

**Ancient Information War within Greek Colonial Narratives: An Analysis of
the Theraian-Cyrenean Founding Myth through Historiography and
Archaeology**

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***Abstract:** During the Greek Archaic Period, the Greek world saw rapid development in culture, economy and political organization. These advancements led to increased prosperity and facilitated the formation of distinct political units. However, these developments introduced new pressures on these nascent governments, which led to waves of Greek colonization across the Mediterranean world. This introduced the new political relationship of 'mother city' and 'colony' into existing trans-Mediterranean networks, a complex structure that would play a large role in the politics of the Greek Classical Period. This paper explores the colonial foundation narrative of Cyrene, one of the most well documented foundation myths surviving, by looking at the competing and contrasting claims put forward by Cyrene and Thera. This paper examines the both the historical context and the geopolitical considerations at play behind the various components of the divergent traditions. In the context of today's increasingly fractious information space, this paper serves to show that manipulation and distortion of political narratives is not a new phenomenon, and that in the end, the victim is usually the historical truth.*

Introduction

The Archaic Period in ancient Greek history is often defined by historians as lasting from the eighth century to the fifth century BCE. The Greek world saw rapid development in culture, economy, and political organization. It was during this time period that the *polis*, the city-state organization that would characterize later Greek history, emerged as the dominant political structure. Improvements in technology and infrastructure allowed for the establishment of Mediterranean trade routes, and this commerce would also result in the development of new industries. While these advancements led to increased prosperity and power for the new city states, it also brought with it an increase in population which outstripped the resources available,

providing one impetus, for Greek colonization.¹ By the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, this ‘colonial’ expansion was well underway, with colonies stretching from Emporion in Hispania (located in modern day Catalonia) to Panticapaeum in Taurica (located in modern day Crimea). Greeks established strong presences in Sicily, Magna Graecia (southern Italy), and Ionia (western Anatolian coast). However, among the various Mediterranean ‘colonies’ established by the Greeks, the settlement of Cyrene in Libya is uniquely valuable to historians and classicists looking to gain a better understanding of Greek ‘colonization’ and what it entailed. Cyrene leaves behind a well-documented foundation myth, references in ancient works, and a revealing archaeological record. An analysis into the ancient sources on Cyrene and material record of the region can provide insight on the nature and causes of early Greek colonization as well as reveal how political considerations can result in the distortion of the foundation mythos of the colony.

A Side Note on Greek Colonization

Before an analysis of Cyrene can be conducted, one must quickly note the shortcomings of the term ‘colonization’ when used to refer to the ancient Greek diaspora across the Mediterranean world. Currently, this word recalls images of European colonization and imperialism in the early modern era and it is easy to misconstrue ancient Greek colonization as a similar historical development. This misconception is not helped by the fact that the legacy of classical civilization was often used to justify European expansionism. Unlike the somewhat more organized and planned imperialist agendas of the nineteenth century European empires, ancient Greek “colonization” happened in a more organic and decentralized manner. The archaic Greeks are believed to have moved away from their homelands for a number of different reasons,

¹ Cawkwell, G. L. “Early Colonisation.” *The Classical Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (1992): 289–303. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/639408>.

ranging from domestic and foreign political strife to ecological burdens as a result of population increase. In terms of the colonial foundation myth, Cyrene is no different and these impetuses are seen reflected in the primary sources as well.

The Foundation of Cyrene in Pindar's Odes

The foundation of Cyrene and its later geopolitical position within the wider Mediterranean region is historiographically well documented among the ancient sources. Pindar, the famed lyric poet of Thebes, is seemingly one of the first ancient authors to mention the origin mythos of Cyrene. In his Pythian 4 ode, Pindar celebrates the victory of King Arcesilaus of Cyrene in a chariot race by telling the story of the city traced all the way back to its mythological ancestor, the argonaut Euphemus. Interestingly though, at the beginning of his ode, Pindar also mentions the religious prophecy that leads to the direct historical colonization of the Cyrene site by a man named Battus: "...on a day when Apollo happened to be present, gave an oracle naming Battus as the colonizer of fruitful Libya, and telling how he would at once leave the holy island and found a city of fine chariots on a shining white breast of the earth."² Later down in the ode Pindar notes, "the oracle [...] declared that you were the destined king of Cyrene, when you came to ask the oracle what relief the gods would grant you for your stammering voice."³ Here, we see that according to Pindar's account of the story, the founding of Cyrene was not planned in any way by the Therans. In fact, it seems to attribute Cyrene's foundation more as a resultant side effect of a divine medical cure rather than an event influenced by historical variables present in Thera at the time.

