

THE GREEKS

H. D. F. KITTO

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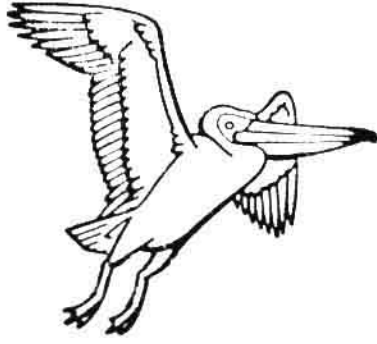
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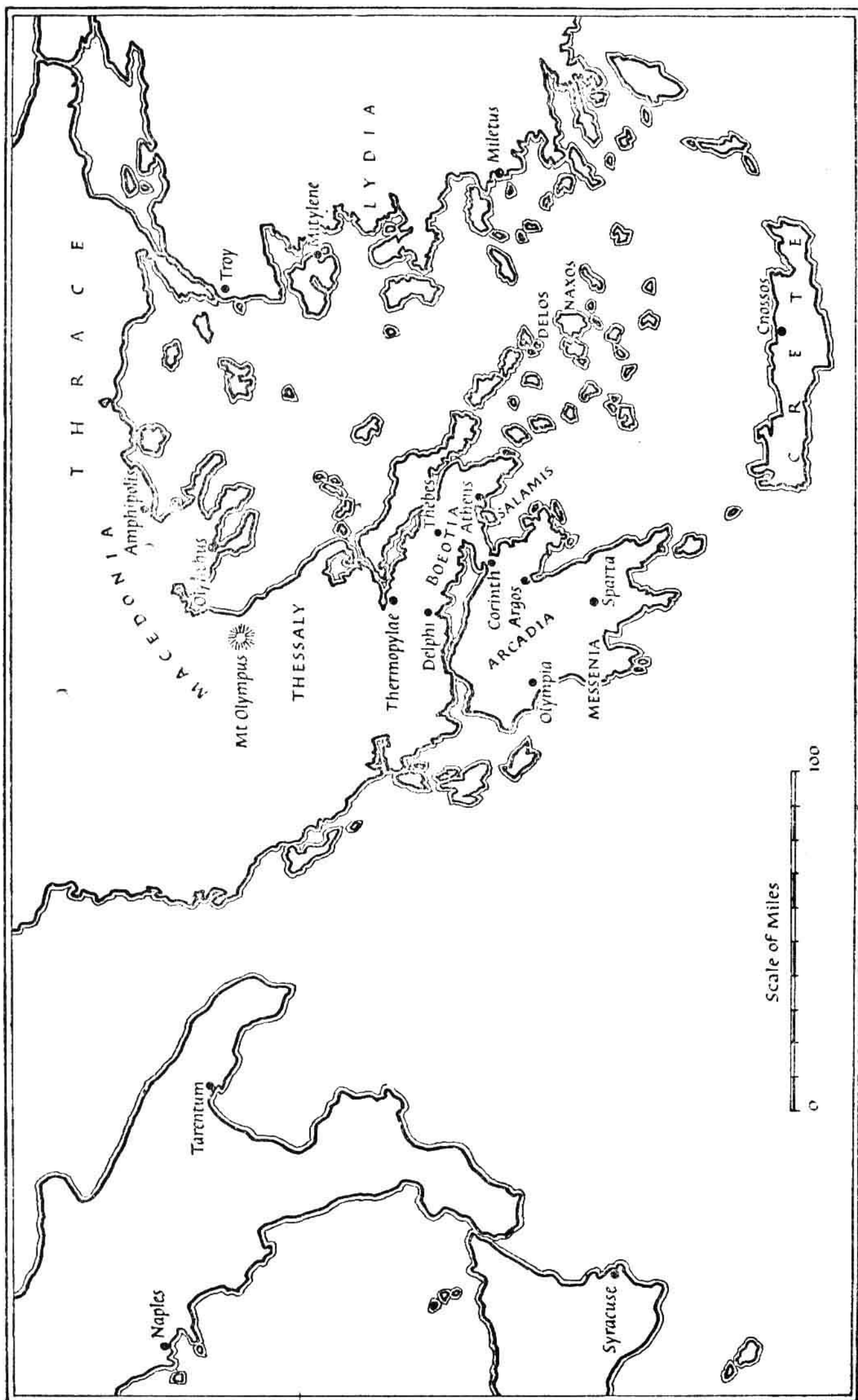
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INTRODUCTION

