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Clearchus's Journey from Soloi to Ai Khanum: A Peripatetic Tale of Old Cyprus and New Hellas

Paul Cartledge

Cyprus today plays a vitally important geopolitical role as a frontier-zone between West and East, between Europe and Asia, and between the Mediterranean and the Middle East. In Classical antiquity, as today, it was divided politically, ethnically, and culturally, but in very different ways. Politically, it was carved up into what are usually called semi-independent 'city-kingdoms'. Most of these were Greek, in the sense that the inhabitants were largely or predominantly ethnic Greeks, Kition being an important exception. These were mostly the direct descendants of immigrants to the island in the late Bronze and early Iron Ages, who had brought with them their unique writing system, a version of the Mycenaean syllabary (which they preserved until the third century BC). In Greek, 'Cyprus' means 'copper', and the island's reserves of copper were hugely important economically, not just to Cyprus but also to much of the ancient Greek world as a whole; as important, historically, as silver was to Classical, democratic Athens.

Of the several Classical Cypriot city-kingdoms, the one that is of relevance to the present article is that of Soloi, which – lying as it does near modern Karavostasi, at the foot of Morphou Bay – unhappily happens to find itself on the wrong side of the island's most important current political division today. In antiquity too, along with the rest of the island, Soloi suffered invasion and foreign occupation. From the late sixth century BC, it passed first under the sway of the Achaemenid Persian Empire, where it remained for much of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, and then under that of Alexander the Great and his successors.

Soloi of Cyprus was not the Soloi that gave its name to 'solecism' (from ancient Greek *soloikismos*), derived from Soloi on the mainland of Asia Minor. We know much less about the ancient Cypriot Soloi than we would ideally like to. Its ancient theatre, excavated in the 1920s and restored in the modern era, was originally built as a Greek theatre

facing the sea, and later reconstructed at the end of the second century AD (below). Soloi also had its own local silver coinage, struck on the usual Cypriot weight standard.

Theatron in ancient Greek both denoted the space where spectators watched plays and was itself the collective noun for the audience of *theatai* (spectators) as a whole. Theatre was a characteristically ancient Greek, originally Athenian, invention, being an art and a space of both entertainment and instruction – especially in the delicate arts of democratic citizenship. In the post-Alexander period, the political function of theatres inevitably altered, as Greek cities such as Soloi became less free and independent, and more subject entities within larger territorial monarchies. One of their key functions was precisely to represent and embody Hellenism. They also became the preferred venues for display oratory by travelling Sophists, one of whom – Aelius Aristides in the second century AD – had the nerve to describe the Roman Empire as a 'perfect democracy, under one man' (*Oration XXVI/26* 'To Rome'). Even Aristotle (384–322 BC), who was by no means a democrat, would have been shocked by that contradiction.