² Pindar, "Pythian 4," Perseus Digital Library (Tufts University), accessed April 11, 2022, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0162%3Abook%3DP.%3Apoem%3D4>.

³ Ibid.

In his Pythian 5, a second ode dedicated to Arceseilaus' victory in the chariot race, Pindar actually brings the original oracular pronouncement to a conclusion by revealing Battus' eventual cure for his speech impediment: "Even loud-roaring lions fled in fear from Battus, when he unleashed on them his voice from across the sea. And Apollo, the first leader, doomed the beasts to dread fear, so that his oracles to the guardian of Cyrene would not go unfulfilled."⁴ Down below, Pindar further expresses praise for the continued prosperity of Battus' Cyrene as well as some more context for Cyrene's place within the Greek myth system. Thus, within these two odes, Pindar brings the story of Battus the founder and his oracular prescription in a full circle and really emphasizes the divine favor bestowed upon both Battus and the city of Cyrene itself.

From these scattered references in Pindar's odes, the foundation narrative of the establishment of Cyrene is shown to be well documented and known among the later Greeks. While Pindar's poetry provides little in the way of historical information other than the name and possible speech impediment of the founder Battus, the religious aspect of the colonization as emphasized by Pindar is interesting. This fits in line with Greek cultural and religious customs and emphasizes the importance of following these processes when conducting colonization on a large scale. As historian Robin Osborne suggests in his book *Greece in the Making*, the Greeks were aware of the damage that colony founding may cause and thus were careful to propitiate the gods even when following divine instruction.⁵ Besides an adherence to tradition and the social mores of the time, the oracular pronouncement also serves to legitimize the establishment of

⁴ Pindar, "Pythian 5," Perseus Digital Library (Tufts University), accessed April 11, 2022, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0162%3Abook%3DP.%3Apoem%3D5>.

⁵ Robin Osborne, *Greece in the Making, 1200-479 BC*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 10.

such a colony. Pindar's association of Cyrene with significant figures and events within the Greek mythological world suggests that incorporation of the city within the shared Greek belief system was also important to the status of Cyrene. Osborne also notes that Pindar's use of the epithet *Karneios* for Apollo indicates an attempt to make a connection between Cyrene and Sparta.⁶ While the Cyrenean connection with Sparta does not play a major role within historiography, references to this link are alluded to in Pindar and Herodotus. In Pythian 4, Pindar mentions that before the Lemnian descendants of Euphemus, who were to become the later founders of Cyrene, shared "Spartan homes and ways" before settling on another island.⁷ Interestingly, this story is corroborated within Herodotus, specifically in the Cyrenean narrative within the *Histories*. Thus, from Pindar's odes it can be seen that a colonial narrative has been constructed to strengthen the position of the city on religious and mythological grounds. More relevant geopolitical ties are not ignored either within the foundation story, as evidenced by Cyrene's attempt to also find links with the Spartans. Even without much historical context provided, the formation of a sort of Cyrenean national, or perhaps state, mythos is thus seen via Pindar's works. There is a divine claim to Libya as provided by the oracle of Apollo, a glorious past with links to the historical Spartans and mythological Argonauts, and finally an endearing and pious national founder.⁸

Divergent Founding Myths of Cyrene in Herodotus' *Histories*

It is through the *Histories* of Herodotus of Halicarnassus that more historical context for the colonization of Cyrene is provided. In Book IV, Herodotus details two accounts of the foundation mythos of Cyrene, one provided by the Theraians, the mother city of Cyrene, and one

⁶ Osborne, 9.

