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DID BOYS REALLY TELL JOKES IN ANCIENT PHAESTUS?

Abstract: In a preserved fragment, the historian Sosicrates records a custom which was practiced among the ancient Phaestians in Crete: the boys were trained to tell witty jests from early childhood. Here, I address the educational purpose of the custom for the boys' future military and social role. The practice is interpreted as a pedagogical measure aimed to control the untamed nature of the young trainees, and to cultivate their cohesiveness as a group. The custom seems to have taken place at the *sysstitia*, where, according to ancient sources, Cretan *agōgē* was realized. The Phaestian jesting is also examined as a probable precursor for wits spoken in Crete today.

Keywords: *Sosicrates, Phaestus, Jest, Sysstitia, Education.*

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Athenaeus has preserved the following enigmatic fragment (*FGrH* 461 F 1 = Athen. 6.79 p. 261 E) on the inhabitants of ancient Phaestus, Crete:

Σωσικράτης δ' ἐν ᾧ Κρητικῶν ἰδιὸν τί φησι περὶ τοὺς Φαιστίους
ὑπάρχειν. δοκοῦσι γὰρ ἀσκεῖν ἐκ παιδαρίων εὐθύς τὸ γέλοια
λέγειν· διὸ καὶ συμβέβηκεν αὐτοὺς ἀποφθέγγεσθαι πολλὰκις
εὐκαίρως διὰ τὴν ἐξ ἀρχῆς συνήθειαν, ὥστε πάντας τοὺς κατὰ
Κρήτην τούτοις ἀνατιθέναι τὸ γέλοιο.

In the First Book of *Kretika*, Sosicrates records that the Phaestians have a peculiar characteristic. It is said that even from early childhood they practice jesting (telling jokes). Hence, they often answer wittily at appropriate times, because they are used to doing it from the beginning. As a result, everyone in Crete attributes wits to them.

The fragment comes from the lost work on Crete (*Kretika*) written by Sosicrates,¹ a Hellenistic historian. Having read the text carefully, I hold that the word 'συνήθεια' here should be rendered as 'custom,'² and it concerns particularly the Phaestians' training in telling jests³ from early childhood (ἐκ παιδαρίων εὐθύς).⁴ On the other hand, the brevity of the text does not

¹ On Sosicrates, see BERTELLI 2009.

² I use this term to translate the word 'συνήθεια', which is also rendered as habit or habituation (LSJ s.v. II. συνήθεια). According to WEBSTER'S 1984, "custom" means: 1. "an accepted practice or convention followed by tradition", 2. "a habitual course of action of an individual". In our case, the first meaning seems to be the right one, due to the participation of everyone in it.

³ LSJ s.v. γέλοιος or γελοῖος; γελοῖα "jests", γέλοια λέγειν.

⁴ LSJ s.v. παιδάριον = "little boy"; in pl., "young children." Here, we are reminded of Pyrgion's reference to νεώτατοι, a term employed for denoting the youngest members of *sysstitia* (*FGrH* 467 F 1). LSJ s.v. εὐθύς, II.1: εὐθύς ἐκ παιδός: "even from one's youth."

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allow for any details about certain aspects of it,⁵ such as the nature of the custom and its significance to the Phaestians, or the time of its initial practice. All these points remain unanswered up to now, and it is my purpose to address them in this article.

Bringing forth the last aspect, i.e., the time of its initial occurrence, no answer can be offered. The only inference that can be made is that the custom was in practice at least during the author's lifetime, i.e., mid-2nd c. BC,⁶ judging from both the infinitive *ὑπάρχειν* and the verb *δοκοῦσι*.

In an attempt to understand the nature and the significance of the custom, i.e., what the *geloia legein* was, we should consider two points in the paper:

a) The phrase *ἄσκειν ἐκ παιδαρίων εὐθύς* entails some sort of collective, organized, and systematic training, as will be shown later. As such then, the training must probably have been enforced to the boys by the state, thus forming part of their education (*ἀγωγή*). Moreover, the phrase means that the training began even from early childhood, and implies that it did not stop then (*ἐκ παιδαρίων* in fact means "from childhood", and leaves open the termination of the training), while its duration is not stated.⁷ If it had not been so, how would the Phaestians have continued to tell wits many times (*πολλάκις*) later in life, unless they had been trained for it for a significant time span?

b) The infinitive *ἀποφθέγγεσθαι*,⁸ linguistically cognate to the noun *apophthegms*, alludes to "terse pointed sayings"⁹ or wits, which can be taken here as a synonymous phrase to *γέλοια λέγειν*.

In discussing the above two points, I will begin with the second, i.e., the meaning of *ἀποφθέγγεσθαι*. It appears that the Phaestians' habitual practice must have been quite important for them, and this requires investigation. For the purpose of this paper, I will need to explore what those *apophthegms* or wits were, and in what sense they related to joking in ancient Phaestus. Of course, it is true that there is no hard evidence. However, I argue that the *geloia legein* must have served an educational purpose for the Phaestian boys: it probably aimed at preparing the boys gradually for their future role, i.e., to become soldiers and citizens dedicated to serve their state as best they could. In order for the Phaestians to become efficient in that role, they should have learned quite early, how to establish a harmonious coexistence with one another through witty jesting, as will be discussed below; this way, they would have managed to avoid conflicts among themselves during their education, which, being mainly military, would have caused antagonism among the trainees.¹⁰

⁵ BERTELLI 2009.

