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## ECONOMIC AND EVERYDAY LIFE IN BYZANTINE CRETE THROUGH NUMISMATIC EVIDENCE

Byzantine coins found in Crete have not yet been studied at all: apart from the coins of the Arab amirs of Crete<sup>1</sup>, all we have is some yearly reports of finds<sup>2</sup>. But their study can prove useful both for our better understanding of Byzantine coinage and for some idea about economy and living conditions in the 'Great Island' during the Byzantine era. This paper aims to make some provisional remarks on the latter point, although definite conclusions, if any, can only be reached with the help of other sources, both archeological and literary, as well as through the detailed study of the coins themselves. It must be stressed, however, that the coins we deal with here are usually surface finds or hoards mostly found by chance while the coins from controlled excavations are very few. Thus, for a large number of finds we possess no record of the area and/or the circumstances of the find, while quite a few coins remain still unidentified.

There exists a number of approximately 1750 Byzantine coins of up to the 13th century in the Cretan museums; there are a few in the Athens Numismatic Collection; and an unknown number in private collections, which have not been taken into account here. The number, the composition and the geographical distribution of these coins present a statistical picture the main characteristics of which can be summarised as follows:

1. There are five times more coins belonging to the second Byzantine period of Crete (961-1204) than the first (up to ca. 826).

2. There is a heavy concentration (around 45,5%) of the coins in the east/central region of the island, but the coins of the early period -4th century- show a concentration in the extreme western part.

3. More than half of the coins belong to hoards which, on the other hand, do not present any pattern relative to one another.

4. There is an almost complete absence of coins belonging to the 5th and the 8th centuries. Although this is not very

surprising for the 8th century, it is less expected for the fifth.

5. The number of gold coins (about 1/9 of the total) is certainly high, as we deal with coins not coming from private collections.

6. The total number of coins is certainly not high, as they represent finds from the whole island, covering a period of nearly eight centuries. Even if we add a hoard of 2000 bronze coins of the Comnenian period found in the region of Rhethymnon (not yet studied and not taken into account here), again we would have the same total of coins as was yielded for the reign of Manuel I alone in the excavations of the Athenian Agora<sup>3</sup>.

On the basis of these characteristics and other particulars of the coin-finds, an attempt to trace and outline the general patterns of everyday economic activities and the degree of their monetization would permit the following remarks.

The westernmost part of the island -nome of Chania- has yielded a relatively large number of bronze coins of the 4th century (Constantine I and Constantius II mostly), and among them are one or two substantial hoards<sup>4</sup>. This, together with the fact that they have mostly been found in a complex of buildings which shows a continuous use from the 4th to the 7th century, points to the suggestion that this region might have been a centre of a certain activity at that time. The existence of only small denominations and the near-absence of gold or silver coinage from this period indicate probably the existence of small, everyday transactions of a monetized character. Also, commercial relations of a certain extent are suggested by the fact that mints from all over the empire are represented: Constantinople, Cyzicus, Nicomedeia, Salonica, Sirmium, Rome and even Lugdunum. Perhaps the same activity, we may assume, prevailed all over the island, since 4th century coins have also been found at the central and central/east parts of Crete, though to a lesser extent and less concentrated. Even allowing for the fact that bronze coinage was issued in large numbers in the 4th century and had been considerably debased<sup>5</sup>, this does not seem to affect the suggestion that basic, daily transactions had been monetized. This, in turn, implies the existence of urban life and urban economic activities, although the hoarding of petty currency is also suggest-

ive of the relative value money had for the inhabitants of a distant province, who had of course different standards and their activities were of a different scale than those of the citizens of greater cities or of the capital.