⁷ Pindar, Pythian 4

⁸ Osborne, 10.

provided by the Cyreneans themselves. Here, the differing traditions on the founding of Cyrene are visible. It seems that the Cyrenean account provided by Herodotus is of the same tradition as that of Pindar analyzed earlier in this essay. Both include the speech impediment of Battus and his subsequent prophetic destiny at the oracle when attempting to resolve said speech impediment. The oracle is similarly blunt in informing Battus that he will be an *oikist* (colony founder): “Battus, you have come here for speech, and here is the speech of Lord Phoibos Apollo. He sends you to Libya, feeder of flocks, to found a colony.”⁹ The one difference is that Pindar’s account does not mention Battus’ lineage while the Cyrenean account traces his line to Etearchos, king of Axos on Crete.¹⁰ Either Pindar decided not to include this part of the story within his celebratory odes or this is a change to the colonial narrative, seemingly an attempt by the Cyreneans to emphasize the royal blood of Battus and thus elevate both his and the colony’s stature.

The Theraian account of the founding of Cyrene is somewhat different from the Pindar/Cyrenean tradition. Instead of traveling to the oracle to ask about his stammer, Battus is instead depicted as part of King Grinnos of Thera’s party to the oracle. Similar to Battus’ consultation in the Cyrenean version, the oracle seemingly randomly instructs Grinnos to found a city in Libya. Grinnos scoffs at the oracle due to his advanced age and is reluctant to undertake such an operation, partly due to the risk and partly due to a lack of knowledge on where exactly Libya was located, and thus ignores the oracle’s directive upon returning to Thera. As Herodotus records, the consequence for ignoring the oracle was severe, “no rain fell on Thera for seven years, and all the trees on the island withered away except for one. So the Theraians again

⁹ Herodotus, *The Landmark Herodotus*, ed. Robert B. Strassler, trans. Andrea L. Purvis (New York, NY: Random House, 2009), 4.155.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.154.

consulted the oracle, and the Pythia again urged them to colonize Libya.”¹¹ The Theraian version of the founding of Cyrene as told by Herodotus stands in stark difference to the Cyrenean version elucidated above. Battus does not have any royal blood and the oracle never explicitly designated him as the one destined to found Cyrene. Instead, Battus is personally dispatched by Grinnos, the king of Thera. Thus, the Theraian narrative puts heavy emphasis on the ties between Cyrene and Thera. The maintenance of this colonial narrative perhaps had geopolitical significance for the foreign policy of Thera as Cyrene became more wealthy and powerful. As will be seen later, Thera will make an effort to maintain these historical links between them and their colony in order to benefit both economically and politically from Cyrene’s influential rise within Libya and the wider Mediterranean world.

The allusion to an ecological disaster that befalls Thera also provides some insight into the true impetus for the Theraian colonization of Libya. A prolonged drought may have put pressure on the agricultural supplies necessary to maintain the Theraian population. In the book *Death and Disease in the Ancient City*, historian Eireann Marshall has suggested that the recording of a drought may also imply widespread disease as a result of a dwindling water supply.¹² Thus, the colonial expedition to Libya may have not only reduced the burden on the Theraian food supply but also eased population concentrations that would have facilitated the rapid spread of disease. The drought, perhaps symbolically representative of Thera’s population burdens, may have gone away not due to divine intervention as promised by the Delphic oracle, but instead due to a decrease in the overall number of citizens.

¹¹ Herodotus, 4.151.

¹² Eireann Marshall, “Death and Disease in Cyrene: a Case Study,” in *Death and Disease in the Ancient City*, ed. Valerie M. Hope and Eireann Marshall (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000), pp. 8-24, 20.