THE reader is asked, for the moment, to accept this as a reasonable statement of fact, that in a part of the world that had for centuries been civilized, and quite highly civilized, there gradually emerged a people, not very numerous, not very powerful, not very well organized, who had a totally new conception of what human life was for, and showed for the first time what the human mind was for. This statement will be amplified and, I hope, justified in what follows. We can begin the amplification now by observing that the Greeks themselves felt, in quite a simple and natural way, that they were different from any other people that they knew. At least, the Greeks of the classical period habitually divided the human family into Hellenes and barbarians.¹ The pre-classical Greek, Homer for instance, does not speak of 'barbarians' in this way; not because he was more polite than his descendants, but because this difference had not then fully declared itself.

It was not, in fact, a matter of politeness at all. The Greek word 'barbaros' does not mean 'barbarian' in the modern sense; it is not a term of loathing or contempt; it does not mean people who live in caves and eat their meat raw. It means simply people who make noises like 'bar bar' instead of talking Greek. If you did not speak Greek you were a 'barbarian', whether you belonged to some wild Thracian tribe, or to one of the luxurious cities of the East, or to Egypt, which, as the Greeks well knew, had been a stable and civilized country many centuries before Greece existed. 'Barbaros' did not necessarily imply contempt. Many Greeks admired the moral code of the Persians and the wisdom of the Egyptians. The debt – material, intellectual and artistic – which the Greeks owed to the peoples of the East was

1. I shall use the term 'classical' to designate the period from about the middle of the seventh century B.C. to the conquests of Alexander in the latter part of the fourth.

rarely forgotten. Yet these people were 'barbaroi', foreigners, and classed with (though not confused with) Thracians, Scythians and such. Only because they did not talk Greek? No; for the fact that they did not talk Greek was a sign of a profounder difference: it meant that they did not live Greek or think Greek either. Their whole attitude to life seemed different; and a Greek, however much he might admire or even envy a 'barbarian' for this reason or that, could not but be aware of this difference.

We may note in passing that one other race (not counting ourselves) has made this sharp distinction between itself and all other foreigners, namely the Hebrews. Here were two races, each very conscious of being different from its neighbours, living not very far apart, yet for the most part in complete ignorance of each other and influencing each other not at all until the period following Alexander's conquests, when Greek thought influenced Hebraic thought considerably – as in *Ecclesiastes*. Yet it was the fusion of what was most characteristic in these two cultures – the religious earnestness of the Hebrews with the reason and humanity of the Greeks – which was to form the basis of later European culture, the Christian religion. But Gentile and Barbaros were very different conceptions; the one purely racial and religious, the other only incidentally racial and not in the least religious. What then led the Greek to make this sharp division? And had it any justification?

It would be one answer, a true and sufficient one, to say that while the older civilizations of the East were often extremely efficient in practical matters and, sometimes, in their art not inferior to the Greeks, yet they were intellectually barren. For centuries, millions of people had had experience of life – and what did they do with it? Nothing. The experience of each generation (except in certain purely practical matters) died with it – not like the leaves of the forest, for they at least enrich the soil. That which distils, preserves and then enlarges the experience of a people is Literature. Before the Greeks, the Hebrews had created religious poetry, love-poetry, and the religious poetry and oratory of the Prophets, but literature in all its other known forms (except the novel) was

created and perfected by the Greeks. The difference between 'barbarian' historical chronicles and Thucydides is the difference between a child and a man who can not only understand, but also make his understanding available to others. Epic poetry, history and drama; philosophy in all its branches, from metaphysics to economics; mathematics and many of the natural sciences – all these begin with the Greeks.

Yet if we could ask an ancient Greek what distinguished him from the barbarian, he would not, I fancy, put these triumphs of the Greek mind first, even though he was conscious that he set about most things in a more intelligent way. (Demos-thenes, for example, rating his fellow-citizens for their spineless policy towards Philip of Macedon, says 'You are no better than a barbarian trying to box. Hit him in one spot, and his hands fly there; hit him somewhere else, and his hands go there.') Nor would he think first of the temples, statues and plays which we so justly admire. He would say, and in fact did say, 'The barbarians are slaves; we Hellenes are free men'.