⁶ BERTELLI 2009.

⁷ The preposition *ἐκ* + genitive reflects temporal use (SMYTH 1920, 367 § 1688).

⁸ LSJ s.v. *ἀποφθέγγομαι*: "utter an apophthegm."

⁹ LSJ s.v. *ἀπόφθεγμα*.

¹⁰ Regarding the avoidance of antagonism among the Cretan boys, see STRATARIDAKI 2009, in which she discusses, how differentiation in food portions and condiments, which were distributed to orphans and non-orphans, functioned as a balancing measure for alleviating potential tensions among the two categories of boys, as participants in *agōgē* at the *syssitia*. In addition, "Cretan customs are adapted for war, the civic

To support the educational purpose of the Phaestian practice, I will first refer to Jan Bremmer's study "Jokes, Jokers, and Jokebooks in Ancient Greek Culture,"¹¹ as it offers insight towards understanding the nature of *geloia legein*. Bremmer mentions ancient philosophical views about types of laughter in antiquity. Pertaining to Greek customs, he observes that Xenophon speaks of the Persians, as one of the peoples who avoided telling insulting jokes.¹² Moreover, Plato and Aristotle also opposed to excessive laughter. According to Plato (*Leg.* 732c), "men must be restrained from untimely laughter" (Perseus translation). The philosopher also warns for the ruinous effects to the young, if they give in to uncontrolled laughter (*Rep.* 388e): "They [the young] must not be prone to laughter. For ordinarily when one abandons himself to violent laughter his condition provokes a violent reaction" (Perseus translation). On the other hand, regarding social amusement, Aristotle (*Eth. Nicom.* 1108a 23-24) praises "the middle character (*ὁ μέσος*) who is witty (*εὐτράπελος*), and the middle disposition wittiness (*εὐτραπελία*), whereas the excess is buffoonery (*βωμολοχία*) and its possessor a buffoon (*βωμολόχος*)" (Perseus translation). One may assume then that, in order for a society -a shame culture- to cultivate the mentality of telling non-insulting jokes, it would need to care for the pertinent education or training of its members from an early age.

In addition, Bremmer cites Michael Herzfeld's study on a twentieth-century Cretan village,¹³ where, as in all shame cultures,¹⁴ insulting jokes -"the negative power of jokes"¹⁵ - are also avoided. To support my argument about the educational character of the jokes at Phaestus, I will turn to Herzfeld's study, in which the author discusses Cretan men's dialogues in the form of rhyming or assonant couplets or *distichs*, the so-called *mandinadhes*, as a way of projecting manhood.¹⁶ Specifically, Herzfeld studied the concept of manhood, one aspect of which was felt and expressed verbally through couplets by the men of the particular Cretan village. At this point, it is necessary to make a digression to the author's findings about the way in which couplets reflected manhood, as this will be pertinent to the discussion of the Phaestians' jokes further down.

In everyday life, the men of the particular Cretan village acted through speech or, in other words, expressed through speech their behavior and attitudes towards everything. In fact, they acted through *mandinadhes*.¹⁷ As Herzfeld notes, "if speech is a kind of action, so action can be said to speak."¹⁸ The men of the village communicated with others, and they still do so today -in the village or outside of it- through *distichs* mostly. It was not uncommon in the

organization being more like an army than a city, with young people herded together like colts at grass," as Willetts notes (WILLETTS 1955, 153).

¹¹ BREMMER 1977.

¹² Xen. Cyr. 5.2.18. As Bremmer notes (BREMMER 1977, 19), Xenophon talks about the Persians, in order to indirectly discuss Greek customs.

¹³ HERZFELD 1985.

¹⁴ On shame, see GILBERT/ANDREWS 1998.

¹⁵ BREMMER 1977, 19. Bremmer refers to Michael Herzfeld, whose research on the island of Crete in the mid 1980s showed that satiric songs had to be avoided so that no one was offended.

¹⁶ HERZFELD 1985, 144.

¹⁷ HERZFELD 1985, 141.

¹⁸ HERZFELD 1985, 140.

village to hear women speak in *distichs* as well, as recorded by Herzfeld, but, according to the author,¹⁹ the *mandinadhes* were used chiefly by men to affirm their manhood. Speech was intertwined with manhood: “The claim to manhood must be established in action. One who has so far lost his manhood as to have been disarmed may not “speak”, since this, too, is a male activity.”²⁰ Simply, a man of the village is not a man, unless he can “act” in *distichs*.

