

El Greco – The Cretan Years

Nikolaos M. Panagiotakes



CENTRE FOR HELLENIC STUDIES, KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

EL GRECO
THE CRETAN YEARS

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Nikolaos M. Panagiotakes

translated by
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with a preface by
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edited by
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Creta le dió la vida y los pinceles

Hortensio Félix Paravicino y Arteaga (1580–1633)

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About the author

Nikolaos (Nikos) M. Panagiotakes (1935–1997) was a prolific scholar whose interests ranged across Byzantine and post-Byzantine language, literature and history, with a particular focus on primary research in archives, especially the enormously rich state archives of Venice. Born in Heraklion, Crete, Panagiotakes was educated at the University of Athens and later went on to postdoctoral work at the Warburg Institute, University of London, where he studied with the eminent Byzantinists Joan Hussey and Robert Browning, and the Islamic scholar Bernard Lewis.

He was first appointed to the University of Ioannina, Greece, in 1966, but his post was annulled two years later by the military dictatorship of the ‘Colonels’, who ruled Greece from 1967 to 1974. A period of self-imposed exile followed, in Venice, Britain and the USA, before he was able to return to Ioannina, where he held a chair from 1970 to 1987. For most of this period Panagiotakes was also closely involved in the early development of the University of Crete, whose Humanities library at Rethymno he was instrumental in equipping. In 1987 he moved from Ioannina to the university that he had helped to found. He held a chair at the University of Crete until his death, while also serving, from 1989, as Director of the Istituto Ellenico in Venice. He died of a heart attack, at the age of 62, in 1997.

Most of Panagiotakes’s work was published during his lifetime in scholarly articles in several languages. As well as the discoveries about the early life of El Greco which are the subject of this book, he brought to light the life and career of a neglected Cretan composer of early music, Frangiskos Leontaritis (Londariti), and in a brilliant series of studies demonstrated what a sophisticated cultural life had once existed in his native Crete during the final century of Venetian rule (roughly from 1571 to 1669).

Preface by Nicos Hadjinicolaou

The translation into English of the principal studies that Nikos Panagiotakes devoted to Domenikos Theotokopoulos has, I feel, been long overdue. They are the work of a brilliant philologist who gradually evolved into a cultural historian. Indeed, Panagiotakes is a particularly illuminating example of how a concern with broadening his personal horizons and desire to interpret complex phenomena (about which the various individual disciplines can only struggle – from their narrower perspectives – to offer satisfactory explanations) inevitably leads the scholar to explore other academic fields.

As far as I know, Nikos himself never felt the need to justify his scholarly choices or become embroiled in theoretical or methodological debates. The type of history he ended up serving was more a matter of personal idiosyncrasy, a deep-rooted need to understand civilization as a whole, particularly that of Crete in its Renaissance heyday, as well as that of the rest of Greece and Italy. That his studies focus primarily on Crete and its culture is undoubtedly due to the fact that he was himself from Heraklion, the capital of the island. He was always fired by love and pride for Crete, indeed that passionate affection shared by so many Cretans for their homeland, which in recent times has enabled certain values of the past to remain alive, and even withstand (to some extent), the overwhelming tide of cultural monotony that is sweeping across the globe. However, I should add that Panagiotakes, while passionately ‘local’ in his academic interests and affections, was highly wary of what he termed *Cretolagneia*, an uncritical and embarrassing obsession with anything Cretan that can lead to a tedious self-satisfaction and anxiety to assert the uniqueness of things local, while being utterly blind to comparable phenomena found elsewhere around the world.

Panagiotakes’s studies on El Greco approach the artist from two main perspectives. First, they explore all the biographical information available on the Cretan master, who in Spain became one of the leading figures of late European Mannerism. And second, they consider the general conditions and circumstances prevailing in Crete during the years around 1567, when, already a mature artist, El Greco left his native island for Venice.

I

‘Education and Culture in Venetian Crete’, which here serves to introduce the volume, was the keynote lecture given by Panagiotakes at an international symposium and accompanying exhibition organised in September 1990 on the occasion of the 450th anniversary of El Greco’s birth. It gives a highly enlightening account of education and schooling in Venetian-ruled Crete, with special emphasis

on the highpoint of the later sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries. I am uncertain to what extent Panagiotakes in this study intended to stress the contact of Cretan Greeks during the period of Venetian rule with educational institutions and learning in Italy, or to what extent he deliberately underplayed the significance and spread of the 'traditional' schooling, which had its roots in the medieval Byzantine system. What can be said of this lecture is that in the context of a conference devoted to El Greco, in which the Cretan phase in the life of the artist was being seriously taken into consideration for the first time, the outline given by Panagiotakes served as an ideal introduction to the subject. In view of the fact that there is sometimes the danger of El Greco appearing to have been 'westernised' from the cradle onwards – which hardly corresponds to the actual toil and labour involved in his acquiring a European painterly idiom during his years in Italy – the very rich substance of this study cannot be overestimated. For it throws important light on the role of Crete in modern Greek, and even European, culture during this period.

