SEMITIC INSCRIPTIONS FROM CRETE

by

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While we are accustomed to reading Northwest Semitic texts written in the twenty-two letter consonantal alphabet, there is also quite an assortment of them inscribed by the ancients in Greek and Latin letters (Gordon, 1967). The Punic sections of the Poenulus of Plautus are in Latin letters. Less familiar are the Punic texts known as the Latino-Libyan inscriptions, in Latin letters. The Hebrew Bible in Greek letters constituted the second column of Origen's *Hexapla*. Especially interesting are the Eteocretan inscribed stones from the eastern half of Crete, written in Greek letters from the Archaic to the Hellenistic periods.

During Nero's reign, a pseudepigraphon about the Trojan War surfaced near Knossos (Gordon, 1981). The text was transmitted to Nero because of his intellectual interests. Nero identified the text as Phoenician-Punic and had it translated into Greek for his library. The Greek version was subsequently translated into Latin by Lucius Septimius under the title of *Dictys Cretensis* in the fourth century. That Nero is credited with knowing that the non-Greek native language of Crete was what we would now call Northwest Semitic, ties in with the decipherment of Eteocretan as Northwest Semitic.

The evidence for the linguistic character of Eteocretan must come from the Eteocretan inscriptions themselves. Fortunately, the script is for the most part the standard Greek alphabet, ranging in shape from archaic letters that are close to their Phoenician forms, to the familiar uncials of Hellenistic times which are just about the same as those in modern Greek typography. Graphic symbols peculiar to Eteocretan are rare. Some of the texts are imperfectly preserved. We shall cite from the new edition of Yves Duhoux (1982).

The opening wedge for identifying the language of Eteocretan is a bilingual from Dreros (text DRE 1). The first two lines run retrograde (right to left) and are in Eteocretan, while the remaining three lines are boustrophedon and in Greek. The verb in the Greek section is EFAΔE, "it was decided, enacted, decreed" (lines 3–4), corresponding to [ ]IPMAF, "they imposed, established, decreed", in line 1 of the

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Eteocretan. The root *rmy* (normally "to throw" in Hebrew) means also "to set, impose (an obligation)" in Syriac and Post-biblical Hebrew. In Palmyrene it is used much as in the Eteocretan-Greek bilingual. Semantically related, though in a different kind of context, is *korsəwân rəmîw* (Dan 7:9), "thrones were set, placed, established" (not "thrown").

Near the end of the Greek section is the dialectal Cretan Greek dative [ ]ΜΑΤΡΙ[ ], "for [his] mother", corresponding to ΛΜΟ (cf. לאמו), "for his mother" at the end of the Eteocretan version. (For the lack of the aleph in the sandhi form of the word for "mother" see Gordon 1965, p. 543.) More familiar are the dative preposition *l-*, 'to, for', and the suffixed pronoun *-ō*, 'his'.

There are two sets of unilingual inscriptions from Praisos and Dreros, in Greek and Eteocretan respectively. Coming from the same towns and period, they overlap in content (Gordon, 1970). Greek unilinguals include decrees embodying the imposing of oaths on "everybody." A Greek variant of the formula is, "I shall adjure the various citizens, both the natives and the foreigners." Eteocretan merisms for "everybody" include ΝΑΣ ΙΡΟ Υ ΚΛ ΕΣ (PRA 3:6), "the people of his city and every (other) man", and ?ΑΡ ΚΡΚΟ ΚΛ ΕΣ (PRA 1:3–4). Most of the earlier editors of the latter inscription read the first letter as M, so that ΜΑΡ ΚΡΚΟ ΚΛ ΕΣ would mean, "lord of his city (and) every (other) man." Duhoux (1982, p. 64) states that the traces of that broken letter cannot be restored as M, but that four other letters, including Σ, are compatible with the traces. ΣΑΡ ΚΡΚΟ ΚΛ ΕΣ, "the prince of his city (and) every (other) man", is a good merism without any great change in meaning. However, inasmuch as the traces of the broken letter are so meagre, it should be noted that M is supported by [ ]ΙΡΕΡ ΜΗΙΑ ΜΑΡ Φ[ ] (PRA 3:7), "[I] adjure whichever lord of P[raisos]."

The above merisms yield more Semitic vocabulary: *nâs/š* "people", two words for "city, town" (*ʿîr, kark*), *u* "and", *kl* "all", *es* "man" (cf. the name of Saul's son, Eshbaal), *mâr* "lord", *ʾrr* "to curse" (*piʿel* "to adjure"), *miya* "whosoever" and possibly *śar* "prince". Note that the foregoing merisms include idiomatic formulae of four and even five words. Moreover, *ʿîr* and *kark* occur only in Northwest Semitic.