The tendency to speak and respond in *distichs* in daily discourse, i.e., to hold dialogues in *distichs*, still exists in modern Crete to a significant degree, according to the speakers at a Conference on “The Cretan *Mandinadha*” in Crete, 2001.²¹ As the *Conference Proceedings* reveal, it was quite common, then, to meet locals in various parts of the island,²² who would express their thoughts and feelings on almost every subject through *mandinadhes*. It is indeed impressive -for the purpose of this paper- how one of the Conference speakers described his personal experience as a child on *mandinadhes*: “I remember Cretan shepherds and villagers, who, although illiterate, used to sing all day long, improvising at times or, when it was possible, answering questions, all in *mandinadhes*. The way they communicated with each other affected us, the children, who, afterwards, did our best to imitate them. That was the time when I memorized nearly the whole “*Erotokritos*” poem, as well as a large number of *mandinadhes*, which I still keep to myself as precious heritage.”²³ (My translation)

The same speaker referred to the tools, which one needs to possess, in order to compose a *mandinadha*: “To construct a *mandinadha*, one has to have experienced it [to have heard and comprehended it] before, to possess language capacities, as well as eagerness and strong will.”²⁴ (My translation)

Reading this, a personal testimony of a contemporary Cretan, I cannot but make an analogy between the way by which a *mandinadha* is created and the formulaic manner followed by the Homeric bards in singing poems. In fact, in his article entitled “Improvisation, Creativity, and Formulaic Language,” Ian MacKenzie records that by using wholly fixed formulas and formulaic phrases (lines or half-lines constructed on the pattern of other formulas) to recreate traditional themes and descriptions.²⁵

MacKenzie also refers to Serbian and Bosnian Muslim singers, i.e. Balkan people, who, like the Homeric bards, followed a “formulaic nature of oral epic poetry.”²⁶

Specifically, MacKenzie cites Milman Parry, Albert Lord, and J.B. Hainsworth, whose research has shown

How apprentice boy singers (in an exclusively male tradition) learn, or rather *acquire*, formulas by hearing them habitually used by other singers, and then begin to use them in their own songs. They subsequently learn how to create new lines based on existing formulas, employing standard poetic techniques such as linking phrases by parallelism or antithesis, placing verbs in unusual positions, and repeating sounds (as an oral tradition is by definition dependent on sound patterning for its very existence). Individual singers thus create unique but formula-like phrases, which Lord calls ‘formulaic expressions.’ Hainsworth insists that Lord’s South Slavic conclusions also apply to parts of the Homeric diction.²⁷

MacKenzie holds that “people learn by listening and repeating and recombining formulary materials”,²⁸ and explains that “formulaic speech [...] provides the basis for the creative²⁹ rule-forming processes by which the syntactic system is mastered. Rather than building up their linguistic competence by learning sounds and structures, children become increasingly able to break down wholes into parts.”³⁰

In addition to MacKenzie, Herzfeld’s study has shown that most village men use “central key constructs,” which they enunciate repeatedly. Their aim is to achieve the *simasia* or meaning, which is expressed through “connectedness (*sinekhia*) between events.”³¹ These very events are denoted through *mandinadhes*, which are exchanged as a “give-and-take” form of a dialogue, in the sense of a “competitive sequence.”³² The oral verses, the *distichs*, which a man addresses to another, are much more effective in passing the speaker’s intent -usually pungent or biting- than if the speaker used a weapon as a threat.³³ In this context, Herzfeld viewed the men’s exchange of poetic verses as “a clever verse riposte [that] serves to restrain physical violence. To respond with knife or fist would demean the assailant by suggesting that he was incapable of responding with some witty line of his own.”³⁴ In other words, exchanging witty verses, as in a dialogue, instead of using physical power among the men of the Cretan village was critical in exhibiting manhood.

In communicating with one another, the village men exchanged a pun or a practical joke, as they believed

¹⁹ HERZFELD 1985, 144.

²⁰ HERZFELD 1985, 182.

²¹ MOUTZOURIS (ed.) 2002.

²² M. Paterakis mentions the region of Lasithi (Neapolis and Hierapytna) in PATERAKIS 2002, 121-130, esp. 126, 129; V. Charonitis (CHARONITIS 2002, 213-219, esp. 216) records both Eastern Crete (Phourne in Mirabello, Lassithi), and Western Crete (Vamos in Chania); O. Tsagkarakis (TSAGKARAKIS 2002, 221-227, esp. 225) refers to Eastern Crete (Siteia); K. Moutzouris (MOUTZOURIS 2002, 155-192, esp. 158) mentions Eastern and Western Crete.

²³ CHARONITIS 2002, 218.

²⁴ CHARONITIS 2002, 219. The same idea of composing a *mandinadha* is also expressed by CHARALAMBAKIS 2002, 143-153, esp. 144.

²⁵ MACKENZIE 2000, 173-179, esp. 176.

²⁶ MACKENZIE 2000, 177.

²⁷ MACKENZIE 2000, 177.

²⁸ MACKENZIE 2000, 176.

²⁹ The emphasis is mine.

³⁰ MACKENZIE 2000, 175.

³¹ HERZFELD 1985, 140.

³² HERZFELD 1985, 140.

³³ It is important at this point to make a distinction between the length of the songs which were performed by the Homeric bards and the *distichs* (*mandinadhes*) told by people in modern Greek villages. Today, *distichs* that are spoken, not sung, do not necessarily constitute long poems. They are uttered, as if they were dialogues, and they always enclose a message as a riposte. Good examples of *mandinadhes* functioning as dialogues appear in HERZFELD 1985, 142, 143.