The almost complete absence of 5th century coins is a striking fact; for instance, there is not one coin of Theodosius II who reigned for forty-two years, nor of any other emperor before Anastasius I who reigned at the very end of the century. This absence may perhaps be associated with the great earthquakes and possibly the plague that hit Crete in this century<sup>6</sup> and the resulting disruption in economic life. The fact that at this very time we have an extensive building activity all over the island, mainly of basilicas<sup>7</sup>, does not necessarily indicate an economic prosperity: first, money may exist in the hands of the Church or a few magnates, but this does not tell us anything about the living conditions of the people<sup>8</sup>; secondly, these basilicas were certainly erected in large numbers but their quality does not exceed the provincial level and is usually lower than average; finally, their cost must have been low, as both the workers' wages were also very low and a considerable amount of voluntary work must have been provided by the people, as was usually the case. So, despite the building activity of this period, the absence of coins can be considered as indicating changing conditions in the life of the middle and lower classes, a shrinking monetized economy with a corresponding decline in urban life and weakening of the small economic activities of the market. In any case, we can find no numismatic trace of the generous help which Theodosius II is said to have sent for the relief of the unlucky inhabitants of the island<sup>9</sup>.

The numbers of coins rise steadily again, starting with the reign of Anastasius I and reaching a peak with Heracleios and Constans II. Their concentration now at the nome of Heracleion shows a shift, if not a shrinking, of the most active areas towards east/central Crete, where the metropolitan seat also lay. We have again mostly coins of small denominations, which have been struck almost exclusively in mints of the eastern parts of the empire: Constantinople is most usually met, but also Salonica, Antioch and Cyzicus. It would seem natural to consider this as an indication of Crete's relationship with Constantinople and the eastern parts of the empire

in general rather than with the West, despite the attachment of the Church of Crete to the jurisdiction of Rome.

On the other hand, although some coastal cities (eg. Suija, at the south-west coast) must have relied mainly on the East-West commerce for their existence and wealth<sup>10</sup>, it is to be noted that virtually no coins of this period (or of any other, for that matter) come from coastal settlements; nearly all the coins we know of come from inland areas, mostly in or around the valley of Messara, the 'capital' area of the island. And the activity of the ports of Crete is mostly suggested not so much by coin finds, which are few from such places, but by the existence of the 'Kommerkiarioi' of Crete in the 7th century, known from their seals<sup>11</sup>; a fact clearly showing an economic activity in or through the island important enough for a government official to be posted there and collect port duties and taxes.

In any case, the amount of coins belonging to the 6th and the first half of the 7th centuries falls short only of the finds of the 10th and the 12th centuries. It seems that this period marked the higher point of monetization of everyday economic activities before the Arab conquest of the island in the third decade of the 9th century. It is also to be noted that there are no hoards, at least important ones, from the 6th or 7th centuries: the gold coins are always found singly, while there have not been found more than one dozen bronze together.

The new recession, which started about the second half of the 7th century with a considerable ruralization and decay of urban life and which was a more or less general characteristic of the Byzantine Empire, is also obvious in Crete. The Arab naval raids from the mid-seventh century onwards, must have certainly brought difficulties in the economic relations between the island and the rest of the empire. Although the existing seals show a continuing Byzantine military presence there<sup>12</sup> - though of what strength we could not tell - the coins from that period of about a century and a half, until the Arab occupation of Crete, are not more than a dozen. Half of them only are small denomination bronze ones, a fact clearly showing that small, everyday monetary market transactions had shrunk to virtual non-existence. So, the few gold and silver coins of the period should probably more

rightly be considered as hoards, even if they have been recovered in ones or twos<sup>13</sup>.

Whether this non-monetary economy was also accompanied by a deterioration of the living conditions of the population or not is a matter of speculation, but in my view the answer is affirmative. It would seem safe to assume that under such circumstances conditions tend to polarize even further and the existence of a lot of farmers living in a poor, almost self-sufficient way of life, along with some very rich magnates seems to have become more manifest than before<sup>14</sup>.

Perhaps we can get a glimpse of what these conditions had been through another kind of evidence: an osteotheke excavated near Knossos and dated at the end of the 7th or the beginning of the 8th century<sup>15</sup>. An anthropological examination of the remains of thirty-five to fifty individuals it contained showed a quite high infant and child mortality and probably a relatively low life-expectancy because of harsh living conditions<sup>16</sup>. The fact that the osteotheke has been found in a relatively central area of the island suggests that perhaps living standards might have been worse in more remote places.

The Arab occupation of Crete (ca. 826-961) isolated it from the empire for a long time and so the few stray Byzantine coins from that period cannot be considered as having any general significance<sup>17</sup>.