II

Panagiotakes's key contribution to El Greco studies was his monograph first published in the *Essays in Honour of Nikos Svoronos* in 1986, whose translation takes up the main portion of the present book (Chapters 1–8 and Appendix 1). This *Festschrift* was a two-volume publication in honour of Svoronos, who, after his return to Greece from political exile, had dedicated his working life to the newly founded University of Crete. The study was also available as a separate publication and was subsequently re-published, in 1999, by Crete University Press in a volume that also contained a number of Panagiotakes's shorter studies on El Greco (including the 'New Document' translated here as the book's final chapter).

El Greco: The Cretan Years explores the information available to us on the Cretan phase in the life of El Greco. One of its main virtues lies in the fact that within its pages is condensed and analysed all the preceding scholarship on sixteenth-century Crete by Greek and Italian scholars.

Even more importantly, however, Panagiotakes undertook his own painstaking research in the Venetian state archives, which enabled him to form his own thoroughly documented views on a host of issues that till then had been subject more to the realm of fantasy than to the rigours of systematic and serious historical enquiry. These issues included the artist's precise place of origin, details regarding his family, his name, his religious affiliation, and his apprenticeship in his vocation. In addition, Panagiotakes presented in his study a previously unknown document that he discovered in the Venetian state archives relating to Domenikos and his brother Manousos. The document informs us that the young artist had already attained the status of *maestro* in 1563, three years earlier than previously thought (on the basis of a Venetian document published by Mertzios back in 1961). On the basis of this new evidence, we can legitimately assume that El Greco already had his own family, which presumably explains why he never married his long-time partner in Toledo, Jerónima de las Cuevas.

Panagiotakes's study also marked a watershed in Greek academic writing on the subject. One needs only to look at other studies on El Greco published in Greek during the previous quarter of a century to see why. It also marked a watershed in El Greco studies on the international level. The preceding twenty-five years had seen the publication of Wethey's important monograph,¹ the second edition of Camón Aznar's monograph originally published in 1950,² the volume by Gudiol,³ the exhibition catalogue for *El Greco of Toledo*,⁴ and the proceedings of the *El Greco y Toledo* conference held in Toledo in 1982.⁵

All these studies display a remarkable blend of ignorance or indifference vis-à-vis the Cretan period in the life of the artist, particularly if one takes into consideration the fact that scholars writing after 1975 had access to important new material on El Greco's Cretan period. The only scholar who felt the need to touch on the subject and revise his views was Wethey, in his paper at the 1982 conference.

One of the key contributions of Panagiotakes's monograph on El Greco's life in Crete is surely the section he devoted to El Greco's apprenticeship as a *spectator* of Renaissance art in Crete: 'All students of El Greco's art take it for granted that his first encounter with fine art took place after his arrival in Venice, and do not seem to take into account or even contemplate the possibility that he had seen works by great artists of the Italian Renaissance in Crete'. He then goes on to list the works – primarily of religious content – that were contained in private collections and churches in Candia, using as his sources a letter sent by Francesco Morosini (1601), a report of Luca Stella, archbishop of Crete (1625), as well as the standard study of the Venetian monuments of Crete by Giuseppe Gerola ([Appendix 2](#)).⁶

III

Panagiotakes frequently pointed out that he was not an art historian. Indeed, his research on El Greco focused exclusively on the artist rather than on his art. The only occasion on which he did stray from the historical to the art-historical was in the case of his assertion that El Greco was never an apprentice of Titian, at least in the strict sense of the term. However, he did not produce particularly strong or new evidence in support of this view.

Among his other published studies, besides the exemplary 'Fodele and Greco',⁷ which soundly refuted an earlier theory that Theotokopoulos may have been born

¹ H.E. Wethey, *El Greco and his School*, vol. 1 (Text and plates), vol. 2 (Catalogue raisonné), Princeton, N.J. 1962.

² J. Camón Aznar, *Dominico Greco*, 2 vols., Madrid 1970.

³ J. Gudiol, *The Complete Paintings of El Greco, 1541–1614*, New York 1973 (and the original Spanish edition, Barcelona 1971).

⁴ J. Brown et al., *El Greco of Toledo*: exhibition organized by the Toledo Museum of Art, with Museo del Prado, National Gallery of Art, Dallas Museum of Fine Arts; Boston 1982.

⁵ The proceedings were published in 1984 as the 13th volume in the *Studies in the History of Art* series of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, under the title *El Greco: Italy and Spain*.

⁶ G. Gerola, *Monumenti veneti dell'isola di Creta*, 4 vols, Venice 1905–1932.

⁷ 'Fodele and Greco', *Anti* 445, 24 August 1990, 32–34.

in the coastal village of Fodele, of especial importance is his paper, 'Un nuovo documento del periodo cretese di Dominikos Theotokopoulos', delivered at the 1990 conference on *El Greco of Crete* in Heraklion, first published in Italian in the *Proceedings* five years later, and included in translation as [Chapter 9](#) and [Appendix 2](#) of the present volume. Here Panagiotakes presents yet another previously unknown document relating to the Cretan period in the life of El Greco, which reveals information regarding the acquaintance of the artist with the Venetian nobility of the island, who perhaps commissioned works from him or played a role in his decision to go to Venice.