³⁴ HERZFELD 1985, 143.

that “true men wrest humor from the very grip of fear.”³⁵ In fact, in Herzfeld’s words, “a man who can turn another’s mockery into his own weapon is at least on the way to mastering that ultimate enemy within his own person.”³⁶ To say it differently, every man in the village gained control of another man’s feelings and reactions, i.e., his behavior, through self-biting irony which, although in dialogue form, was expressed in rhyming couplets; this way, any tension was avoided between them.

So far, Herzfeld’s analysis and MacKenzie’s approach may offer ideas as to how the training of the Phaestian boys could have been implemented with successful results. I assume that the process among the Phaestians would have been based on structuring jokes, through listening, repeating, and imitating syntactic formulas.³⁷

Therefore, it seems that, as in a given situation the village men in Herzfeld’s study told the best possible *distich*, which was drawn from “an oral archive,”³⁸ in a similar manner must the ancient Phaestian boys have acted by using an analogous source, from which they could also have drawn up a theme or idea for composing their own sayings. The new ‘version’ of a joke, spoken in a new context, would have signified that the composer had developed a poetic skill.³⁹ Considering that not all boys were gifted in this sense, the above-mentioned process would have enabled even the least talented to construct a witty jest. To be sure, it was the very *etymologia* (‘readiness with words’), as Herzfeld noted, that was quite important for the competition on a verse.⁴⁰ Likewise, for successful jests, a Phaestian speaker would have needed to activate his *etymologia* for creating a witty phrase (a joke) and managing to tease, not to insult, the hearer, and moreover, to win him over by making him laugh.

The type of jokes by which the Phaestians used to train their young must have been *apophthegms*, which, as mentioned earlier, relate to the infinitive *ἀποφθέγγεσθαι* in Socrates’ fragment. The term ‘apophthegm’ denotes a wisdom saying, like a *paroimia* (proverb), although it is not. An *apophthegm* must have been a riposte aimed at a certain person, whereas *paroimiae* have a generalizing effect.⁴¹ The short form of an *apophthegm* carries a sharp and to-the-point message, which challenges the listener with its terseness. These features assure the laugh on the part of the receiver, who would accept the teasing, as it was not uttered as a direct insult, but as a witty saying. In this sense, an *apophthegm* for a Phaestian would have been a *geloion*, a jest.

Yet, in the case of the Phaestian jokes, a successful exchange of jests would have depended on the sensitivity of each person involved towards the other, so that no one would have been offended. In support of this, reference to Herzfeld’s words with regard to *mandinadhes* -which in

this paper are viewed as a similar case to *geloia legein*, in terms of structure and of a message-to-pass- can be made: “Knowing how far to go is the key to a successful negotiation of the balance between personal idiosyncrasy and social acceptability.”⁴² This statement reflects how *mandinadhes* worked in passing to the hearer the intended message while avoiding insults; I propose that the jests of the Phaestians operated in a similar manner.

In the Cretan village -according to Herzfeld’s study- the success of a *mandinadha*’s use was assured, if its recipient received it in an agonistic attitude,⁴³ which meant that he in turn would be urged to respond accordingly. The cleverer the *mandinadha* one spoke, the ‘manlier’ the speaker was.⁴⁴ This way a speaker would force his opponent to feel that, if he were a real man, he would react as expected.

A comparable kind of ‘verbal exchanges in competition’ seems to have been cultivated among the ancient Phaestians, through the boys’ training in *geloia legein*. To discuss now how this training could have occurred, I will address the first point set out in the beginning of the paper, about the collective, organized, and systematic character of the practice, which is embedded in the phrase *ἄσκειν ἐκ παιδαρίων εὐθὺς*. The Phaestians seem to have been trained *en masse* from early childhood. The collective enforcement of this practice to the male children is reflected in the sentence *δοκοῦσι γὰρ ἄσκειν ἐκ παιδαρίων εὐθὺς τὸ γέλοια λέγειν*, which implies that none of the boys was excluded from training. This massive practice of all Phaestian boys will be discussed further down. However, that this practice probably served an educational means will be considered next.

Specifically, the instructive purpose of the Phaestian boys’ training seems to have been dual: First, to make the boys conscious, as they grew up, of what it was like to be a man. Such awareness must have been very significant to them, as manhood was inseparable from the concepts of ‘militariness’ and citizenship; and these concepts must have been reflected in the boys’ future role. Second, the practice in jesting seemed to foster sentiments of cohesiveness among the trainees; this way, they would have felt that they belonged to a group, and thus shared the same interests and goals, i.e., to serve their state as best they could.⁴⁵ But in order for jesting to cultivate a sense of cohesiveness among the boys, the training should have functioned like a control measure for the boys’ undisciplined nature, which, according to Plato, would have had to be tamed early through education, if the boys -the future citizens of the state- had been expected to perform their prescribed duties (civic and military).⁴⁶

⁴² HERZFELD 1985, 143.

⁴³ HERZFELD 1985, 124, 126.

⁴⁴ HERZFELD 1985, 144.

⁴⁵ See above n. 10.

