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DEPARTMENT OF MEDITERRANEAN STUDIES

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Dear Colleague:

During the 1880's the first of four Eteocretan inscriptions was found on Crete. Those inscriptions are written in Greek letters, but in a "mysterious" language that scholars correctly assumed to be the pre-Greek speech of Crete. The identity of that language, however, remained a mystery until February 1962.

Herodotus repeatedly mentions the Phoenicians as active in the Minoan World. Homer tells us that the mother of King Minos was a Phoenician princess. Early Greek tradition informs us that the Phoenician Cadmus founded Thebes and introduced Phoenician script to Greece.

Unfortunately we tend to underestimate the value of tradition. For reasons spelled out in my forthcoming book "Before the Bible" (Harper, 1962), I have come to realize the correctness of the ancient Greek traditions to the effect that prior to around 1500 B.C. the dominant factor throughout the entire East Mediterranean, including Crete and the Aegean, was Phoenician. Accordingly, during the last few weeks I reexamined the Eteocretan texts which date from the sixth to the third centuries B.C. Since they are in the Greek alphabet, there is no difficulty in pronouncing them. Three Eteocretan texts from Praisos, Crete, turn out to be tombstones. They all contain the word mit (which means "died" in Phoenician) after the name of the deceased in the opening line. One tombstone records that the deceased was a "benefactor" who had been "mayor over Praisos" and a "mighty ruler of Praisos". Another tombstone, after recording that the lamented "had gone to sleep and died", invokes the curse of exile on anyone who desecrates the grave. The third text requests kind treatment from everyone "be he lord of a city or any man at all". The remaining Eteocretan text, from Psychro, Crete, can be translated completely: "There are no valuables buried in the tomb that I have established" (literally, "the house which I have given, there is not with it in the earth anything beautiful"). The Semitic vocabulary, morphology, syntax and idiom are flawless.

The language of the Eteocretan inscriptions is no more different from the Phoenician dialects of Byblos or Carthage than the latter are from each other.

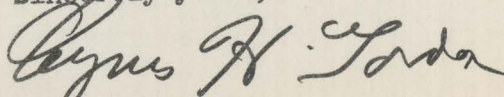
Like the Greeks, so too the ancient Egyptians recognized the unity of the entire East Mediterranean prior to 1500 B.C., for they apply the name "Keftiu" to its various component parts prior to that date.

When the Mycenaean Greeks wrested Knossos from the Semitic Minoans in the fifteenth century B.C., the beginning of the end had come for the earlier population. Minoan enclaves survived into classical Greek times to leave us a few Eteocretan inscriptions. But the Indo-Europeans were destined to displace the Semites in the Aegean, Crete, Cyprus and Asia Minor. This historic fact may well be what Genesis 9:27 expresses as Noah's prediction that Japheth (the traditional ancestor of the Greeks and other Indo-Europeans) "shall dwell in the tents of Shem".

My scientific publication of the four Eteocretan inscriptions has gone to press. Pending its appearance in the July issue of Journal of Near Eastern Studies edited by Professor Keith C. Seele, you may be interested in knowing what has happened.

With best greetings,

Sincerely yours,


Cyrus H. Gordon

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