

## The Root of the Matter: El Greco

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### A Cretan village that was the painter's birthplace bristles at a nearby town's claim

By Joanna Kakissis, Globe Correspondent | March 6, 2005

FODELE, Crete -- The fight for El Greco resumed in this coastal village in the dead of winter, when the moody sky roiled like the painter's electrified landscapes.

The villagers who claim the painter born Domenikos Theotokopoulos as their ancestor had heard the bad news: Once again, Fodele was losing its most famous native son to Heraklion, Crete's capital and largest city. This month, Heraklion would install an El Greco altarpiece it purchased in December for \$1.54 million. Journalists had hailed the sale for returning an El Greco work to the city of his birth.

It was too much for Fodele villagers like Dimitra Louladaki, a homemaker whose maiden name, Theotoki, she says is a shortened form of Theotokopoulos. So much about her village revolves around El Greco: the home-turned-museum that shows poster-sized copies of his work, the statue in the square, the plaque from his adopted country of Spain, the monastery where he is said to have painted his first icons.

"Since I was born, I have heard El Greco was from Fodele and was family," says Louladaki, 59, whose thin face, high forehead, and blue-gray eyes have compelled tourists to photograph her as a modern-day replica of the painter. "Since Heraklion bought the painting, all I hear is that he was born in that city. It's not true. They can try as much as they want to take him away, but we won't let them."

In Greece, where history is both identity and economy, El Greco (1541-1614) is a prized commodity. Heraklion and Fodele have been dueling quietly over the artist for at least two decades, a battle involving years of academic research and generations of oral history.

In Fodele, a farming village on the north central coast of Crete, scores of the 650 villagers claim some relationship to the painter, and much of the village's money comes from tourism associated with him. Most of Greece's tourism websites list Fodele as El Greco's birthplace.

About 17 miles east, Heraklion, the island's cultural center and home to 150,000 people, has its own El Greco square and bust. Its seaside historical museum already owns the painter's "Landscape of the God-Trodden Mount Sinai," and the new altarpiece showing the baptism of Christ will be displayed there, too.

The city's claim to him is based on two documents from a trial in 1606, when the painter was 65, stating his place of birth as Candia, the Venetian name for Heraklion. Scholars often cite the documents as biographical proof of El Greco's birthplace; city officials say this is conclusive.

"El Greco was born in Heraklion," says Markos Karanastasis, president of the city's municipal council. "Most of the sources say this. He only spent a few years in Fodele, painting near the beach."

The uncontested biography of Domenikos Theotokopoulos goes something like this:

He was born in Crete in 1541, when the island was part of the Venetian Republic. As a teenager, he studied Byzantine icon painting in Heraklion. In 1567, he moved to Venice to study under Tiziano Vecellio (called Titian), Jacopo Tintoretto, and Jacopo Bassano. In 1571, he moved to Rome, where his brashness both alienated and electrified the holy city's artistic community.

By 1576, he had moved to Spain and developed the restless and hallucinatory style that would influence

such 20th-century masters as Pablo Picasso and Jackson Pollock. His dramatic backdrops, elongated and blanched saints, and unnerving scenes of death and salvation prompted proclamations of both genius and madness.

He morphed his difficult name into El Greco, Spanish for "The Greek," and eventually settled in Toledo. He met Jerónima de las Cuevas, who became the mother of his son, Jorge Manuel. The painter stayed in Toledo until he died in 1614. He always signed his paintings by his birth name.

In Crete, a fierce island that romanticizes its heroes, El Greco remained Domenikos Theotokopoulos. His moody paintings reflected the restless Cretan skies and inspired Cretan artists.

"You have to study Theotokopoulos for a lifetime to understand him," says Kostas Dolapsakis-Krasanakis, 59, a Heraklion artist who carves sheets of metal into light-refracting scenes of startling beauty. "When we talk about him, we whisper out of respect."

But he is firm about the painter's city of birth: "He was born here," in Heraklion. "End of story."