⁴⁶ The untamed behavior of children (boys) in antiquity was commented upon by Plato (*Leg.* 7 808de), who spoke of the need for their educational control. See THOMAS 2010, 185-223, esp. 193. The practice of *geloia legein* as a self-control measure among the young, may be paralleled with another measure for self-control taken by the Cretans in general, that of curbing wine drinking. As excessive wine drinking was prohibited among the Cretans for preventing intoxication, and thus restraining themselves from pleasures (see MANDALAKI 2004, 217 and notes 181, 182), in a similar manner, it is understood, why *geloia legein* could have been instituted among the Phaestians: to avoid excessive laughter, thus aiming at self-control, which

³⁵ Herzfeld (HERZFELD 1985, 149) records that “The men of the village feel fear inside them, but they view it as enhancing their bravery.” Also, on p. 148 the author explains that the men of the particular community “regard jokes about their own system of values as a true index of manhood.”

³⁶ HERZFELD 1985, 149.

³⁷ HERZFELD 1985, 141; MACKENZIE 2000, 176.

³⁸ HERZFELD 1985, 141.

³⁹ HERZFELD 1985, 143.

⁴⁰ HERZFELD 1985, 141.

⁴¹ LARDINOIS 1995, 19.

The apparent organized and systematic training could be related to the *syssitia* or common messes, where the boys' *ἀγωγή* took place in the ancient Cretan states. Our knowledge about the boys' *agōgē* in ancient Crete comes from Ephorus (FGrH 70 F 149 = Str. 10.4.20), as well as from the fragmentary works of Dosiadas (FGrH 458 F 2) and Pyrgion (FGrH 467 F 1), ancient historians of Crete. These sources reveal the undisputed pedagogical role of the common meals to the young boys,⁴⁷ who would have begun to prepare for their future citizen role at the age of 7,⁴⁸ through their participation in the *agōgē*. Being encouraged to sit by their fathers in the *syssitia*, the boys not only shared in the meals, but they also listened to and learned from the experiences of the adults who, as members of the *syssitia* and for the encouragement of the young, as Dosiadas notes (FGrH 458 F 2: *προτρειόμενοι τοὺς νεωτέρους εἰς ἀνδραγαθίαν*), spoke about their deeds.⁴⁹

The *syssitia* in Crete operated like a school for the young boys ("The children must learn, not only their letters, but also the songs prescribed in the laws and certain forms of music." (Strabo 10.4.20 - Perseus transl.)). Moreover, the boys received military training; those participating in the same common mess were engaged in (mock) battles against the boys of other common messes, and each group was presided by a boy-director (*paedonomos*).⁵⁰ Therefore, as their education -taking place at the *syssitia*- was mostly military, their training in *geloia legein* could have taken place there as well. Returning to the sentence *δοκοῦσι γὰρ ἄσκεῖν ἐκ παιδαρίων εὐθὺς τὸ γέλοια λέγειν*, we observe that it includes the characteristic elements of the Cretan *agōgē*: "training" (*ἀσκεῖν*) and "from childhood" (*ἐκ παιδαρίων*), i.e., probably at their 7th year of age, when their education began. The phrase *ἀσκεῖν ἐκ παιδαρίων* alludes to collective training, as noted earlier, which is inferred by the fact that the Cretan *agōgē* pertained to the massive training of the boys as a group, who were the sons of the *hetairoi*, the adult *syssitia* members.⁵¹ In other words, if the training in jesting pertained to all Phaestian boys, i.e., collectively, this practice might as well have taken place at the common messes. This assumption is based on Sosicrates' fragment, suggesting the ongoing practice of jesting among the Phaestian men later in life -although *εὐκαίρως* (opportunistically; at an appropriate time)-⁵² (*συμβέβηκεν αὐτοὺς ἀποφθέγγεσθαι πολλάκις*

εὐκαίρως διὰ τὴν ἐξ ἀρχῆς συνήθειαν). The apparently long duration of the *geloia legein* practice may explain on one hand, why the Phaestian men continued to joke at times as long as they lived; and, on the other, why the rest of Crete knew of the custom as a particular Phaestian feature (*πάντας τοὺς κατὰ Κρήτην τοῦτοις ἀνατιθέναι τὸ γέλοιοι*).

If we visualized the situation of the Phaestian boys' training in telling jokes, we could imagine the trainees -sitting by their fathers in the *syssitia*- observing the men jesting *εὐκαίρως*. For instance, the boys themselves would have experienced the performance and the timing of the joke exchange among the adults, and that process would have familiarized the boys with the meaning (*simasia*) intended to be passed. It would have been natural then for the boys to become acquainted with that practice, so that they would have been able to perform their own *geloia legein* during their physical and military exercises.

The collective character of the boys' exercising in telling jokes would have required some authority in charge of the trainees' practice. It appears very likely that the *paedonomoi*, being Phaestians themselves, were also responsible for presenting the basic instructions for the formation of jokes, as well as for superintending the boys' groups, while practicing jesting. Thus, the boys' telling jokes, while being engaged in mock battles, meant that in confronting their peers as opponents, they were encouraged (probably by the *paedonomoi*) to practice *geloia legein* themselves, for the goal was to keep the cohesiveness of each group as a fighting body. A successful practice in jesting would also have signified that the members of each group had probably managed to restrain any offensive behavior of theirs by transforming it from potential aggressiveness against one another to actions of collaboration, such as wits, which fit to mates striving for a common end: to be united in facing and defeating an enemy. The boys' response in jests seems to have functioned as a discipline measure for them, enacted by the state, so that they -being members of a group- avoided verbal insults, and thus averted attacks.