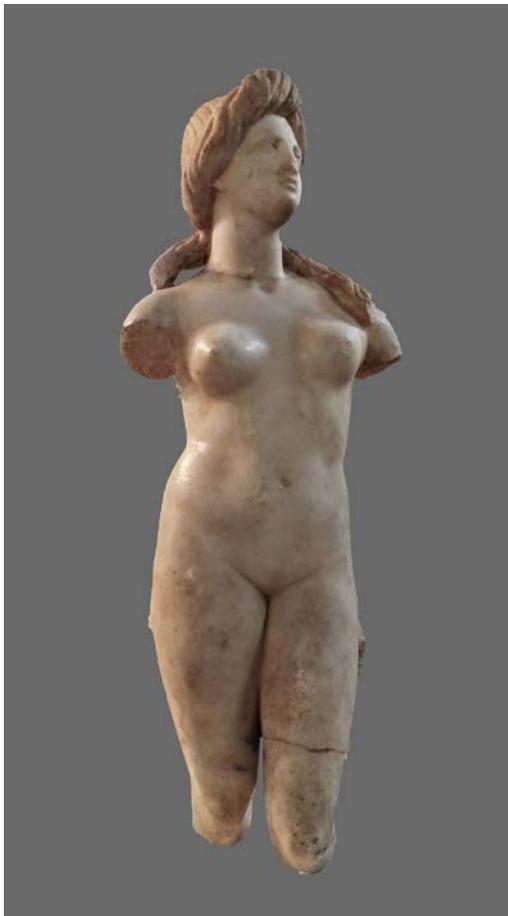
One of ancient Soloi's most famous extant artefacts, now in the Cyprus Museum in Lefkosia/Nikosia, is a fine-quality, marble sculpture of the Cyprus-born goddess herself, Aphrodite (page 10, left). This dates to the post-Alexander, Hellenistic period, during which Hellenic cultural influence was spread ever further eastward, as far as what are today Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Aphrodite goddess figure actually originated further east, however, taking the form of Astarte, for example, among the people of modern Lebanon known to the Greeks as 'Phoenicians'. Only later did she modulate into Greek Aphrodite, unwarlike divinity of sexual love. Her major shrine on Cyprus, however, was at Palaepaphos, old Paphos in the south-west of the island, near her alleged birthplace. At Soloi, she by no means had things all her own way,



The restored Roman theatre at Soloi, Northern Cyprus, built on the north slope of the hill near the coast. © George Plakides.

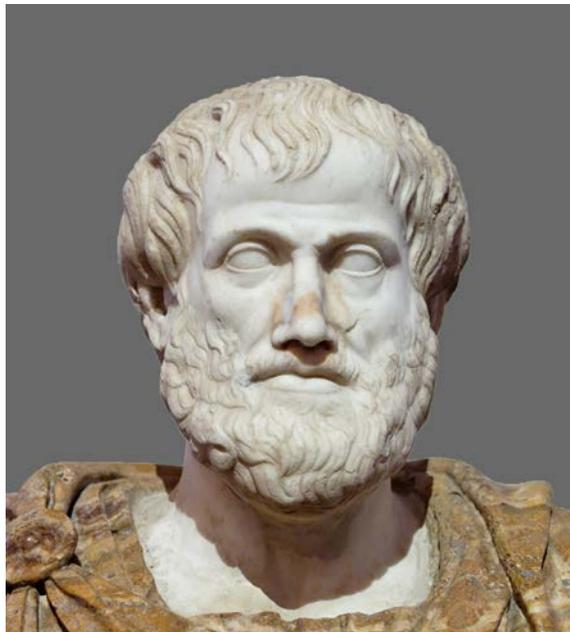
since cults of Zeus and Athena are also attested there. The marble representation from Soloi, though, stark naked in the preferred post-Praxitelean manner, gives a fair indication of the taste and wealth of the city in the second/first century BC.

Cyprus as a whole by around 200 BC was a part of one of the Hellenistic ‘Successor’ kingdoms to the empire of Alexander the Great. Alexander had inherited in 336, at the age of only twenty, the enlarged kingdom of Greater Macedon. This was thanks to the assassination of his father Philip II, in which Alexander may – or may not – have had a hand. Together with Philip’s throne, for which he had to fight and kill, he inherited a whole lot more: not least, a project of imperial expansion, which he himself enlarged massively so as to include centrally the conquest of the entire Achaemenid Persian Empire. Based in Iran, where Cyrus II the Great had founded it around 550 BC, this had been the fastest growing oriental empire to that date. Its tentacles had at one time stretched as far east as Pakistan in South Asia, as far west as Bulgaria and northern Greece in Europe, and as far south as Egypt and Cyrenaica in North Africa.



Aphrodite of Soloi, first century BC, Cyprus, marble. Height: 81cm. Cyprus Archaeological Museum, Lefkosia, Nicosia. © Archaeo-Artist.

Bust of Aristotle, Roman copy after a Greek bronze original by Lysippos from 330 BC, marble. Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Altemps, Ludovisi Collection, inv. 8575. © Jastrow (2006). Public Domain.



