

Ancient Thera: The "Other" City

by P.Y. Forsyth

The Cycladic island of Thera (also known as Santorini) is best known today for the well-preserved Bronze Age ruins at the site of Akrotiri. Yet there is another important ancient site on Thera, one that few modern visitors to the island are aware of: the city of "Ancient Thera", perched atop the peak of Mesa Vouno. Here, on a ridge some 800 m long and 150 m wide, remain the still impressive ruins of a settlement excavated from 1895-1903 by the German archaeologist Friedrich Hiller von Gærtringen.

While most of the remains now visible belong to the Hellenistic and Roman eras, the city of Ancient Thera seems to have been settled as early as the 10th century B.C., as attested by early Geometric-style pottery discovered by Hiller in the Sellada cemetery nearby. The legend of the foundation of Ancient Thera is recorded by the Greek historian Herodotus, who tells us that an ex-regent of Sparta by the name of Theras led a group of Dorians to the island, where eventually seven towns were established, with Ancient Thera becoming the metropolis. The importance of the city certainly owed much to its strategic position high up on Mesa Vouno, and to two excellent harbours below: Kamari to the north, and Perissa to the south.

The pottery remains indicate that Ancient Thera really began to grow and prosper in the 8th century B.C. Along with a significant increase in population came the development of writing, for it was the Ancient Theraeans who were among the very first Greeks to adopt the Phoenician alphabet, and some of the oldest known inscriptions in Greek have been found on the site. These were carved in the style known as boustrophedon

("ox-plow"), in which lines would be written alternately from left-to-right and from right-to-left. The government of the time was a monarchy which lasted until the 6th century B.C., when it was replaced by an aristocratic form of rule. The culture in general remained staunchly Dorian, and thus very conservative.

Ancient Thera enjoyed its peak of power and prosperity between ca. 630 and 570 B.C. In the city itself, impressive buildings arose, including the Temple of Apollo Karneios, in whose precinct young boys would dance in the nude to honour Apollo. The cistern found under the courtyard of the temple bears witness to the one great problem faced by the ancient inhabitants atop Mesa Vouno: the lack of sufficient water supplies; indeed, almost every building, whether private or public, had an underground cistern for the storage of rain water. And it was to be a long dry-spell that would force the conservative Theraeans to embark upon their one great colonization venture in 630 B.C. As Herodotus records, a group of Theraeans was sent to North Africa after seven years of drought, and founded the city of Cyrene; within two generations, ironically, this "colony" would begin to surpass its mother-city in all respects.

The history of Ancient Thera during the Classical Age is not at present fully understood. At the time of the Persian Invasion in 480 B.C. the Theraeans seem to have sided with the Persians against their fellow Greeks (it should be noted, however, that other Greek states also sided with the enemy). After the Persians had been defeated, the Theraeans refused (not surprisingly, given their Dorian affiliation) to join Athens' Delian League, but were forced into the League by Athens around 430 B.C. They also seem to have belonged to Athens' Second Maritime League in 378 B.C. By this time, the city of Ancient Thera had clearly been relegated to a minor position in the greater Greek world.

Ancient Thera indeed remained a "back-water" until the Hellenistic era ushered in by the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C. With Alexander gone, his generals divided up the empire he had acquired, and a general named Ptolemy gained control of Egypt. Being expansionists, the Ptolemies (as the dynasty came to be known) soon took over the island of Thera, using it as a naval base. Ancient Thera was chosen to be the headquarters of this base, and the fortunes of the city quickly revived. Many of the buildings on the site today owe their existence to the Ptolemaic occupation: the elaborate House of the Commandant, the Ptolemaic gymnasium, the sanctuary of the Egyptian gods, the theatre, and many private houses with cisterns, corridors, courtyards, and painted walls.

By the middle of the second century B.C., however, a new power was on the horizon: Rome. It is currently thought that, after the death of Ptolemy VI in 145 B.C., the island of Thera became part of the expanding Roman empire. There is, however, a contrary view that Thera regained its independence for a brief period before the Roman take-over. In either case, Roman influence is most definitely apparent by the first century B.C., when we begin to find Roman inscriptions, Roman baths, and a Roman renovation of the city's theatre. Inscriptions to various Roman emperors attest to the continuing dominion of Rome into the first and second centuries A.D. But Thera was once again relegated to a back-water, and was to play a very minor role within the vast Roman Empire.

The city shows signs of a serious decline in the third century A.D., and though it continued to be inhabited until 800 A.D., it fades into obscurity, and we know little of this era in its history. Nonetheless, the site itself remains atop Mesa Vouno to remind us of this "other" important settlement on the island of Thera. While not so spectacular as Bronze Age Akrotiri, Ancient Thera has its own unique story, and is well worth a visit should one be lucky enough to venture to this most beautiful of the Cycladic islands.