Decline or prosperity at Roman Eretria? Industry, purple dye works, public buildings, and gravestones

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Introduction

To historians Eretria on the island of Euboea is best known for its participation in Greek colonisation during the Geometric period and later for its destruction by the Persians because of Eretrian support for the Ionian revolt. The best-known period of Eretria's archaeology is the late Classical and early Hellenistic, when luxurious private dwellings were built, the result of a prosperity that led also to the construction of many public buildings. The city's later history is marked by violent destructions, such as which occurred during the Chremonidean War (267-261 B.C.). However, it seems that recovery was quick, for the Eretrians strongly resisted a Roman army led by L. Quinctius Flamininus, brother of T. Quinctius Flamininus, the 'liberator' of Greece, before being conquered and destroyed in 198. Following this destruction not all the dwellings investigated thus far were re-used, and that led to the view that the prosperity of the city was already declining during the 2nd c. B.C. As Eretria was on the side of Mithridates VI Eupator of Pontus and Bithynia, it was assumed that the city suffered the same fate as Athens — violent destruction during the First Mithridatic War (88-86 B.C.). From this period on Eretria was generally thought of as a largely ruined and scattered settlement, even though on various occasions Roman structures had been found. This opinion may have been encouraged by the fact that Pausanias did not visit the island, or his writings about it have been lost. However, it even led some to argue that Strabo, who refers to Eretria as the second most important town during his day, was wrong, or at least not well informed. Some previous excavators of Eretria tried to make the archaeological evidence fit their preconceived ideas. Thus, indications of a settlement in the Roman period were interpreted as dispersed farms or even as a single farm that took over the former area of the city. The same statement was already found in the first preliminary report of the Swiss excavations at Eretria in 1965.