On Clearchus’s ‘journey from Soloi to Ai Khanum’ (in modern Afghanistan), he went ‘the long way round’, via Athens. Clearchus was a pupil of Aristotle (above), one thing that he shared in common with Alexander the Great, but, unlike the future Macedonian king, Clearchus studied with Aristotle at the school of higher learning that he founded in the mid-330s at Athens, in the gymnasium grove dedicated to Apollo Lykeios (Wolfish Apollo), from where its name the Lykeion or ‘Lyceum’ (and French lycée) derives. Since Aristotle was given to instructing his pupils on the hoof, his school also acquired the nickname of the Peripatos or ‘path’, so that a modern equivalent of the rather uninformative title Lyceum would be something like Peripatetic Institute for Advanced Studies. We do not know exactly when Clearchus was born, but, given that the Lyceum was founded in the mid-330s, his birth must have been around the mid-fourth century BC.

Athens had long been the cultural epicentre of the ancient Hellenic world by then. Plato (c. 427–347) makes one of the characters in his *Protagoras* dialogue, which has a dramatic date in the 430s BC, refer to Athens as the ‘City Hall of Wisdom’. He had himself founded his Academy in the 380s, an institution of higher learning and reflection named after its location in a gymnasium grove devoted to the hero Akademos. Aristotle, formerly Plato’s star pupil, followed his mentor’s example when he founded his Lyceum.

The fame of the Lyceum soon spread, and news of it would have reached Cyprus early on in the wake of Alexander’s conquests on the Asiatic mainland. There was a great deal to attract the interest of a bright young Cypriot

Greek would-be intellectual, such as Clearchus must have been, for at the Lyceum Aristotle lectured on pretty much everything that then counted as branches of learning, knowledge, and scholarship.

Aristotle was himself fundamentally a natural scientist – more specifically a biologist and zoologist – as well as a logician, literary critic, and political theorist. However, what animated all his work was *historia* – research, enquiry. Not that he had much admiration for what we call ‘history’ today: in the *Poetics*, he notoriously opined that poetry was more ‘philosophical’ and ‘serious’, that is, more important, than history, because history merely told you stuff such as ‘what Alcibiades did and what happened to him’, to which Aristotle’s reaction was a shrug of ‘so what?’ On the other hand, that attitude did not prevent Aristotle from getting his hands dirty, historiographically speaking, that is, doing primary research to establish facts. An extant honorific inscription on a marble pillar from Delphi, issued by the Amphictyony (religious administration) of Delphi, reads (in part, as restored):

Since Aristotle son of Nicomachus the Stagirite and Callisthenes son of Damotimus of Olynthus have drawn up the catalogue of those who have been victors at the Pythian Games ... praise Aristotle and Callisthenes and crown them.

Callisthenes just happened to be Aristotle’s nephew (or grand-nephew), and it was on the strength of such primary historical research and – no doubt – Aristotle’s positively glowing reference that Callisthenes was appointed by Alexander to be his official historian, when the two of them stepped onto Asiatic soil in 334. Unfortunately, things did not turn out so well for Callisthenes, since in

327 BC Alexander had him executed for high treason, as a consequence of which the city of Delphi rescinded its honours for Aristotle and had the marble stele taken down and broken up. A damnation of memory that almost succeeded.

In Bactria (northern Afghanistan), Alexander not only found himself a bride (Roxane) and began the process of procreating a dynasty, but also established a key buffer zone of empire – between the nomads to the north and east, and the old Achaemenid heartland of greater Iran to the south and west. One tried and tested way of laying down foundations for the continuity and expansion of imperial rule was to establish cities. This was a point well – or rather, too well – taken by the ancient sources, who typically credited Alexander with far more city foundations than he could possibly have actually been personally responsible for; the actual figure was about a dozen.