The Byzantine reconquest of the island in 961 does not seem to have immediately instigated a new vigour in economic activities. There is an increasing number of coins starting with the reign of Nicephoros II and reaching a peak in the reign of Basil II but, apart from the fact that these coins, too, are exclusively concentrated in the general area of Heracleion, there are now two new characteristics: first, the coins of Nicephoros II and Basil II come only from hoards and, second, they are mostly gold coins while the bronze ones are comparatively very few. It is also strange that we possess no coins of Romanos II, in the reign of whom Crete was recaptured from the Arabs.

We do not of course know under what circumstances these hoards were deposited but they do not seem to have any connection with conditions of war or any other emergency, while

the hoarding of eighty-two solidi of Basil II is something unique for Cretan standards. On the other hand the near-absence of bronze coins of that period suggests that forty or even sixty years after its liberation Crete had not yet achieved a sufficiently monetized economic life. Perhaps the gold coins of this period should more rightly be connected with the function of civil and military administration, payment of soldiers, port duties, taxation, or even local magnates' riches and cannot offer an indication for the general living standard and the economic activities of the majority of the middle- to lower-class people.

In general, the picture we get here shows that by the end of the 10th century there still was an absence of active urban centres. And though it is frequently maintained that the Arabs had destroyed the Cretan cities it seems more probable that by the time they established themselves in the island there did not exist any cities worth speaking of, following the decline of urban life during the previous period. In this context it might prove most interesting to examine the existing Arab coins in Crete which, though in small numbers, have a quite widespread geographical distribution<sup>18</sup>. In any case, after the recapture of Crete by the Byzantines, although new centres were being created or old ones revived, this process of re-urbanization obviously took some time.

From the period 1025-1081, when the political and military as well as the financial position of the Byzantine empire had been in decline, the number of coins recovered is again very low: a handful of bronze and three gold ones is all we have from those fifty-five years<sup>19</sup>. It is somewhat surprising that a period during which economic relations in general, despite the difficulties, were more monetized than before would yield so few coins. But even more surprising is the actual absence of coins of Alexius I, the emperor who carried out the well-known monetary reform<sup>20</sup>, as only four scyphate billon trachea have been found from his reign.

In contrast, it is from the reigns of John II, Manuel I and Isaac II that we have the relatively largest volume of coins: 28% of the sum total. They mostly come from hoards found in the region of Heracleion or -for the first time- from the extreme eastern part of the island, as well as the west/central region; the westernmost part is altogether ab-

sent. Their composition of considerable numbers of silver and bronze scyphate coins seems to prove what can be already detected through other sources<sup>21</sup>, namely that the economy of Crete under the Comnenoi and the Angeloi had a well advanced monetized character. This fact does not necessarily imply that living conditions for the middle or lower classes had become prosperous, since taxation and general exploitation of the farmers had certainly become more intense; but, to say the least, it points to a relatively greater accumulation of wealth, which could not have been in the hands of the very rich only, as the composition of the coin-finds shows.

The remarks made above are of course of a provisional and indicative character only, attempting to trace the general trends of the numismatic evidence. More definite conclusions for a particular or wider aspect can be reached by a detailed study of the coins themselves. And as our written sources are almost completely silent about Crete, at least until the 9th century, numismatic and other archeological evidence is obviously of greater significance.

#### N O T E S

1. Studied by G.C.Miles, *The coinage of the Arab amirs of Crete* (Numismatic Notes and Monographs, 160), American Num. Society, New York, 1970. He has also presented numerous shorter studies.
2. Mostly in the *Archeologikon Deltion*, Athens 1-15 (1915-1935), 16 (1960- ).
3. M.Thompson, *The Athenian Agora*, vol.II Coins, Princeton New Jersey, 1954, p.86.
4. Cf. *Arch. Delt.* 25 (1970), *Chronica*, p.477; *ibid.* 26 (1971), p. 11-12.
5. See A.H.M.Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 234-602*, Oxford 1973, vol.I, pp.439-443, for a brief description of the monetary policies of the time; cf. also J.P.Callu, *The distribution and the role of bronze coinage from AD 348 to 392, Imperial Revenue, Expenditure and Monetary Policy in the Fourth Cent.AD*, The Fifth Oxford Symposium on Coinage and Monetary History (Brit.Arch.Reports, Int.Ser. 76), Oxford 1980, p.99.
6. I.Malalas, *Chronografia*, ed.Bonn, LXIV, 61; cf. E.Plata-