Therefore, considering the Phaestian boys' education, one can infer that jesting seems to have operated as one of the 'taught subjects,' along with the letters, songs and music learned by the Phaestian boys through memorization or repetition (Strabo 10.4.20). In a comparable manner, it may be assumed, the boys memorized the formulas, according to which jokes were constructed and spoken by the men in the *syssitia*. This process would have facilitated the trainees to cultivate their improvisation of composing new jokes -depending on the occasion- which would have been based on jests already familiar to them.⁵³

was pursued particularly among military people, as the Cretans were.

⁴⁷ STRATARIDAKI 2009, 340: "the role of *syssitia*, [...] according to Ephorus, aimed at educating its participants to live a simple, disciplined, military way of life."

⁴⁸ WILLETTS 1955, 14. This age marked the beginning of the boys' education in other Greek states as well, such as Athens and Sparta.

⁴⁹ Dosiadas wrote about the boys' participation in the *syssitia* of Lyttus, where the children were encouraged to attend the discussions held by their fathers and the *presbyteroi*. Pyrgion complements Dosiadas in recording that even orphaned boys attended the common meals. For a discussion about the pedagogical role of the *syssitia*, as well as of the orphans' participation in the institution, see STRATARIDAKI 2009. Although there is no literary evidence about the boys' attendance of the *syssitia* in all Cretan states, we assume that the descriptions of the common messes by Ephorus, Dosiadas, and Pyrgion reflected more or less a common picture of the institution in the whole island.

⁵⁰ See Strabo 10.4.20, where Ephorus speaks of the *paedonomoi* as the men in charge of the boys' *agōgē*. WILLETTS 1955, 13, 26.

⁵¹ See Dosiadas (FGrH 458 F 2) and Pyrgion (FGrH 467 F 1).

⁵² LSJ s.v. *εὐκαίρως*: "seasonably, opportunistically." It is quite amazing that the

exact meaning of the ancient adverb *εὐκαίρως* occurs in analogous contexts related to *mandinadhes* in contemporary Crete, as testified by a Cretan, V. Charonitis, a participant of the Conference on the Cretan *Mandinadha* cited above (CHARONITIS 2002, 213): "In my childhood, everyone kept a significant reserve of a variety of *mandinadhes*, which we sang *at an appropriate time*, while simultaneously living in a society whose members spoke *mandinadhes*, formed their thoughts by *mandinadhes*, and beautified their lives through *mandinadhes*." (My translation; the emphasis in italics is mine.)

⁵³ Herzfeld's words are brought to mind, regarding the Cretan villagers' imitation/repetition of formulae in composing verses: "The apt use of a familiar verse in a novel context also qualifies as original and will be

Turning now to the apparently long duration of the jesting training, it is significant to our hypothesis (i.e., that the *geloia legein* must have acted as an educational measure for the Phaestian boys preparing for their future role) to consider the age span for the trainees' practice. In fact, the boys' presence at the *syssitia* was completed at the end of their 17th year of age, after which the males entered the next age group, the ephebes, who were enrolled in the *agelae* ("troops").⁵⁴

The ephebes' involvement in jesting appears to have been quite likely, if not imperative, due to their intensive military training,⁵⁵ during their two-year presence in the *agelae*. It was thus likely that the Phaestian youth, when engaged in mock fighting at the *agelae* -a tougher practice than indeed than when at the *syssitia*- should already have attained the expertise in telling witty jokes. The rigid physical training of the ephebes must have foreboded more serious and violent reactions among them than those occurring during their earlier military training, as minors, in the *syssitia*. Thus, it would be reasonable to assume that the *agōgē* of the young Phaestians must have been anticipatory, provisional, and prescriptive in function (as it aimed at forming future citizens), so that the type of jokes which the boys were encouraged to tell one another during their exercise period were non-offensive. The training process in *geloia legein* must have served as an effective balancing measure among the young, in order for them to avoid any insulting verbal attacks and scurrilous laughs against one another.⁵⁶ Consequently, a harmonious fellowship among the boys -through jesting- would have been aimed at.

Moreover, if we accept that the boys' practice in jesting occurred in the *syssitia* mainly, apart from the ephebes' training in the *agelae*, its significance can naturally be connected to the educational mission of the institution. In fact, the *andreia*, the buildings in which the *syssitia* were held, constituted the places, where disputes among the young members used to be settled.⁵⁷ It is reasonable to view

remembered as such." (HERZFELD 1985, 141); "Other devices that support the same strong contrast between disciplined form and adventurous content include phrase repetition, the imitation of syntactic formulae [...]" (HERZFELD 1985, 142). In this sense, the jokes may have resembled the poetic couplets, which are still heard today in the form of dialogues between Cretan village men.

⁵⁴ According to Ephorus (Strabo 10.4.20), the ephebes are called μείζους. μείζους is contrasted to νεωτέρους, a term used by Dosiadas (FGRH 458 F 2) and Ephorus (Strabo 10.4.20.11: τοὺς μὲν οὖν ἔτι νεωτέρους εἰς τὰ συσσίτια ἄγουσι τὰ ἀνδρεία), apparently to denote the younger groups of the boys, namely those below the age of 17. WILLETTS 1955, 14, 16.

