

Note on Roman purple winning at Chersonisos, Crete

by

G. J. BOEKSCHOTEN

(Geologisch Instituut der Rijksuniversiteit, Groningen)

In early times already, the Cretans were interested in Mollusca. Minoan pottery frequently shows decorations which represent scallops, *Argonauta*, *Octopus* and cuttlefish. At the minoan palace of Mallia, three shells of *Charonia gyrimoides* (Brocchi) have been found



Figure 1. Part of a Roman mosaic at Limani Chersonisos. Photograph Miss F. Feekes.

with the tops broken off. Doubtless these were used as horns; the fishermen of Crete have not yet forgotten this instrument. Replicas of *Charonia* in alabaster and liparite and of *Tonna* in bronze have been unearthed at the excavations in the neighbourhood of the palace of Phaestos. Shells of *Helix aspersa* Müller abound in the refuse of the Roman ruins of Gortys, thus indicating that this gastropod was a main constituent of the diet just as in present-day Crete. Today these and other landsnails are collected by the shepherds and sold as a cheap protein food to the inhabitants who rarely can afford meat or eggs. The collecting is done mostly in the evening, because at this time the snails leave the hideouts where they hide from the sun.

Especially during lent the dark slopes of the lowland hills are enlivened by the wandering lights of the snail collectors.

Cephalopods (*Octopus* and *Sepia*) are considered a delicacy by the Cretan. Here also little has changed since classical times. About twenty kilometres east of the main town of the island, Iraklion, the small fishing village of Limani Chersonisos is situated. This hamlet has been constructed on the ruins of a Greek-Roman town. Among the monuments which are preserved, a Roman fountain can be seen which is adorned with mosaics representing e.g. the spearing of cephalopods. A part of this fountain is shown in the photograph, figure 1.

At the nearby sandy beach between the two promontories Ay. Georgios and Ay. Paraskevi some beach erosion took place. In this way, the foundations of some simple Roman houses became unearthed; also a building of some more importance must have been present as a row of three spirally cannelated black limestone columns can be observed at the beach. These foundations comprise patches of reddish loam, containing many shards of simple red pottery. One of these houses, however, had a floor consisting exclusively of shells. Nearly all of the shells turned out to be crushed specimens of *Murex trunculus* L. One specimen of *Columbella rustica* (L.) was observed when the site was visited in June 1962.

The significance of this find is clear. *Murex trunculus* is well known as a purple-snail, and so its occurrence here indicates the former existence of purple manufacturing at Chersonisos. Only one from the thousands of *Murex*-shells appeared to be undamaged; however, it turned out to be perforated, showing a circular hole, such as *Natica* and other carnivorous gastropods drill. This shell must have been collected empty, and so there was no necessity to crush it in order to obtain the purple gland. Probably the Mollusca were collected during sponge fishing, as *Murex trunculus* does not occur in the upper shore zone. Nowadays, sponge divers visit the bay of Chersonisos each year; but the *Murex* is not fished any more.

SAMENVATTING

Charonia werd op Kreta reeds in Minoïsche tijd, minstens 1600 v. C. als hoorn gebruikt. Het spietsen van inktvissen daar wordt op een Romeins mozaïek afgebeeld. Evenzeer werd in Romeinse tijd *Helix aspera* Müller reeds voor voedsel verzameld. Uit het vinden van talrijke fragmenten van *Murex trunculus* L. aan de kust bij Chersonisos in ruïnes uit diezelfde tijd blijkt de voormalige exploitatie van deze gastropode als purperslak ook op Kreta.