- kes, Οἱ σεισμοὶ τῆς Κρήτης, *Kretika Chronika* 4(1950), p. 474.
7. For a recent list of these basilicas cf. I.F.Sanders, *Roman Crete to the Arab Conquest*, Oxford 1977, p.148ff. (D.Phil. thesis, typed copy).
  8. Cf. C.Mango, *Byzantium, The Empire of New Rome*, London 1980, p.39-40, where some very indicative examples have been gathered. For further details see Evelyne Patlagean, *Pauvreté Économique et Pauvreté Sociale à Byzance 4e-7e siècles*, Paris-Le Haye, 1977.
  9. I.Malalas, *ibid.*
  10. Cf. I.F.Sanders, *op.cit.*, p.72; A.Orlandos, Ἡ παλααιο-χριστιανικὴ βασιλικὴ τῆς Σούας (Σελύνου), *Kret.Chron.* 7 (1953), pp.337-359.
  11. H.Antoniadis-Bibicou, *Recherches sur les douanes à Byzance*, Paris 1963, p.227 n<sup>o</sup> 27, probably also p.229 n<sup>os</sup> 39,40; cf. Zacos-Veglery, *Byzantine Lead Seals*, vol.I/1, Basel 1972, p.149, tab.5; p.154, tab.8 and n<sup>o</sup> 189.
  12. Cf. Zacos-Veglery, *op.cit.*, n<sup>os</sup> 1017,1782,2001,2645,2059, 2646; S.Xanthoudides, Σφραγίδες Κρήτης καὶ Ἀλμυροῦ, *Byz. zeit.* 18(1909), p.176; *idem*, Χριστιανικὰ Ἀρχαιοῦτητα ἐκ Κρήτης, *Journal Intern.d' Arch. Numism.* 6(1903), p. 120; V.Laurent, Le statut de la Crète Byzantine avant et après sa liberation du joug Arabe, *Kret.Chron.* 15/16 (1961-2), pp.382-396.
  13. Cf. R.Lopez, The Role of Trade in the Economic Readjustment of Byzantium in the Seventh Century, *D.O.P.* 13(1959) p.75 and note 18; H.Antoniadis-Bibicou, *op.cit.*, Appendix II, p.254-5. See also C.Mango, *op.cit.*, p.48-9 and p.65ff. For a different view cf. G.Ostrogorsky, Byzantine Cities in the Early Middle Ages, *D.O.P.* 13(1959), pp. 47-66.
  14. See note 10 *supra*.
  15. H.W.Catling-D.Smyth, An Early Christian Osteotheke at Knossos, *Annual of the Brit.School at Athens* 71(1976), pp.25-39.
  16. J.H.Musgrave, Appendix A: The human remains, *ibid.* pp. 40-46.
  17. Although D.M.Metcalf, *Coinage in South-Eastern Europe 820-1396*, London 1979, p.49 expresses the view that perhaps 'Greek families succeeded sometimes in preserving



