

Herodotus and the “True Cretans”: A Fresh Look

The Eteocretans, “True Cretans”, are cited by Homer in Odysseus’ lying tale to Penelope among the ethnic groups inhabiting Crete (*Od.* 19.276). Herodotus does not cite them by name but they are presumed to be “the men of Praisos”, or at least among the men of Praisos, referenced in 7.170,171 as sources for the tradition that Crete suffered desolation of the island in consequence of foreign expeditions.

The Greek embassy to Crete seeking aid against the invasion of Xerxes is rejected after consultation of the Delphic oracle, who bid the Cretans recall the consequences of the expedition to Sicily and the expedition to Troy (7.169). In each case Crete was left desolate, with only a remnant remaining. From Sicily the survivors did not return to Crete at all but founded a new city in southern Italy (Hyria), and they and other Italian cities were eventually destroyed by fighting each other. From Troy the survivors returned to Crete and suffered famine and pestilence, leaving the island desolate a second time.

The expedition to Sicily aimed to avenge the death of Minos. The expedition to Troy took place in the third generation after Minos. After Troy and the ensuing famine and pestilence, a third group of Cretans and “those who were left” were confronted with the embassy requesting aid against Xerxes. “The men of Praisos” were descendants of those of Polichne and Praisos who did not join the expedition to Sicily (7.170). We are not informed whether they joined the expedition to Troy -- presumably they did -- but, at any rate, “the Praisioi” were keepers of the tradition of the two foreign expeditions (7.171).

Excavations at Azoria, site of a small city in East Crete, about 30 miles from Praisos, have produced several graffiti, inscribed on pottery. The site has a long Archaic phase, from ca. 700 B. C., but was abandoned in the early 5th century. Three pottery sherds have short graffiti which can with some degree of probability be interpreted as Eteocretan. All of the inscribed sherds come from the destruction levels of the rooms in which they were found, which may be as late as the first quarter of the 5th century. Two of the sherds are pithos handles, found in one room of a service complex for the Monumental Civic Building, and these were inscribed before firing, as shown by the ridges thrown up by the inscribing. The other is scratched on the rim of a lekane, from a kitchen serving the putative *andreion* located on a terrace above the Monumental Civic Building. The Azoria graffiti, then, suggest a domestic context in which the language was actually used, the pottery workshop, the storeroom, and, perhaps, the kitchen.

In the early 20th century, a law written in Eteocretan, dated ca. 500 B. C., inscribed on a stone slab was found at Praisos and another, a bilingual in Eteocretan and Greek, has been found at Dreros. On the question of whether Eteocretan was a living language in time of Herodotus, however confined to a small remnant, the stone inscriptions have been thought to appeal, as impressive monuments of script, to the few aristocrats who could read and the ordinary people who were basically illiterate but could admire the monument.

In what way do the Azoria graffiti justify a fresh look at Herodotus? The informants of the tradition which he reports, the men of Praisos, may have been more broadly based, as “keepers of the flame” than a few elders of the ruling class.