immediately turned to stone and became the island of Dia. The island can be seen from Knossos and it has the shape of a giant lizard. The islets of Lefkai were the result of a musical contest between the Sirens and the Muses. The Muses were so anguished to have lost that they plucked the feathers from the wings of their rivals; the Sirens turned white and fell into the sea at Aptera ("featherless") where they formed the islands in the bay that were called Lefkai (the islands of Souda and Leon). Hercules, in one of his labors, took the Cretan bull to the Peloponnese. Europa and Zeus made love at Gortys and conceived the Kings of the Minoan civilization.

The labyrinth of the palace of Knossos has the myth of Theseus and the Minotaur where the Minotaur was slain by Theseus. Icarus and Daedalus were captives of King Minos and crafted wings to escape. King Minos became a judge of the dead in Hades.

Notable people from Crete

Internationally famous people from Crete include:

John Aniston, actor, best known for his role as Victor Kiriakis on the NBC daytime drama Days of our Lives also father of Jennifer Aniston

Ross Daly, a world music musician who has lived in Crete for most of his life, originally from Ireland.

Eleni Daniilidou, an international tennis player, born in Chania.

Odysseas Elytis, an internationally-renowned poet, who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1979, was born in Heraklion.

El Greco, a Renaissance artist, born in Fodele.

Nana Mouskouri, an internationally-known singer, born in Chania.

Georgios Samaras, an international football player, born in Heraklion.

Eleftherios Venizelos, an internationally-renowned former Greek Prime Minister, born in Chania Prefecture.

Nikos Kazantzakis, an internationally-published author, born in Heraklion.