

Cretan Zeus

With one exception, Greeks were unanimous in recognizing the birthplace of Zeus as Crete. Minoan culture contributed many essentials of ancient Greek religion: "by a hundred channels the old civilization emptied itself into the new", Will Durant observed,^[15] and Cretan Zeus retained his youthful Minoan features. The local child of the Great Mother, "a small and inferior deity who took the roles of son and consort",^[16] whose Minoan name the Greeks Hellenized as **Velchanos**, was in time assumed as an epithet by Zeus, as transpired at many other sites, and he came to be venerated in Crete as **Zeus Velchanos**, the "boy-Zeus", often simply the *Kouros*. In Crete, Zeus was worshipped at a number of caves at Knossos, Ida and Palaikastro. In the Hellenistic period a small sanctuary dedicated to Zeus Velchanos was founded at the Aghia Triada site of a long-ruined Minoan palace. Broadly contemporary coins from Phaistos show the form under which he was worshipped: a youth sits among the branches of a tree, with a cockerel on his knees.^[17] On other Cretan coins Velchanos is represented as an eagle and in association with a goddess celebrating a mystic marriage.^[18] Inscriptions at Gortyn and Lyttos record a *Velchania* festival, showing that Velchanos was still widely venerated in Hellenistic Crete.^[19] The stories of Minos and Epimenides suggest that these caves were once used for incubatory divination by kings and priests. The dramatic setting of Plato's *Laws* is along the pilgrimage-route to one such site, emphasizing archaic Cretan knowledge. On Crete, Zeus was represented in art as a long-haired youth rather than a mature adult, and hymned as *ho megas kouros* "the great youth". Ivory statuettes of the "Divine Boy" were unearthed near the Labyrinth at Knossos]] by Sir Arthur Evans.^[20] With the Kouretes, a band of ecstatic armed dancers, he presided over the rigorous military-athletic training and secret rites of the Cretan *paideia*. The myth of the death of Cretan Zeus, localised in numerous mountain sites though only mentioned in a comparatively late source, Callimachus,^[21] together with the assertion of Antoninus Liberalis that a fire shone forth annually from the birth-cave the infant shared with a mythic swarm of bees, suggests that Velchanos had been an annual vegetative spirit.^[22] The Hellenistic writer Euhemerus apparently proposed a theory that Zeus had actually been a great king of Crete and that posthumously his glory had slowly turned him into a deity. The works of Euhemerus himself have not survived, but Christian patristic writers took up the suggestion with enthusiasm.