The last fruit of Panagiotakes's interest in the life and career of El Greco was his communication delivered at the conference organised by the Institute of Mediterranean Studies and the University of Crete in Rethymno in September 1995 on *El Greco in Italy and Italian Art*.⁸ Here again he presented previously unknown material on El Greco's brother Manousos. Undoubtedly this completed – as far as the sources allow – the mosaic that had first begun to be revealed before the Second World War through the researches of Konstantinos Mertzios. Of course, we would like to know more about Manousos's decision to leave Italy for Toledo and his life there until his death in 1604, beyond what has already been published by San Román.

Panagiotakes's research on El Greco was concerned almost exclusively with the Cretan phase of the artist's life, as was not the case, for example, with the biographical study of El Greco by Pantelis Prevelakis.⁹ An interesting undertaking, and not without significance in its day, this examined archival and other evidence for every period in El Greco's life, and was undoubtedly a much more serious enterprise than the melodramatic fictions of Achilleas Kyrou and other later writers. However, the far superior work of Panagiotakes, compared with that of Prevelakis, is due not only to the different times in which they were written or, one could argue, the fact that the road had been opened for Panagiotakes thanks to the discoveries of Mertzios and Constantoudaki (Prevelakis was familiar only with Mertzios's work on Manousos, to which he referred extensively). Rather, the key to the difference lies in the fact that Panagiotakes toiled at first-hand archival research with the methodical thoroughness of the seasoned historian. His research in the Venetian archives, coupled with his very extensive knowledge of sixteenth-century Crete, enabled him to make clear-sighted interpretations of the evidence that consistently revealed a host of views and conjectures regarding the life and times of El Greco as being wholly spurious.

The joint forces of the disciplines of History and History of Art have, over the course of the past century, opened up many new perspectives. Yet surprisingly few have exploited the full potential offered by these twin academic tools. Thanks to

⁸ N.M. Panagiotakes, 'Manousos the Pirate: 1571–1572', in N. Hadjinicolaou, ed., *El Greco in Italy and Italian Art*, Rethymno 1999, 17–23.

⁹ Pantelis Prevelakis, *Θεοτοκόπουλος, Τὰ βιογραφικά*, Athens 1942.

the studies of Nikos Panagiotakes published here, further academic research on the great Cretan master can now proceed on firmer foundations.

I believe that these essays will be welcomed by English-speaking readers. After all, since the 1930s, the work of El Greco has received very great attention from scholars and art historians writing in English, such as Robert Byron, David Talbot Rice, Frank Rutter, Pal Kelemen, Harold Wethey, Ellis Waterhouse and Enriqueta Harris.

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Translator's note

I would like to thank Professor Roderick Beaton for first suggesting to me that I undertake the translation of Panagiotakes's studies of El Greco's early years. The Greek world after Byzantium and before the establishment of the modern Greek state was a diverse, complex, contradictory, yet distinct, culture. El Greco is one of its more remarkable offspring.

In the translation I often use El Greco's given name of Domenikos Theotokopoulos where this seemed appropriate, particularly since Panagiotakes focuses on the young man in Crete and the contemporary records containing his name before he became known simply as 'El Greco'. The sobriquet 'El Greco' is obviously appropriate when the man was outside his homeland, but may be seen by some as incongruous when used of him in Crete. As for other Cretan names contained in the Venetian records of the time, they display a mixture of Greek and Venetian Italian (usually Greek names transcribed in somewhat haphazard fashion into Latin characters). I supply the Italian, archival record of the name in some instances, in parentheses, alongside the probable Greek version of the names. Prizes will not be awarded to anyone who spots any inconsistency in the spelling of such names here, the blame for which should be placed squarely on the Veneto-Cretan notaries public of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

I am grateful to Ellie Panagiotakes for allowing me to consult her late husband's impressive library in their home while translating this volume on El Greco. I also wish to thank Nicos Hadjinicolaou for taking up my suggestion that he write the preface for this English edition and for supplying fine digital reproductions of illustrative material to accompany the text. There were no systematically compiled bibliographies in the original studies, but here I have extracted titles from the footnotes to create a separate bibliography, while also supplementing these with a separate list of more recent publications (post 1990) provided by Nicos Hadjinicolaou. I like to think that Nikos Panagiotakes would have approved of this.

John C. Davis
Athens, June 2008

Abbreviations

ASV Archivio di Stato di Venezia

DC *Duca di Candia*

NC *Notai di Candia*

NV *Notarile* [*Notai di Venezia*]

EIB Ἑλληνικὸ Ἰνστιτοῦτο Βενετίας

MCC Museo Civico Correr

ASVa Archivio Segreto Vaticano

Visita ASVa: *Sacra Congregazione di Propaganda, Visite e Collegi*, vol. 5

reg. registro

b. busta

f. folio

r recto

v verso

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