In this paper I am going to discuss key epigraphic and archaeological evidence from the eastern Aegean islands as a way to broach the issue of transition to a Christianised world and study the interaction of major players in this long process. Looking at pagans, Christians and Jews during the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries, I will also try to touch upon aspects of the longue durée history of these islands and see how the issue of connectivity can be used to describe religious change locally.

My first case-study concerns the capital-city of the Province of the Islands, i.e. Rhodes. Our most important source of information about the history of the city comes from rescue excavations, which because of their nature do not allow a systematic study of the material. Lavishly decorated Christian basilicas, wealthy private buildings and other finds show that Rhodes remains a prosperous city through the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries. During the third century one of the major arteries of the city was drastically remodeled into a large cardo, with colonnades on both sides, leading to the ancient Agora and the Lower Gymnasium. At the junction of these two streets a monumental tetrapylon was built.¹ A large part of the public life in late antiquity was concentrated along these two major streets and three large EC basilicas had their entrance on the monumental cardo. Typically, the urban landscape saw a major transformation in late antiquity that included the abandonment of traditional cult places and the erection of spacious EC basilicas in focal parts of the late antique city.² The unsophisticated nature of the archaeological material, however, does not allow us to follow this change closely, therefore I would like to turn my attention to

two verse inscriptions discovered in the city that do raise interesting questions pertinent to our discussion here.³

The first text comes from a hexagonal marble-base and reads:

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Ἥρακλες, αἷμα Διός, θηροκτόνε, οὔ νυ τι μοῦνος
ἐν προτέροις ἐτέσσιν ἄλεξικακός τις ἐτέχθης,
ἀλλὰ καὶ ἡμετέρη γενεή τέκεν Ἡρακλήα
ἐσθλὸν Ἀναστάσιον Ῥοδίων κλυτὸν οἰκιστήρα
δς σὲ καὶ ὧδ’ ἀνέθηκεν ἃριζήλοις σὺν ἀέθλοις.
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Heracles, blood of Zeus, slayer of animals, you were not the only one who was born in previous times to ward off the evil; but our age too gave birth to a Heracles, the noble Anastasios, the famous founder of the Rhodians, who dedicated you here together with your remarkable feats.

Written in Homeric dactylic hexameters, this language is typical of honorary epigrams of the Late Roman Empire. The text tells us that the inscribed base was associated with a monument, possibly a relief panel or a statue, which depicted Heracles and his labours. Moreover, and this is crucial, on the upper cornice of the base, Giulio Jacopi, who first published this text in 1932, saw a rough graffito featuring the popular Christian tag ΚΕ ΒΟΗΘΙ (“Lord, help”), but no traces of this graffito are visible today.⁴ Yet we can still see a crudely incised cross on one of the front faces of the block.

Louis Robert had rightly suggested that the dedicator of the monument cannot be the emperor Anastasios (491–518), and the epithet “κλυτὸν οἰκιστήρα” points to a provincial governor, or local benefactor.⁵ The inscription is probably dated to the fourth/fifth century. The verses of the text give no specific information regarding the nature of Anastasios’ good deeds but they are enough to assume that the monument was erected by the citizens of Rhodes to honour Anastasios who was here equated with a Heracles of a New Age.

A second inscribed block of a similar style and also referring to an Anastasios is reported from Rhodes.

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+ Ἐνθάδε τὸν μεθύοντα καὶ υπνώοντα Μάρωνα
θῆκεν Ἀναστάσιος περιώνυμος, ἐκπροχέει δὲ
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³ The two epigrams have been discussed in Deligiannakis (2008a); here they are presented again with minor amendments and additions.
⁴ Jacopi (1932) 208–209, no. 45.
⁵ Robert (1948) 177–178.