No intelligent and knowledgeable Northwest Semitist who has understood the above readings will deny that Eteocretan is Northwest Semitic. Duhoux (1982) denies this by failing to mention, let alone consider, ordinary Semitic words that fit the context (such as the morphemes meaning "his", "and", "all", "man", "whosoever", "lord", etc.). A Semitist does not have to defend the meanings of such banalities in Semitic texts, any more than a Hellenist has to explain his translations of their Greek equivalents.

The denial of Duhoux (1982) is specious. For example, three of the Eteocretan inscriptions have MIT in the first line. In isolation, MIT could stand for Semitic "died", "hundred" and possibly "from" (מֵאֵת), or even "from the time—" (מֵעֵת). I at first thought that the stones might be funerary and consulted the then-director of the museum at Heraklion as to whether their provenance was compatible with funerary texts. He replied in the affirmative, so I (Gordon, 1966) equated MIT with מֵת, "died". But subsequently I (Gordon, 1970) noted that the Greek unilinguals had to do with public enactments, including the adjuring of the public, and that therefore the Eteocretan texts with the same merism for adjuring "everybody", had to be the same kind of public enactment or proclamation. In updating Gordon 1966, in Gordon 1975, and again in Gordon 1981, there is no mention of MIT "died". I did not specifically retract MIT "died" because, until the triple occurrence is explained, we cannot be sure of what it means or does not mean. It is *a priori* possible that a sworn public proclamation might contain a death notice (for dating the occasion?), though I am not maintaining that this is so. After all, it was I who pointed out, on textual evidence, the correct nature of the Eteocretan enactments by collocating the Greek enactments from Dreros and Praisos. I should not be taken to task in 1982 of not knowing the character of the Praisos enactments which I correctly demonstrated in 1970. Duhoux (1982, pp. 273–275) knew of all fourteen of my publications on Eteocretan.

The source of the controversy is the failure to understand the differences between early pioneering and later refinement. Mistranslating a common word in the Bible or the Aeneid cannot be tolerated. But without trial and error, no set of inscriptions has ever been deciphered from scratch. Show me a person who has never made a mistake, and I'll show you a person who has never deciphered anything. A decipherer has to be flexible enough to abandon false readings in the light of cogent evidence. Anyone who considers his pioneering efforts as final is not likely to make further contributions, even if his first steps contain some truth.

A sound critic must understand that the correct readings (e.g., the formulae [ ]IPEP MHIA MAP Φ[], "[I] adjure every lord of P[raisos]," and NAΣ IPO Y KΛ EΣ, "the people of his city and every man") indicate that Eteocretan is Northwest Semitic, regardless of whether other words such as MIT have been misinterpreted. If the correct identifications are of sufficient weight, they are not negated by the flaws in other readings. There are many more correct (as well as some incorrect) identifications in Gordon 1966, 1970, 1975, 1981 and Stieglitz 1983 that interested Semitists should examine in order to get a hold on the subject quantitatively as well as qualitatively.

The pioneering mistakes of Georg Grotefend, Jean François Champol-
lion, Henry Rawlinson, George Smith, Hans Bauer and other decipherers
have been corrected. In most cases the decipherers themselves initiate
the process of refining their own early work. The process may go on for
generations. Now for the second century, the refinement of Egyptian
and Akkadian continues unabated. This is not strange when we ponder
the on-going clarification of *hapax legomena* in Homer and the Bible.

The methods of the decipherer are not identical with those of the
philologian plodding along some well beaten path. The decipherer must
make what cryptanalysts call "guesses" in the hope that some of them
will turn out to be "lucky guesses" that prove to be right. But he must be
willing and able to abandon readings that turn out to be wrong. When
the language itself is to be identified, etymology is indispensable, and it
will pay off if the texts prove to be couched in a dialect of some known
linguistic family. The more one knows of the linguistic family that proves
to be the right one, the more likely he is to make correct readings. But
every reading must fit the context, and, as the decipherment advances,
the etymological method must yield to the contextual or combinatory
method.

Duhoux wants globality in a decipherment. So do I. But you cannot
solve a whole body of texts before clarifying parts of them. I do not
claim to have interpreted every word in the Eteocretan inscriptions, but
only enough to set the decipherment on its right course as a Northwest
Semitic language with strong Aramaic affinities.