⁵⁵ Strabo 10.4.20: "[...] and on certain appointed days "Troop" contends with "Troop", marching rhythmically into battle, to the time of flute and lyre, as is their custom in actual war [...]" (Perseus transl.)

⁵⁶ The Phaestian goals appear to be mirrored in Plato's (*Rep.* 388e) and Aristotle's (*Eth. Nic.* 1108a 23-24) relevant exhortations to men. Could the Phaestian custom, if practiced before the Hellenistic age, have provided Plato with an example for his ideal state, in which laughter could have operated as an educational tool? This is a valid question; Plato was opposed to excessive laughter, as stated earlier (*Leg.* 732c). He also objected to wine drinking for avoiding intoxication (*Leg.* 2 666 a-c). This may have been based on the philosopher's awareness of a law enacted in Eleutherna (or of *Leg.* in other states) (MANDALAKI 2004, 218). According to Willetts (WILLETTS 1955, 26), "it is difficult not to believe that Plato's account is inspired by the primitive Cretan system."

⁵⁷ GUARDUCCI 1939, II v 25 (Axos) and p. 70; reference to ἀνδρηῖο and ἀνῆβο points to such settlements; similarly, GUARDUCCI 1935, I x 2.6

this measure as one initiated by the Phaestian state for constraining the youth's social and military demeanor.⁵⁸

The young Phaestians' involvement in *geloia legein* training, a notably long activity, as said before, aimed at enabling the young males to achieve through training self-awareness and self-control, before they undertook their citizen and military duties. It is understood that such character qualities were indispensable for a body of soldiers in battle.

For the sake of the discussion of *geloia legein*, and, as stated earlier, due to lack of evidence about the Phaestian custom, the military training of the youth in Sparta may offer a parallel case to that in Phaestus. The Spartan example is worth examining, because jesting was recorded to have been part of the young Spartans' *agōgē* as well (Plut. *Lyc.* 12.4). In fact, the young Spartans' practice in telling jokes might help to make speculations about the Phaestian custom. After all, the Spartan and Cretan systems of *agōgē* were similar (Ephorus in Strabo 10.4.17-19 and Plut. *Lyc.* 17-19); moreover, the institution of *syssitia* formed a significant part for the boys' education in both systems.⁵⁹

The custom of *geloia legein* was an exclusively Phaestian feature in all Crete, at least in the Hellenistic period. Nevertheless, one could propose that composing *mandinadhes* as a habit in contemporary Crete could have originally been traced among ancient Phaestians. Although the custom pertained to jokes, the Phaestians could be viewed as the πρώτοι εὔρεται for the Cretan *mandinadhes*, which for decades until now have been spoken in dialogue form or sung in Crete, on a variety of themes touching upon almost every aspect of life, with the intention to avert insults among the speakers. If jests in ancient Phaestus aimed at cultivating among the youth sentiments of cohesiveness during their military training, as discussed above, then, they must have constituted part of the ancient Phaestians' education. Later in time, the practice might have expanded from Phaestus to other parts of the island, while a thematic broadness might also have followed. In fact, if we treat the contemporary men of the Cretan village (in HERZFELD 1985) on one hand, and the boys in ancient Phaestus on the other, as parallel cases, we will find out that a) village men and Phaestian boys seem to have shared in telling ready-witted jokes (*eutrapeloi*), and b) they appear to have utilized similar linguistic processes (such as those proposed by MacKenzie mentioned above) for composing and telling poems, verses or jokes, which formed centuries-old traditions, like Homeric poetry.⁶⁰

Summing up, in many Cretan communities today,⁶¹ witty phrases and jokes structured in couplets can still

(Elytynia) and pp. 90-92, allows for analogous settlements in the *andreia*. For these, see STRATARIDAKI 2009, 342 and n. 20.

⁵⁸ Analogous measures for social control of the youth appeared to have been applied by the ancient Cretan states; one such measure was the food type and portions offered to the members of the *syssitia*, according to Pyrgion's testimony (FGRH 467 F 1). For a discussion of this issue, see STRATARIDAKI 2009, 342 and n. 20.

⁵⁹ See the Appendix for a discussion on the significance of jesting as an educational measure for the Spartan and Cretan youth.

⁶⁰ MACKENZIE 2000, 176.

⁶¹ Besides the community studied by Herzfeld (HERZFELD 1985, xvii), there exist others in present-day Crete (see MOUTZOURIS (ed.), 2002),

be heard frequently, usually for generating non-insulting laughter. Such *distichs* appear to echo the ancient tradition from Phaestus, according to which the *distichs* may have operated as a measure to train the young in dealing with military life (part of their future duties as citizens) by cultivating among them sentiments of collaboration and cohesiveness. In time, *distichs* of this sort may appear to have been favored by Cretans all over the island as a means to refer to, and cope with, almost any daily situation in a joking, non-insulting manner. Regardless of the occasion, the Cretans' preference for such *distichs* today seems to have aimed at controlling the speakers' reactions to high-pressure situations, thus building sociable, non-stressful relations among the speakers. This must have been the aim of the *geloia legein* practice among the ancient Phaestians with emphasis on their chief duties, i.e., military and civic.