Returning back to the Cyrenean version of Battus' departure from Thera, it can be seen that the Cyreneans ascribe a different reason to the impetus for colonization. Battus, similar to Grinnos in the Theraian version, shuns the advice of the oracle for being irrelevant to the curing of his speech impediment. Instead of seven years of drought, this account mentions a string of misfortunes that befalls Thera. The oracular solution is similar, though with emphasis on Battus himself rather than Grinnos and the Theraians, "The Pythia responded that everything would go better for them [Thera] if they would join Battos in settling Cyrene in Libya."¹³ The mention of bad luck on Thera seems to indicate that there was possibly strife and political tensions on Thera that leads to the departure of a group of Theraian colonists under Battos. A potential clue to the nature of this strife may be found in the Theraian version, where Battos is described as "a member of the tribe Euphemides, who were Minyans."¹⁴ In the sections preceding, Herodotus describes the Minyans as a refugee peoples, being pushed from their original home of Lemnos by the Pelasgians.¹⁵ The Minyans flee to Sparta but soon earn the ire of their Lacedaemonian hosts and finally flee to the island of Calliste, which would become known as Thera.¹⁶ The Minyans are thus foreigners within Thera and it may be possible that they came into conflict with their Theraian hosts just as they did with their Lacedaemonian hosts previously.

This unamicable parting is further corroborated by the differences between the accounts when describing Battus' journey from Thera to Libya. In the Cyrenean account, after Battus departs and arrives at Libya, he doesn't know how to proceed with creating a colony and attempts to return back to Thera with his men. The Theraian response is unpleasant, "As they

¹³ Herodotus, 4.156.

¹⁴ Herodotus, 4.150.

¹⁵ Ibid., 4.145

¹⁶ Ibid., 4.148

[Battus] were sailing in, however, the Theraians shot at them and would not allow them to land; they ordered them instead to sail back again.”¹⁷ In contrast, the Theraian account paints their actions in a much more organized and amicable manner. After Battus establishes an initial presence on Libya, he return to Thera to recruit more colonists and men in order to establish a city. Battus and the Theraians then collectively decide on how to proceed with the colonization effort: “The Theraians resolved to send one out of every two brothers there, to be chosen by lot and accompanied by men from all seven districts, with Battos to be their leader and king.”¹⁸ Not surprisingly, the Theraian version paints their actions in a much more favorable light. The Theraians essentially portray the colonization of Cyrene as something that could not have been accomplished without their support and it seems to suggest that in a way, the Cyreneans are indebted to them. There is also messaging that emphasizes a shared Theraian identity and a fraternal unity among the respective peoples. After all, according to the Theraian account the respective citizens of each city are quite literally brothers, divided up by random lot.

Thus, once again, the divergence between these two traditions seem to reflect the embellishment and distortion of the colonial narrative to suit the political interests of their respective states. Theraian messaging is keen to play up their support of the Cyrenean expedition and the common identity between the *metropolis* (mother city) and the *apoikia* (colony). Even though Thera would not be able to keep powerful Cyrene under its rule, it was certainly hoping to share in the profits of Cyrenean prosperity by using kinship diplomacy as a sort of proganda tool. The Cyrenean messaging instead tries to emphasize the independent nature and self-reliance of the colonists under Battus. One can sense the ideological jostling

¹⁷ Ibid., 4.156

¹⁸ Ibid., 4.153

between the narratives of the *metropolis* and of the *apoikia*, each side willing to manipulate the story to suit their own purposes.

However, as classicist Irad Malkin warns in his article “‘Tradition’ in Herodotus: The Foundation of Cyrene”, one should be careful when analyzing a story in terms of the political situation, “Nor is it helpful to regard tradition as completely fluctuating with changing political circumstances”.¹⁹ Malkin states that a tradition’s “framework elements are not flexible and fluid”.²⁰ Malkin does focus on the crystallization of a national mythos of the Cyreneans and how the foundation narrative is used both as legitimacy of Cyrenean power but also as justification for future goals. The Cyreneans take pride in their humble origin as it only makes their current prosperity seem all the more impressive. Malkin notes the importance of how the Cyreneans view their beginning, “The original two Theran *pentekonters* under Battos, obviously conceived as a bridgehead of a war party, probably became as symbolic as the *Mayflower* did in the USA. The beginning, as often, came to stand for the whole.”²¹ Thus, to Malkin, the importance in these traditions as told by Herodotus and Pindar are not necessarily the underlying political messaging but instead their role as a part of the Cyrenean identity. Malkin identifies one more important factor of the Cyrenean foundation myth: Cyrene’s divinely backed territorial claim over the entirety of Libya. Based on how one interprets it, the Delphic Oracle’s prophecy did not pronounce Battus as specifically the king of Cyrene, but instead giving him the right to rule over Libya. Cyrene’s foundation myth is not only a tradition used to legitimize (or delegitimize) current power structures, but a justification for potential future actions taken by the Cyrenean