Many of these foundations were named, unsurprisingly, ‘Alexandr(e)ia’ – Alexanderville; the first and most famous and important was that which Alexander himself prospected and laid out in the western Nile delta of northern Egypt, though he did not live to see it built and assume the role of capital of the Successor kingdom of the Ptolemies. However, the Alexandria of relevance to the present article is that probably known originally as *Alexandria-in-Sogdia* but called today, in the local Tadjik language, *Ai Khanum*, ‘Lady Moon’. It lies on the northern frontier of Afghanistan, on the *Amu-Darya* (ancient *Oxus*) river, looking across to (ex-Soviet) Tadjikistan.

The war of the 1970s between the then Soviet Union and the then Western-backed Taliban did the site no favours. Fortunately, the French excavations that had proved so fruitful since the mid-1960s had proceeded far enough by the late 1970s to show just how extensively



This map of the eastern Mediterranean and Western and Central Asia conveys the vast distances travelled by Clearchus in the Hellenistic period. Public Domain, modified by Mark Merrony.

Greek this remote central Asian outpost of Hellenism had once been (below). Like Soloi, Ai Khanum had a theatre, where for all we know plays – or at least excerpts of plays – by Sophocles and Euripides could have been performed, as they were in the old, pre-Alexander administrative capital of the Persian Empire, Susa. More relevant here, Ai Khanum had a gymnasium associated – like the Lykeion at Athens – not only with athletic exercise but also with mental gymnastics, with the teaching of philosophy. In a remote outpost such as this, the gymnasium served also as a centre of civic education.

Of great interest is another key element of this oriental Alexandria's civic architecture: the religious shrine set up to commemorate the key role played by the city's *oikistes* or Founder, Cineas. It is what the Greeks called a *heroon*, or hero-shrine, indicating that at and after his death and burial Cineas had been promoted from the status of mere mortal to that of semi-divine hero and, as such, the recipient of (literal) hero-worship. Such shrines are documented from the very beginnings of Hellenic 'colonisation', the movements of population that originated in the mid-eighth century BC and took Greeks from the old mainland and Aegean islands to settle permanently as far west as eastern Spain, and as far east as modern Georgia on the Black Sea. However, not long after Cineas died and was heroised, something rather extraordinary happened: Clearchus paid a visit to Ai Khanum, in the early third century BC.

How do we know? He tells us himself, his message carved in the most politically numinous of all architectural spaces, Cineas's hero-shrine, in the following poem:

These wise sayings of the illustrious men of old have been consecrated at Sacred Pytho [Delphi]. There, Clearchus transcribed them carefully, coming here [Ai Khanum] to display them so that they shine in a distant place, in the sacred precinct of Cineas.

A cynic might of course ask: how do we know that this Ai Khanum Clearchus is identical with Clearchus of Soloi? We do not know for sure, and the name is not rare, but several supporting arguments suggest almost conclusively that they are the same individual. In short, I am happy to follow the lead of Louis Robert, the doyen of Greek epigraphists, who first suggested the identification, and Simon Hornblower, leading expert on oriental Hellenism, and accept this identification.

The poem of Clearchus quoted above now takes its place as Fragment no. 134a in the edition of all the extant philosophical writings of Cypriot authors compiled by Professor Ioannis G. Taïphakos. Clearchus in fact finds himself placed immediately after a very famous Cypriot indeed, his contemporary Zenon (c. 334–262), who originated from the predominantly Phoenician-origin city of Kition. Like Clearchus, Zenon had found himself drawn as by a magnet to Athens, where he founded the philosophical school of Stoicism, so named because Zenon began by teaching within the stoa (portico, roofed colonnade) in the Agora known from its frescoes as the Stoa Poikile or Painted Stoa.