APPENDIX

Jesting constituted part of the Spartan *agōgē*. Specifically, Plutarch notes that, while exercising or fighting, the young Spartans used to engage in "jesting without scurrility."⁶² Apparently, this phrase reflects the Spartan state's exhortation to her youth to remain firm in their exercises and fights, and to retain self-control. It is reasonable to assume that, in learning how to fight, the Spartan youth had to concentrate on the act itself, as well as on their opponents.

Generally speaking, it appears natural that physical activities, such as mock fighting, often entail aggressive behavior especially among young participants-opponents, who due to their age tend to be more irritable and passionate by nature than mature men in such involvements. Under hard competitive conditions of military training of youth, as the case in Sparta was, it is rather easy to imagine the youth being quite aggressive towards one another, while fighting, and probably one would expect them to use obscene language among themselves. This setting also appears quite common in modern societies, in which young people, who participate in tough competitions (e.g., football games), often react vehemently both physically and verbally. As a consequence, then, the aggressiveness exhibited by the youth may often

which, as already noted, handle dialogues in verses and jokes almost on a daily basis.

⁶² Plut. *Lyc.* 12.4 παίζειν εἰθίζοντο καὶ σκώπτειν ἄνευ βωμολοχίας (the relevant text in translation is the following; the emphasis is mine: Boys also used to come to these public messes, as if they were attending schools of sobriety; there they would listen to political discussions and see instructive models of liberal breeding. There they themselves also became accustomed to sport and jest without scurrility, and to endure jesting without displeasure. Indeed, it seems to have been especially characteristic of a Spartan to endure jesting; but if anyone could not bear up under it, he had only to ask it, and the jester ceased. (Perseus transl.)) and 17.1: μαχομένοις καὶ σκώπτουσι ἀλλήλους (the relevant text in translation is the following; the emphasis is mine: The elderly men also kept close watch of them, coming more frequently to their places of exercise, and observing their contests of strength and wit, not cursorily, but with the idea that they were all in a sense the fathers and tutors and governors of all the boys. In this way, at every fitting time and in every place, the boy who went wrong had someone to admonish and chastise him. (Perseus transl.)). St. Halliwell (HALLIWELL 2008, 48) is right in interpreting laughter among the Spartan youth as "verbal sparring"; for a long discussion on Spartan laughter, see also HALLIWELL 2008, 45-50, as well as DAVID 1988, 1-25, esp. 3.

disorientate them from their main scope, which is dual: on one hand, to defeat their opponents, and, on the other, to act under control by a set of rules prescribing the tactics of fighting, including cohesiveness of their group, and restraint of insulting jokes.

Accordingly, even if reactions like the above are always expected in real life fighting situations, the military training of the Spartan youth also aimed at teaching them not to attack their mates in scurrility.⁶³ To meet this pedagogical goal, as Plutarch notes, the Spartan state prescribed that the competing trainees be supervised by older Spartan men -πρεσβύτεροι-⁶⁴ so that the former did not exhibit indecent conduct against one another,⁶⁵ but reacted in jests.⁶⁶

The Spartan example discussed here serves as an interesting parallel to the Phaestian boys' training in jesting, the practice of which would ensure avoidance of scurrility against one another. Contemplating on the military, and thus strict, character of the boys' *agōgē* in Sparta and Crete,⁶⁷ we could not but appreciate that the implementation of jesting among the youth in Sparta and in Phaestus, could probably have occurred as a measure for controlling the irascible, passionate and irritable character of the young.⁶⁸ Being trained to become best soldiers for their states, the Spartan and the Phaestian boys had to learn how to discipline their due-to-age untamed nature.⁶⁹

⁶³ See above n. 62.

⁶⁴ The training in jesting of the Phaestian youth could probably have been entrusted to the *paedonomoi*, as the Spartan youth had been supervised by the *presbyteroi* (Plut. *Lyc.* 17.1).

⁶⁵ Plut. *Lyc.* 17.1. Xenophon, Plutarch's apparent source, records that the Spartan youth being engaged in quarrels and fights with others of the same group were also instructed to avoid *hybris*, *paroinia* and *aischrologia* (*Lac. Resp.* 5.6-7). On mechanisms for the preservation of harmony in the Spartan state, see FISHER 1988, 26-50, esp. 29; HALLIWELL 2008, 47.

⁶⁶ See above n. 62.

⁶⁷ Sparta and Crete shared common features in their *politeiae*. Aristotle (2.1271b) notes that the Spartans formed their laws after Lyktus (Lyttus), which they had colonized. Ephorus' description of Cretan boys' education (Strabo 10.4.20) is similar to the education of the Spartan boys (Plut. *Lyc.* 16-19).

⁶⁸ According to Bremmer (BREMNER 1977, 19), in antiquity humor could be dangerous. In avoiding it, as Bremmer states, attempts were made by "conservative philosophers, Spartans and the early Christians" to 'tame' laughter. As discussed earlier in the paper, Plato particularly emphasized the disastrous effect of uncontrolled laughter among young people.

⁶⁹ I owe a debt of gratitude to PPT and to HMG.

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