And what did he mean by this 'freedom' of the Greek, and the 'slavery' of the foreigner? We must be careful not to interpret it in political terms alone, though the political reference is important enough. Politically it meant, not necessarily that he governed himself – because oftener than not he didn't – but that however his polity was governed it respected his rights. State affairs were public affairs, not the private concern of a despot. He was ruled by Law, a known Law which respected justice. If his state was a full democracy, he took his own share in the government – and democracy, as the Greek understood it, was a form of government which the modern world does not and cannot know; but if it was not a democracy, he was at least a 'member', not a subject, and the principles of government were known. Arbitrary government offended the Greek in his very soul. But as he looked out upon the wealthier and more highly civilized countries of the East, this is precisely what he saw: palace-government, the rule of a King who was absolute; not governing, like the early Greek monarch, according to Themis, or a law derived from Heaven, but according to his private will only; not responsible to the gods,

because he was himself a god. The subject of such a master was a slave.

But 'eleutheria' – of which 'freedom' is only an incomplete translation – was much more than this, though this is already a great deal. Slavery and despotism are things that maim the soul, for, as Homer says, 'Zeus takes away from a man half of his manhood if the day of enslavement lays hold of him'. The Oriental custom of obeisance struck the Greek as not 'eleutheron'; in his eyes it was an affront to human dignity. Even to the gods the Greek prayed like a man, erect; though he knew as well as any the difference between the human and the divine. That he was not a god, he knew; but he was at least a man. He knew that the gods were quick to strike down without mercy the man who aped divinity, and that of all human qualities they most approved of modesty and reverence. Yet he remembered that God and Man were sprung of the same parentage:

'One is the race of Gods and of men; from one mother¹ we both draw our breath. Yet are our powers poles apart; for we are nothing, but for them the brazen Heaven endures for ever, their secure abode.'

So says Pindar, in a noble passage sometimes mistranslated by scholars who should know better, and made to mean: 'One is the race of Gods, and that of man is another'. But Pindar's whole point here is the dignity and the weakness of man; and this is the ultimate source of that tragic note that runs through all classical Greek literature. And it was this consciousness of the dignity of being a man that gave such urgency and intensity to the word that we inadequately translate 'freedom'.

But there is more than this. There were 'barbaroi' other than those living under Oriental despotism. There were for example peoples of the North, living in tribal conditions from which the Greeks themselves had not long escaped. What was the great difference between these and the Greeks, if it was not merely the superior culture of the Greeks?

It was this, that the Greeks had developed a form of polity

1. The Earth-Mother.

which we clumsily and inaccurately translate 'city-state' – because no modern language can do any better – which both stimulated and satisfied man's higher instincts and capabilities. We shall have much to say about the 'city-state'; here it will be enough to remark that the city-state, originally a local association for common security, became the focus of a man's moral, intellectual, aesthetic, social and practical life, developing and enriching these in a way in which no form of society had done before or has done since. Other forms of political society have been, as it were, static; the city-state was the means by which the Greek consciously strove to make the life both of the community and of the individual more excellent than it was before.

This certainly is what an ancient Greek would put first among his countrymen's discoveries, that they had found out the best way to live. Aristotle at all events thought so, for that saying of his which is usually translated 'Man is a political animal' really means 'Man is an animal whose characteristic it is to live in a city-state'. If you did not do this, you were something less than man at his best and most characteristic. Barbarians did not; this was the great difference.

In compiling this account of a people about whom such a lot might be said I have allowed myself the luxury of writing on points that happen to interest me, instead of trying to cover the whole field in a systematic and probably hurried way; also, I have stopped short with Alexander the Great, that is with the end of the city-state: not because I think the Greece of the next few centuries unimportant, but on the contrary because I think it far too important to be tucked away in a perfunctory final chapter – which is often what happens to it. If the gods are kind, I shall deal with Hellenistic and Roman Greece in a second volume.

I have made the Greeks speak for themselves as much as I could, and I hope that a reasonably clear and balanced picture emerges. I have tried not to idealize, though I deal with the great men rather than the little ones, and with philosophers rather than rogues. It is from the mountain-tops that one gets the views: and rogues are much the same everywhere – though

the Greek rogue seems rarely to have been dull as well as wicked.

II

THE FORMATION OF THE GREEK PEOPLE

XENOPHON tells an immortal story which, since it is immortal, can be retold here. It concerns an incident in the march of the Ten Thousand through the awful mountains of Armenia towards the Black Sea. These men were mercenary soldiers who had been enlisted by Cyrus the Younger to help him drive his half-brother from the Persian throne – not that Cyrus told them this, for he knew very well that no Greek army would willingly march three months from the sea. However, by deceit and cajolery he got them into Mesopotamia. The disciplined and well-armed Greeks easily defeated the Persian army, but Cyrus was killed. An awkward position for everybody. The Persians suddenly had on their hands an experienced army that they could do nothing with, and the Greeks were three months' march from home, without a leader, paymaster or purpose, an unofficial, international body, owing allegiance to no one but itself. They might have run amok; they might have degenerated into robber-bands to be destroyed piecemeal; they might have been incorporated into the Persian army and empire.