Clearchus has so many pages devoted to him in the Taïphakos collection, both because he covered such a huge



The ruins of Ai Khanum were excavated by the French Archaeological Delegation in Afghanistan between 1965 and 1978 under the direction of Paul Bernard. © Ancientpages.com.

range of topics, and because his work was sufficiently well regarded and recognised as to be preserved by such a large number of ancient philosophical writers and commentators. To quote Paul Bernard (the principal excavator of Ai Khanum), Clearchus ‘immersed himself in the study of human behavior and the moral rules governing social relations ... and was also interested in the origins of religious thought, which he believed to come from the East.’ More specifically, his interests extended to the beliefs and customs of non-Greeks. He was no narrow Greek nationalist, any more than had been Herodotus of Halicarnassus (c. 484–425 BC), a century before him. Like Herodotus, Clearchus too found that Delphi – and the ‘wise sayings’ he had personally transcribed there – had something uniquely valuable to say, not just to him but to all humanity, and certainly to the Hellenised non-Greeks as well as ethnic Greeks of Ai Khanum.

There were nearly 150 Delphic precepts in all; and from the positioning of the surviving part of no. 48 at Ai Khanum we may infer that Clearchus had all of them transcribed and brought there. It was not surprising that an intellectual and philosopher of his calibre should have been willing and, given his probable wealth, able to travel extensively over vast distances, some 4,800 kilometres, no doubt in often acutely uncomfortable conditions, along partly commercial but probably predominantly military routes anticipating the fabled ‘Silk Routes’ of Roman and later epochs, and in an unsettled military situation (page 11).

By one of those rare and lucky chances, the one Delphic maxim that happens to be preserved in full on stone is really rather enchanting (below), a genuine piece of philosophical wisdom:

As a child, learn good manners
 As a young man, learn to control thy passions
 In middle age, be just
 In old age, give good advice
 Then die, without pain [or ‘without regret’].



Block with a portion of the Delphic maxims, second century BC, Ai Khanum, stone. National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul. Public Domain.

‘Hermaic pillar’ depicting a gymnasiarch, first half of the second century BC, Ai Khanum, limestone. Height: 77cm. National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul, inv. 05.42.14. © Musée Guimet.



From Herodotus we know that some Greeks – including wise Solon of Athens (falsely associated with Soloi) – acted on the maxim ‘call no person happy until he or she is dead’. Another version went: ‘look to the end’. In other words, it was believed that it was only when you have seen how a person dies that you can judge retrospectively whether that life had been a happy one or not. Here at Ai Khanum, thanks to the labours of Clearchus of Soloi, is preserved Delphi’s special spin on that maxim.

The subject of the future development of Ai Khanum is not our direct concern here, but it is nevertheless of great interest. Did it develop into a full-blown *polis* or citizen-state? Probably not: the presence of a palace, and of non-Greek religious cult objects, and the absence of a *bouleuterion* or Council-Chamber tell against it. Yet this Alexandria did its bit and its best for Hellenism on the educational-cultural side. From Ai Khanum’s Gymnasium came the remains of a fine statue of a gymnasiarch (above). He was the official who was responsible for the Gymnasium’s financial management, represented aptly in the guise of a philosopher.

A rather earthier, less cerebral side of Greek religiosity is displayed in another statue – of the universal ancient Greek hero-god Heracles (page 14, left). Originally from

Thebes and the son of a mortal Greek woman as well as of mighty all-father Zeus, Heracles too like Clearchus travelled far and wide – allegedly even further east than he, to India, as well as to the far northern, amber-laden Isles of the Blest. He ended up back in northern Greece, on top of Mt Olympus, dwelling forever in the company of the other Olympian Gods and Goddesses.

Of course, these new Greek cities – some of which were called precisely that: Neapolis in the eponymous Bay of Naples, for instance – differed from each other hugely, in accordance with the motives and circumstances of their foundation, and with the varying local and regional contexts into which they were inserted. Ai Khanum, on the far eastern marches of Hellenism, was in contact – not always peaceful – with Asiatic nomadic tribes, through whom was spread a version of Hellenism. It is widely agreed that the fusion of ‘Gandharan’ style in religious Buddhist sculpture (including the first anthropomorphic images of the Buddha himself) was an outlier of this Hellenic cultural movement. If we are to believe V.-P. Vailenko, that alien soil could have included even the empire of Mauryan emperor and Buddhist convert Ashoka (r. 273–232 BC).

