

Literacy and Writing in Archaic Crete

Building on studies by James Whitley (1990), Paula Perlman (1992), and Alan Johnston (2006), this paper concentrates on non-stone inscriptions of archaic Crete, including owner's inscriptions, dedications, labels, control marks, numbers, etc. to evaluate emerging literacy from the 8th to the early 5th c. B. C. Inscriptions on graffiti, in particular, from Kommos, Azoria, and other sites are considered, integrating them into our understanding of writing from such texts as the Spensithios decree and inscribed armor from Aphrati.

The most famous archaic inscriptions from Crete are the laws, mainly from Dreros and Gortyn, which were inscribed on the walls of temples and/or public buildings, from the 7th to the middle of the 5th c. B. C. Opinion varies as to whether these were really meant to be read by individuals or were created by elites for display.

Graffiti, however, bring us into relation to the ordinary person. The earliest text, from the 8th c., may be the Phaistos pithos inscribed with an owner's inscription. In my opinion the letter forms appear to be later, but writing in Crete does come from this century, as some of the Kommos graffiti are this early. Most of the Kommos graffiti are of the 7th c., but several longer inscriptions elsewhere are of the 7th c., including the texts written on armor from Aphrati, interpreted not as booty dedications in the strict sense, but rather "declarations" for display (e. g., "Aisonidas took this, son of Kloridio").

Similarly, the decree creating the office of *poinikastas*, public scribe, for Spensithios was inscribed on an abdominal guard serving as a tablet and may have been set up in a public space such as an *andreion*. The Spensithios decree has been dated c. 500 B. C. Seventeen graffiti from excavations at Azoria date from the late 6th or early 5th c. and permit continued insights into the developing literacy of the island, balancing our appreciation of both long and short inscriptions.

Several of the Azoria texts are of particular note. A short inscription on the rim of a basin may be interpreted as the name of a Dorian woman or even an Eteocretan text. Two pithos handles are inscribed with words which are probably Eteocretan. As these are marks incised pre-firing, they must have been made by a potter. The handle of a small vase bears on its base, at its interior join, another potter's mark, the Doric letter *san*, which would not have been visible after the firing of the finished vase. Saro Wallace, commenting on the significance of the locations of Protogeometric – Archaic settlements on Crete, has stated that "use of the term 'Eteocretan' by Homer (*Odyssey* 19.176) and later authors and its narrative context suggests that this ancestry was crucial to political definition" (*ABSA* 98 [2003] 272). Eteocretan inscriptions of an informal nature at Azoria would suggest continuity of the language or at least knowledge of the language by craftsmen in the area.

The paper also considers problems which must be confronted in the interpretation of short texts.