

4.4. Herodotus and Strabo / The Founding of Cyrene

The founding of Cyrene, on the Libyan coast of North Africa due south of Greece, took place c. 630 BCE by colonists from the island of Thera in the Aegean.

Hdt. 4.150–159. Source: Herodotus. *The History*. Trans. George Rawlinson. New York: Dutton, 1862.

Strabo Geog. 17.21. Source: Strabo. *The Geography of Strabo*. Trans. Hans Claude Hamilton and William Falconer. Bohn's classical library, v. 74-76. London: H.G. Bohn, 1854.

Herodotus, *The History*, c. 430 BCE

Grinus (they say), the son of Aesanius, a descendant of Theras, and king of the island of Thera, went to Delphi to offer a hecatomb on behalf of his native city. On Grinus consulting the oracle about sundry matters, the Pythoness gave him for answer, “that he should found a city in Libya.” When the embassy returned to Thera, small account was taken of the oracle, as the Therans were quite ignorant where Libya was.

Seven years passed from the utterance of the oracle, and not a drop of rain fell in Thera: all the trees in the island, except one, were killed with the drought. After a while, everything began to go wrong. Ignorant of the cause of their sufferings, they again sent to Delphi to inquire for what reason they were afflicted. The Pythoness in reply reminded them reproachfully “that if they and Battus would make a settlement at Cyrene in Libya, things would go better with them.” So, as there was no help for it, they sent messengers to Crete, to inquire whether any of the Cretans, or of the strangers living amongst them, had ever travelled as far as Libya: and these messengers fell in with a man named Corobius, a dealer in purple dye. In answer to their inquiries, he told them that contrary winds had once carried him to Libya, where he had gone ashore on a certain island which was named Platea. So they hired this man's services, and took him back with them to Thera. A few persons then sailed from Thera to reconnoiter. Guided by Corobius to the island of Platea, they left him there with provisions for a certain number of months, and returned home with all speed to give their countrymen an account of the island.

The Therans who had left Corobius at Platea, when they reached Thera, told their countrymen that they had colonized an island on the coast of Libya. They of Thera, upon this, resolved that men should be sent to join the colony from each of their seven districts, and that the brothers in every family should draw lots to determine who were to go. Upon this the Therans sent out Battus with two penteconters, and with these he proceeded to Libya; but within a little time, not knowing what else to do, the men returned and arrived back off Thera. The Therans, when they saw the vessels approaching, received

them with showers of missiles, would not allow them to come near the shore, and ordered the men to sail back from whence they came. Thus compelled, they settled on Platea.

In this place they continued two years, but at the end of that time, as their ill luck still followed them, they went in a body to Delphi, where they made complaint at the shrine to the effect that they prospered as poorly as before. Hereon the Pythoness made them the following answer: “Know you better than I, fair Libya abounding in fleeces? Better the stranger than he who has trod it? Oh! Clever Therans!” Battus and his friends, when they heard this, sailed back to Platea: it was plain the god would not hold them acquitted of the colony till they were absolutely in Libya. So they made a settlement on the mainland directly opposite Platea, fixing themselves at a place called Aziris.

Here they remained six years, at the end of which time the Libyans induced them to move, promising that they would lead them to a better situation. So the Greeks left Aziris and were conducted by the Libyans towards the west, their journey being so arranged, by the calculation of their guides, that they passed in the night the most beautiful district of that whole country, which is the region called Irasa. The Libyans brought them to a spring, which goes by the name of Apollo's Fountain, and told them, “Here, Hellenes, is the proper place for you to settle; for here the sky leaks.”

During the lifetime of Battus, the founder of the colony, who reigned forty years, and during that of his son Arcesilaus, who reigned sixteen, the Cyreneans continued at the same level, neither more nor fewer in number than they were at the first. But in the reign of the third king, Battus, surnamed the Happy, the advice of the Pythoness brought Greeks from every quarter into Libya, to join the settlement. Thus a great multitude were collected together to Cyrene, and the Libyans of the neighborhood found themselves stripped of large portions of their lands.

Strabo, *Geographia*, c. 20 CE

Cyrene was founded by the inhabitants of Thera, a Lacedaemonian island which was formerly called Calliste, as Callimachus says: Calliste once its name, but Thera in later times, the mother of my home, famed for its steeds. The harbor of Cyrene is situated opposite to Criu-Metopon, the western cape of Crete, distant 2000 stadia. The passage is made with a south-southwest wind. Cyrene is said to have been founded by Battus, whom Callimachus claims to have been his ancestor. The city flourished from the excellence of the soil, which is peculiarly adapted for breeding horses, and the growth of fine crops.