Before leaving Hellenic Central Asia, it is interesting to refer to a post-Alexander Successor king of Ai Khanum and Bactria, Euthydemus I (r. c. 230–200 BC). It is fitting to end with him partly because he managed to have himself depicted on his fine gold and silver coins in such a pukka Greek style (as were other Bactrian

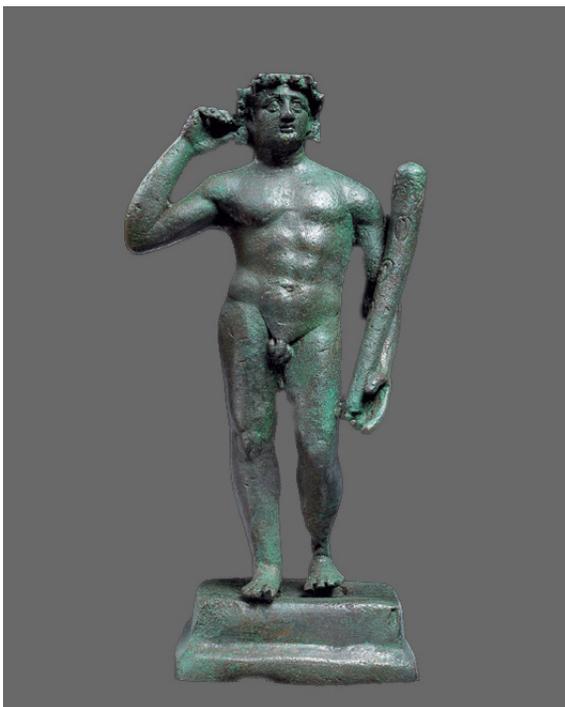


Figure of Heracles from the Temple with Niches, c. 150 BC, Ai Khanum, bronze. Height: 18.2cm. National Museum of Afghanistan, Kabul, inv. 04.42.8. © University of Pennsylvania.

Stater depicting the Bactrian king Eucratides (r. 171–145 BC), obverse; reverse, the Dioscuri (Castor and Pollux) on horseback with the Greek legend ΒΑΣΙΛΕΩΣ ΕΥΚΡΑΤΙΔΟΥ (King Eucratides, his name repeated below); assigned to his reign, originally found in Bukhara, Uzbekistan, and later acquired by Napoleon III, gold. Diameter: 58mm. Cabinet des Médailles, Paris. Public Domain.



kings) (above), and partly for his wonderfully idealistic name: a compound of *euthus*, ‘straight’ as in upright, and *demos*, because it was for the *demos*, the People, that his uprightness was to be displayed and dispensed. We can only hope that he at least tried to live up to his name. Actually, his dynasty came to a fairly sticky end only a couple of generations after his death, in about 150 BC. Clearchus would, though, have had cause to be proud – as we should be too – that the metropolitan culture and morality he had brought with him from Delphi and from Athens, the ‘City Hall of Wisdom’, had been transplanted directly through him to alien soil for at least five or six generations.

We move, ultimately, back to Cyprus, resuming the theme of teaching and athletic exercise conjured up by the gymnasium of Ai Khanum. In its visibly present form the gymnasium of ancient Cypriot Salamis is a creation of the second century AD, though its roots as a structure are thought to go back several centuries before then, perhaps even as early as the third century BC. Choosing to focus on Salamis is a matter of homonymy. 2020–2021 marks the 2,500th anniversary of the famous naval battle named after Cypriot Salamis’s Attic/Athenian namesake: Salamis (modern Salamina). This isle is located in the Saronic Gulf, a little way down the coast from the Athens where Clearchus was by no means the least distinguished alumnus of Aristotle’s Peripatetic School of Advanced Study, a fitting place to end our intellectual journey where Clearchus surely began his.

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