Eteocretan is the final stage of the Minoan language. The linguistic
continuity from Minoan to Eteocretan is reflected by vocabulary and
morphology common to both. For example, *l-* "to, for", *u* "and", *kull*
"all", *mâr(ê)* "lord" are attested in Minoan and Eteocretan (for "lord" in
Minoan, note on the second line of the wine pithos from Epano Zakro:
a-le ma-re-na h מרינא אלי, "to our lord" (Gordon, 1976, p. 29).

Minoan, recorded in the variety of the Aegean syllabary called
Linear A, is of special interest as the first known language used for
writing intelligible texts on European soil. The fact that it is Northwest
Semitic goes a long way in accounting for the links connecting early
Israel and early Greece in the Late Bronze and First Early Iron Age,
long before Classical and Hellenistic times. The displacement of the
Semitic Minoans by the Mycenaean Greeks may be reflected in the
blessing of Japheth that "he shall dwell in the tents of Shem" (Gen 9:27).
Linguistically, Minoan affects our understanding of other Semitic lan-
guages, including Hebrew. For example, the Minoan word "wine" is
written *ya-ne* on a jar from Knossos; also in Ugaritic "wine" is *yân-*
(Gordon, 1975, pp. 157–158). The reduction of *-ay-* to *-â-* (instead of to

-ê-) is attested also in Hebrew, though not hitherto recognized. Pending a fuller treatment of the phenomenon, I shall call attention to $m\dot{}n$ (2 Kgs 5:25): the *qrê* is the normal מֵאַיִן, but the *ktîb* is מֵעָן (with the diphthong treated as in לְאָן). Both -*ay*- and -*aw*- can be reduced to -*â*- in Eblaite.

There is one Eteocretan text (*ARC β) for which a complete translation has been offered (Gordon, 1981, p. 767):

EΠIΘI   "I, Enete son of Siphai,

Z HΘANΘH   have presented

ENETH ΠAP ΣIΦAI   this engraved stone."

If this is correct, *ARC β perpetuates the Minoan tradition. For *pi-te-za*, "this engraved stone" (Gordon, 1966, p. 29, 124) appears on an inscribed Minoan stone libation table. It equals *ptḥ z* in Phoenician votive formulae. The verb HΘANΘH, "I have given, presented" = Phoenician/ Punic *ytnty*; the verb *ytn/ʾtn* "to give" applies to offerings in Minoan; note the first person singular perfect suffix -*ti*. Both the verb and the suffix occur in Minoan dedicatory formulae. Though the personal name ENETH is not otherwise known, Stieglitz (1976) has shown that ΠAP = Aramaic *bar*, "son", and has compared the father's name with Sippai in 1 Chr 20:4.

Marinatos (1958) read all three thetas in the *editio princeps*. The two in line 2 have not been questioned, for in both instances a short horizontal mark inside the circle is clear. However, the mark inside the circle in line 1 is damaged, so that in its present state it is possible to read omicron instead of theta. I have had the letter collated by a member of the staff at the Heraklion Museum. His verdict is that the damaged state of the letter precludes certainty as to whether it is omicron or theta. Duhoux insists it is omicron. He may or may not be right. His photographic plate of the stone shows markings inside the letter, but they are not as extensive as in the thetas in line 2.

A complete translation can be ventured for the Minoan tablet HT 31 (as numbered by Brice, 1961). This inscription was the opening wedge for deciphering Minoan, thanks to pictographs of various vases with their Semitic names spelled out syllabically over them. Another word for a small open bowl is *a-ga-nu* (= אגן) at the opening of an inscribed magic bowl excavated at Knossos. (Like so many claims in Best 1982, this identification in Best 1982–83, pp. 17–18, has been anticipated in Gordon 1966.) Note the nominative case ending -*u* in *a-ga-nu*.

The bearing of Minoan-Eteocretan on Hebrew linguistics is clear. In Minoan, we have vocalized Northwest Semitic texts starting in the Middle Bronze Age. In Eteocretan, we have vocalized Northwest Semitic inscriptions from Early Iron Age III. In between we have the large corpus

of Ugaritic tablets from the Late Bronze Age. While the Early Bronze Age tablets in Eblaite are not as close linguistically as Ugaritic and Minoan-Eteocretan to Hebrew, they nonetheless shed light on Hebrew morphology, lexicon and syntax. Able young Semitists should not be scared off by the scripts in which the new material is inscribed, nor should they cringe from the difficulties of breaking new ground. The pitfalls of pioneering can be minimized by the exercise of judgement, care and self criticism.

We cannot conclude this article without thanking Duhoux for his valuable epigraphical work on the Eteocretan stones.

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