

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

Stephan G. Schmid

Introduction

To historians Eretria on the island of Euboea is best known for its participation in Greek colonisation during the Geometric period¹ and later for its destruction by the Persians because of Eretrian support for the Ionian revolt.² The best-known period of Eretria's archaeology is the late Classical and early Hellenistic, when luxurious private dwellings were built,³ 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 that which occurred during the Chremonidean War (267-261 B.C.).⁴ 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 198.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.).⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ The same statement was already found in the first preliminary report of the Swiss excavations at Eretria in 1965.¹⁰ This

-
- 1 J. Boardman, "Euboians overseas: a question of identity," in D. Evely, I. S. Lemos and S. Sherratt (edd.), *Minotaur and centaur. Studies in the archaeology of Crete and Euboea presented to Mervyn Popham* (BAR S638, Oxford 1996) 155-60 and, in a broader context, id., *The Greeks overseas* (London 1980); G. R. Tsetskhladze and F. de Angelis (edd.), *The archaeology of Greek colonisation* (Oxford 1994); S. C. Bakhuizen, "Euboian colonisation: the non-archaeological evidence," in J. M. Fossey (ed.), *Proceedings of the first international congress on the Hellenic diaspora* (Amsterdam 1991) 25-36; *Gli Eubei in occidente. Atti del diciottesimo convegno sulla Magna Grecia* (Taranto 1979); see also the contributions of S. Huber and D. Ridgway both in M. Bats and B. d'Agostino (edd.), *Euboica. L'Eubea e la presenza euboica in Calcidica e in Oriente. Atti del convegno ... 1996* (Naples 1998) 109-33 and 311-22.
 - 2 Hdt. 6.99-102; Nepos 1.4.2.
 - 3 See K. Reber et al., *Die klassischen und hellenistischen Wohnhäuser im Westquartier (Eretria 10; Lausanne 1998)*; also *Eretria* 8.
 - 4 See S. G. Schmid, *AntK* 40 (1997) 106 f. with further refs.; id., "A group of early Hellenistic pottery from a well at Eretria," in *Επιστημονική συνάντηση για την ελληνιστική κεραμική* (forthcoming).
 - 5 Liv. 32.16.8 ff., 33.34.10; Paus. 7.8.1; Polyb. 18.45.5, 18.47.10 f.
 - 6 For the re-use of buildings after 198 B.C. see K. Reber, "Die Stadt Eretria nach der Eroberung durch Lucius Quinctius Flamininus," in *Actes XIV Cong. Int. Arqueología Clásica*. (Tarragona 1994) 351 ff.
 - 7 Auberson and Schefold 1972, 37 f.; on this see S. G. Schmid, "Sullan debris from Eretria?," *RCRF* 36 (forthcoming) and *infra* n. 16.
 - 8 Strabo 10.18-11; Auberson and Schefold 1972, 38; Strabo is said to have re-used an older source of the 2nd c. B.C., but cf. *infra* n. 97.
 - 9 Auberson and Schefold 1972, 38, 110 f.; cf. the preliminary reports by the excavator: J.-P. Descoedres, *ADelt* 22 (1967) *Chron.* 278-83; 23 (1968) *Chron.* 239-42; 24 (1969) *Chron.* 209; *AntK* 11 (1968) 96; see also *infra* nn. 49-51.