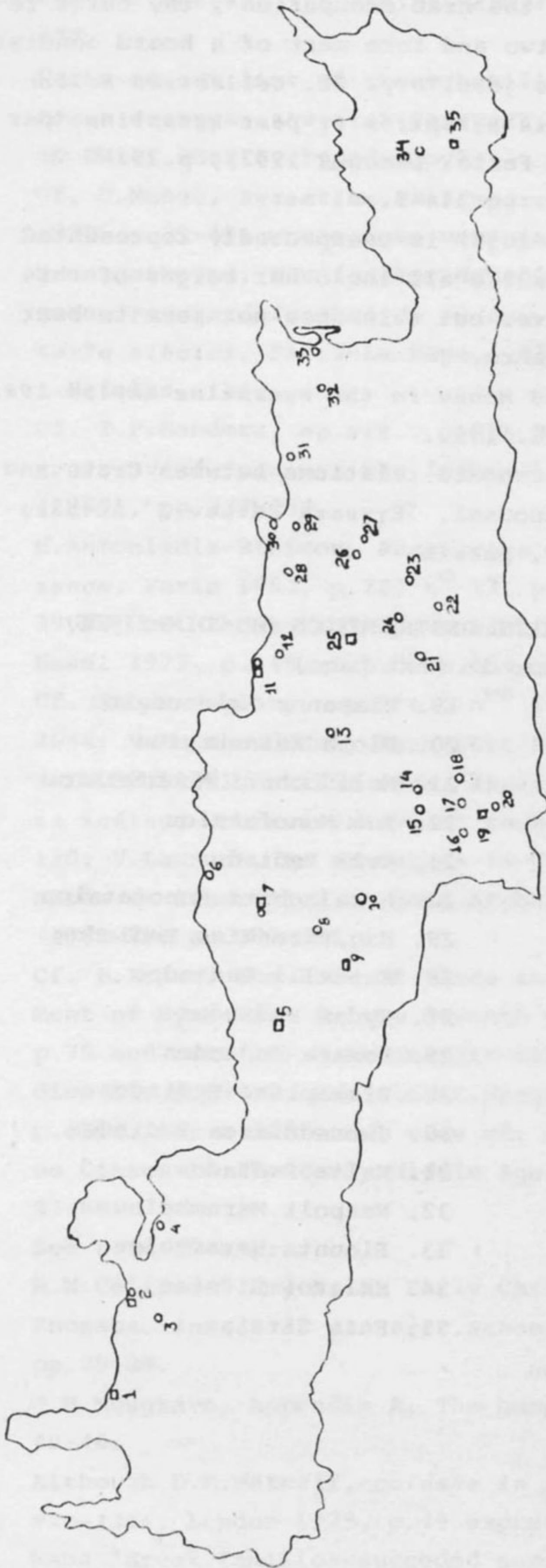
property throughout the Arab occupation', the coins referred to are only two and form part of a hoard consisting mainly of Arabic jewellery. Cf. *Collection Hélène Stathatos. Les objets Byzantins et post-Byzantins* (par Etienne Coche de la Ferté, Limoges 1957), p.29.

18. D.M.Metcalf, *op.cit.* pp.344-5.
19. Only Theodora (1055-1056) is unexpectedly represented by sixteen bronce, while all the other reigns of this period by one to five, but this does not seem to bear any specific importance.
20. M.Hendy, *Coinage and Money in the Byzantine Empire 1081-1261*, Washington D.C. 1969.
21. For instance, the economic relations between Crete and Patmos. Cf. Era Vranoussi, "Εγγραφα Πάτμου-Α' Αὐτοκρατορικά", Athens 1980, *passim*.

#### APPENDIX: GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF COIN-FINDS

(See map in next page)

- |                                       |                             |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1. Kastelli Kissamou                  | 19. Platanos Kainourgiou    |
| 2. Chania                             | 20. Plora Kainourgiou       |
| 3. Varypetro Cydonias                 | 21. Melidochori Monofatsiou |
| 4. Aptera Apokoronou                  | 22. Ini Monofatsiou         |
| 5. Armenoi Rhethymnou                 | 23. Avli Pediados           |
| 6. Panormo Mylopotamou                | 24. Arkalochori Monofatsiou |
| 7. Eleftherna (Prines)<br>Mylopotamou | 25. Hag.Paraskies Pediados  |
| 8. Thronos Amariou                    | 26. Kastelli Pediados       |
| 9. Messonisia Amariou                 | 27. Xydas Pediados          |
| 10. Vyzari Amariou                    | 28. Koxare Pediados         |
| 11. Heracleion                        | 29. Piskopiano Pediados     |
| 12. Knossos                           | 30. Chersonissos Pediados   |
| 13. Avyeniki Maleviziou               | 31. Malia Pediados          |
| 14. Gergeri Kainourgiou               | 32. Neapoli Merambelou      |
| 15. Zaros Kainourgiou                 | 33. Elounta Merambelou      |
| 16. Moires Kainourgiou                | 34. Sklavoi Siteias         |
| 17. Metropoli Kainourgiou             | 35. Etia Siteias            |
| 18. Hag.Deka Kainourgiou              |                             |



CRETE: GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION OF COIN-FINDS

SCALE: 1:1,000,000

KEY : ○ SINGLE FINDS; □ HOARDS