¹⁹ Irad Malkin, “‘Tradition’ in Herodotus: the Foundation of Cyrene” in *Herodotus and his World: Essays from a Conference in Memory of George Forrest*, ed. Peter Derow and Robert Parker (New York, NY: Oxford, 2003), pp. 153-171, abstract.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Malkin, 162.

state. As Malkin notes, “The fact that Cyrene never asked for a foundation oracle for its numerous colonies in Libya, in spite of its excellent, continuing relations with Delphi, seems to corroborate that this was her outlook.”²²

Cyrenean Prosperity and the Material Record

Thus far, much discussion has been made about Cyrene’s prosperity and how it influences the historical narrative. Certainly, Cyrenean prosperity is recorded within the ancient sources. Herodotus mentions later on in Book IV that Cyrene’s environmental conditions were so good that the Cyreneans enjoyed three harvest seasons every year and that the farmers spent up to eight months harvesting their crops.²³ Contrast this with the Theraian narrative’s drought that led to the creation of Cyrene and one can see the success story is built into the myth. The archaeological record also provides some insight into the nature of Cyrene’s prosperity as well as how the jostling between mother city and colony occurred outside of the historical tradition. It is important to note that Cyrene’s wealth comes from several key factors. Cyrene was located in a strong geographical location, with access to the sea for trade, fertile land with frequent rainfall, and a source of freshwater.²⁴ The state would expand its influence and power with the founding of a number of cities along the Libyan coast. Cyrene also had access to two important resources: silphium and Libyan horses.²⁵ Silphium was prized among the Hellenistic world for its pharmacological benefits and the Cyrene’s exportation of it became so important to its economic

²² Ibid., 160.

²³ Herodotus, 4.199.

²⁴ Joyce Reynolds, “Cyrene,” Oxford Classical Dictionary (Oxford University, December 22, 2015), <https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-1990>, 1.

²⁵ Ibid.

prosperity that the plant would become the seal of Cyrene and seen in the numismatic record of the region.²⁶

Of the multitude of artifacts and ruins excavated by archaeologists, the *Stella dei Fondatori*, or SEG ix 3, is the most interesting. The SEG ix 3 is an inscription that proclaims that the Theraians should have equal citizenship with the Cyreneans according to the original agreement prior to the colonization of Cyrene.²⁷ This 4th century inscription referencing the Agreement of the Founders has been shown to draw upon a different tradition than those recorded by Herodotus.²⁸ However, the debate over whether it's a forgery or a genuine interpretation of an early agreement is still debated by historians. Malkin is of the opinion that such a discussion is unhelpful and ignores the complex relationship between Thera and Cyrene. Osborne is rather in agreement. For him, the importance of the text once again rests upon the political nature of Cyrene's colonization narrative. Osborne believes that such a concession by the Cyreneans towards the Theraians may be reflected in the possible anti-Battiad political situation at the time.²⁹ The more powerful Cyreneans would only be willing to make such a declaration if the Cyrenean version of the foundation myth had been discarded. Malkin heavily disagrees, pointing to the myriad of references to Battus within SEG ix 3 as proof that even after the fall of the Battiad Dynasty, Battus himself was not a politically taboo figure.³⁰ Regardless, even without any conclusive determination as to the dating of the inscription, the political climate of the time, and the nature of its creation, an analysis of the epigraphy shows that it

²⁶ "Coin," The British Museum, accessed April 11, 2022, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/C_EH-p697-3-Cyr.