Polychronis Alodianakis, a Fodele native who lives and works in Heraklion, says this is a brazen rewriting of history. The painter probably told everyone in Spain he was from Heraklion because it was the closest known city next to tiny Fodele, he says.

"We know our story is the right one," he says.

Alodianakis, 60, takes out a 40-year-old newspaper from a desk drawer in his small office. A four-page spread tells the story of El Greco's descendants in Fodele, with photographs of Alodianakis; his late father Stelianos; and Dimitra Louladaki. Stelianos apparently looked so much like El Greco that tourists would photograph him. In the newspaper story, he was photographed dressed as the painter.

"You cannot argue about the resemblance," says the son.

In 1995, Polychronis traveled to Toledo to see the artist's last home, and imagined the painter homesick. He thought the medieval Spanish city had the moody sky and earthy scents of his own Cretan village.

Fodele lies between a mountain and the Sea of Crete. A sign marks the exit on the highway: "Birthplace of El Greco".

The first buildings appear after a spiraling drive into a valley of lush orange groves. A narrow road divides the stone-white homes and a three-rung wooden fence that protects the banks of the Pandomandri River, which bisects the village. In winter, the oranges are ripe, and their scent lingers.

Under the ancient plane tree in the village square sits a bust of El Greco and a plaque cut from the rock of Toledo and donated in 1934 by professors from the University of Valladolid in Spain.

Near the square is a coffee shop called Café Domeniko, which specializes in sage-spiced mountain tea and the honey-drenched fried dough balls called loukoumades.

Maria Kalaitzaki, a short, broad woman in a blue flowered dress and slippers, minds the cafe in winter. The owners, her daughter and son-in-law, will return in April. Though the family claims no relation to the painter, Kalaitzaki says her daughter named the cafe after him because she thought it was good business.

"Anyway, every old person, as long as I can remember, said Theotokopoulos was from Fodele," she says.

She waves to a row of graying women embroidering cream-colored purses and tablecloths for sale. The most ardent saleswoman is Niki Fakoukaki, 64, who also offers her sesame-sprinkled, clove-flavored cookies "in honor of our man, Domenikos." She says she is one of his descendants.

She points toward a bridge over the creek. "Have you seen his house?" she says. "It's about a kilometer up the road."

The bridge leads to a reconstructed, Venetian- era building known as the Domenikos Theotokopoulos Museum of Replicas, or the Museum of El Greco. Inside, under lighted glass, are copies of his paintings and framed newspaper articles about Spanish dignitaries visiting Fodele. In the back is a re- created workspace with an easel, oil paints, a table, and a sunlit view of the orange groves.

The building became the museum in 1980 after it was donated by Dimitra Louladaki. It used to be the ancestral home of her family, the Theotokis.

On a rainy afternoon, Louladaki digs out a 42- year- old book on Crete by an Athenian journalist. She reads aloud the section on Fodele, which recounts the journalist's wonder at meeting descendants of El Greco. The journalist later invited Louladakis to Athens, and she stayed for three months. During that time, an Athens artist painted a portrait of her as a Venetian- era beauty, a loose scarf framing her long face and almond- shaped eyes. She still has a photograph of the painting.

She closes the yellowed book and looks out the window at the wet, swaying trees.

"I wanted to be a painter, too," she says. "When I finished elementary school, some wealthy Greek- Americans gave me money to study in Heraklion and wanted to take me to Spain. I was there for a year when my mother got sick."

So she returned to Fodele, gave up painting, and eventually married Vassilis Louladakis, with whom she had two sons. She settled into a farmer's life of orange and olive harvests. She saved the newspaper articles and the book about El Greco's Fodele.

"In the day- to- day routine of a normal life, it is very important to have something to be proud of," Louladaki says. "I am proud of my family, and I am proud of my home. All of us here believe in our story."

Outside, the uneasy sky breaks into bolts of gray- blue darkness. An old man in nicked black boots and a gauzy black warrior's scarf leans on his cane. He walks into the bitter tableau, smiling as if it is the most beautiful scene on earth.

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