

International Conference.

«Writing and Religious Traditions in the Ancient Western Mediterranean»

The Fretrani of Sicily and the shrine of Hercules Nouritanus in Lilybaeum (AE 2016, 622 = I.Sicily 004368)



I.Sicily link

C(aius) Fannius Min(ati) f(ilius) ceivesq[ue] Fretran[ei q]uei in Sicilia
colunt Herculei Nouritano fanum faciundum
coiraveront. Pecunia conlata est n(ummi sestertii) DCXLIII
[- - ? - -]RAC[.]V[. .]QV[. .]DEDE[- - ? - -]

Gaius Fannius, son of Minatus, and the citizens of the Fretrani who dwell in Sicily saw to the construction of the shrine of Hercules Nouritanus. The money collected was 643 and a half sestertii.

Archaeological context: found in excavation in March 2008 in secondary deposition Lilybaeum (Marsala, north-western Sicily).

Dimension: height = 24-26 cm; width = 150 cm; depth = 94 cm.

Paleographic dating: 120-50 BC (Ampolo 2016).

Support: base.



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Introduction

The text records the building of a shrine (*fanum*) dedicated to a previously unattested religious figure, Hercules Nouritanus - whose epithet very likely refers to Sardinia, rich in similar toponyms and ethnonyms - and was issued by the Fretrani (also known as Frentani, in a later version of their name), an Italian population from the Biferno's lower valley, in today's Molise. While the inscription is generally interpreted as a dedication issued from *negotiatores*, the internal linguistic evidence and epigraphic parallels suggest that the Fretrani were probably local residents (*incolae*) joined in an ethnic association, and that Hercules Nouritanus was adopted as tutelary deity of this group.



The home region of the Fretrani. Image free of copyright (<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Popolitacrop.png>)

Sulla and the Social War: a potential reason for the mobility of the Fretrani?

It is essential to highlight that the Fretrani were a Samnite population (“Φρεντανοί, Σαυντικὸν ἔθνος” in Str. 5, 4, 2). Describing the post-Social war Samnium, Strabo narrated that Sulla “would not stop making proscriptions until either *he had destroyed all Samnites of importance or banished them from Italy*. And to those who found fault with him for such excessive wrath he said he had realised from experience *that not a Roman could ever live in peace so long as the Samnites held together as a separate people*” (Str. 5, 4, 11; translated by Jones). Although there is no compelling evidence that this is the case for the Fretrani of Sicily, this event should be taken into account as a potential explanation for their presence abroad as residents (and not as businessmen).



Left side of the inscription. Photo by Jonathan Prag. With the permission of Regione Siciliana, Parco Archeologico di Lilibeo-Marsala.

Residents and not itinerant merchants

It is tempting to assume that the Fretrani were itinerant businessmen, similar to the *negotiatores* that are attested by a number of inscriptions in the Hellenistic East. This interpretation would contribute to explaining the potential allusion to Sardinia included in the epithet ‘Nouritanus’, which could have been adopted by these individuals during their business travels to Sardinia.

Unfortunately, the linguistic choices of this text do not support this hypothesis: the Fretrani deliberately decided to depart from the standard self-presentation used by the itinerant Italian businessmen abroad - ‘qui negotiantur’ (also attested in Sicily) - and instead opted for ‘quei in Sicilia colunt’. This linguistic choice indicates that the Fretrani did not just do their business in Sicily (something that foreigners could do too) but were permanently based there, as all the different meanings of *colo* share a settled relationship with a region.

An association of *incolae*

The dedication of a shrine and the presence of a group of people sharing some features led by a named person are consistent with the dedications issued by associations (*collegia*) and their *magistri*, which are often building inscriptions dedicated to their patron deity. Similarly, a 2nd-century BC inscription from Aesernia (CIL IX, 6757), at the time already a Roman colony, is set up by the *Samnitae incolae* led by their *magistri*. The deduction of Roman citizens (*coloni*) for the foundation of a colony resulted in the native inhabitants of the area becoming only residents without Roman citizenship (*incolae*). Although Lilybaeum was not a Roman colony, the ‘holders of Fretrane citizenship’ (*ceives Fretranei*) were probably distinguished from the Romans settled (*cives Romani*) there as much as the local citizens. Like the Samnites in Aesernia, they formed an association of *incolae* – residents without local citizenship - sharing the same ethnic identity in a multicultural milieu as Lilybaeum was.

The worship of Hercules Nouritanus

Roman associations always revolved around the worship of a shared religious figure, and Hercules Nouritanus was probably the one chosen by the Fretrani. It is worth recalling that in the western Sicily Herakles/Melqart had a lengthy history as a charter myth used by different ethnic groups - primarily Phoenicians against Greeks - competing for the possession of the area (Malkin 2011). In this context, although highly speculative, the intriguing hypothesis emerges that the Fretrani, expelled from their homeland, adopted Hercules Nouritanus to claim some form of ownership or, at least, legitimacy over their new home.



Right side of the inscription. Photo by Jonathan Prag. With the permission of Regione Siciliana, Parco Archeologico di Lilibeo-Marsala.

Select Bibliography

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