²⁷ A. J. Graham, "The Authenticity of the Opkion of Cyrene," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 80 (November 1960): pp. 94-111, <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/628379>, 96.

²⁸ Malkin, 166.

²⁹ Osborne, 13.

³⁰ Malkin, 168.

draws from much of the same arguments over historical legacy already touched upon above. If it is not a forgery, then it may reveal the presence of a new tradition over the establishment of Cyrene. It certainly does seem to reflect some political maneuvering on the side of the Theraians. Historian Christopher Jones believes that such an inscription is an example of Greek kinship diplomacy.³¹ The Theraians, though much less powerful, are able to exert influence on their former colony through common history. While Jones is of the opinion that the agreement inscribed on SEG ix 3 is not authentic, he nevertheless recognizes the significance of this Theraian political ploy as an important precursor to Greek diplomacy and relations between the mother cities and colonies of other Greek city states.³²

Should SEG ix 3 be an authentic text from the 4th century, its contents can provide some insight into the verity of the ancient sources. The oath and the inscription on the stela only partially corroborate the contents of Pindar's *Odes* and Herodotus' *Histories*. There is no mention of Battus' stammer or speech impediment but there is acknowledgement of Apollo's role as the divine initiator of the colonization of Cyrene. This mythological founder is widely agreed upon in both Pindar and Herodotus and is in line with the historiographic sources. The text only partially corroborates the Theraian narrative as recorded by Herodotus, mainly emphasizing the familial nature of the founders, claiming "that Theraeans should sail off as companions; that they should sail off on equal and same terms from each family, one son being chosen from each family."³³ No mention is made of King Grinnos of Thera, as mentioned in the *Histories*. The founding of Cyrene is primarily attributed to Apollo, representative of divine

³¹ Christopher P. Jones, *Kinship Diplomacy in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1999), 34.

³² *Ibid.*, 35.

³³ Catherine Dobias-Lalou, "Inscriptions of Greek Cyrenaica"; "Greek Verse Inscriptions of Cyrenaica," (Universita de Bologna), accessed May 24, 2023, <https://igcyr.unibo.it/igcyr011000>

approval and of the role of Delphi, and of Battus. Considering the clear pro-Theraian messaging in the rest of the text, this omission of Theraian narrative details may be an acquiescence to the Cyreneans. After all, the text indicates that the Theraians had already secured significant economic and political concessions, most likely based on kinship diplomacy as proposed by Jones. As the narrative's primary purpose may have been nothing more than just a geopolitical tool, the Theraians would have had no need to further push their messaging beyond that of simple kinship ties. With their aims achieved, the Theraians would have wanted to avoid antagonizing the Cyreneans, nor would it have been necessary to attack the political stature of Battus, especially considering the downfall of the Battiad Dynasty a century earlier.

Conclusion

In summary, an analysis of the historiography and epigraphy on the founding of Cyrene reveals the manipulation of the historical narrative in order to achieve certain political goals as well as the religious, political, and ecological motivation for colonization. As Cyrenean power grew, there was a necessity to clarify and exaggerate its foundation myth, as evidenced by the grand mythological ancestry as told by Pindar in his odes. One can see examples of national myth formation within history, from Romulus' mythological lineage as established in the *Aeneid* to George Washington and the cherry tree. Increases within Cyrenean power also lead to competing narratives from its mother city of Thera, in an attempt to exploit its historical relationship for some benefit. This battle over the narrative can be seen in the different emphases of the various traditions recorded by Herodotus. The Theraian narrative emphasizes Thera's role in facilitating the creation of such a colony while the Cyrenean role focuses more on Battus' perseverance and their humble origins. Archaeological finds in the area corroborate the general details of Cyrene's foundation but, as SEG ix 3 reveals, the battle over the city's distant

history was not only confined to oral and literary tradition. New archaeological findings may help clarify the complex nature of Thera-Cyrene relations or it may very well reveal new clashing traditions in the fight to control the city's historical legacy.

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