None of these things happened. They wanted to go home – but not through the length of Asia Minor, of which they had seen quite enough. They decided to strike north, in the hope of reaching the Black Sea. They elected a general, Xenophon himself, an Athenian country-gentleman, and he was as much Chairman as he was General, for they decided policy in concert. With the self-discipline that these turbulent Greeks often displayed, they held together, week after week, and made their way through these unknown mountains, conciliating the natives when they could, and fighting them when conciliation failed.

Some perished, but not many; they survived as an organized force. One day, as we read in Xenophon's quite unheroic *Anabasis*, Xenophon was commanding the rearguard while the leading troops were climbing to the head of a pass. When they got to the top they suddenly began to shout and to gesticulate to those behind. These hurried up, imagining that it was yet another hostile tribe in front. They, on reaching the ridge, began to shout too, and so did each successive company after them – all shouting, and pointing excitedly to the north. At last the anxious rearguard could hear what they were all shouting: it was 'Thalassa, thalassa'. The long nightmare was over, for 'thalassa' is the Greek for 'sea'. There it was, shimmering in the distance – salt water; and where there was salt water, Greek was understood, and the way home was open. As one of the Ten Thousand said, 'We can finish our journey like Odysseus, lying on our backs'.

I recount this story, partly on Herodotus' excellent principle, that a good story never comes amiss to the judicious reader, partly because of the surprising fact that this eminently Greek word 'thalassa', 'salt-water', appears to be not a Greek word at all. To be more precise: Greek is a member of the Indo-European family of languages, akin to Latin, Sanskrit, and the Celtic and Teutonic tongues: languages carried by migrations from somewhere in Central Europe south-east to Persia and India, so that the Indian 'raj' is akin to the Latin 'rex' and the French 'roi', southwards into the Balkan and Italian peninsulas, and westwards as far as Ireland. Yet the Greek for so Greek a thing as the sea is not Indo-European. Where did the Greeks find it?

A companion-picture to Xenophon's may explain that – though the earliest authority for this story is the present writer. Some ten, or maybe fifteen, centuries before the march of the Ten Thousand a band of Greek-speaking people was making its way south, out of the Balkan mountains, down the Struma or Vardar valley in search of a more comfortable home. Suddenly they saw in front of them an immense amount of water, more water than they or their ancestors had ever seen before. In astonishment, they contrived to ask the natives what

that was: and the natives, rather puzzled, said, 'Why, *thalassa*, of course'. So '*thalassa*' it remained, after nearly all the other words in that language had perished.

It would of course be very rash to base upon a single word any theory of the origins of a people: foreign words are adopted, and can strangle native words, with great ease. But in the mature Greek civilization of the fifth and subsequent centuries (B.C.), there are many features which are most easily explained if this civilization was the direct offspring of two earlier ones, and there is some evidence that in fact it was.

Let us examine a few more words. There are in Greek two classes of words which are not Greek by origin, words ending (like '*thalassa*') in -assos or -essos, mostly place names – Hali-carnassos, Herodotus' birthplace, is an example – and words ending in -inthos, such as '*hyacinthos*', '*Corinthos*', '*labyrinthos*', all of which are familiar to us. Foreign importations? Corinth originally a foreign settlement? Possibly. What is more surprising than 'Corinth' is that 'Athens' is not a Greek name, nor the goddess Athena. Sentiment at least rebels against the idea that Athens owes her name to foreigners intruding upon Greeks – and so does tradition, for the Athenians were one of two Greek peoples who claimed to be 'autochthonous', or 'born of the soil'; the other one being the Arcadians, who were settled in Arcadia before the birth of the moon.

Now, there is reason, as we shall see presently, for treating traditions with respect, and there is at least some plausibility in these Arcadian and Athenian legends; for Arcadia is the mountainous heart of the Peloponnese, difficult to conquer (as the Turks found later), and Attica, the territory of the Athenians, has thin soil not very attractive to invaders or immigrants. Athena then is non-Greek, and there is some reason to think that she and her people are also pre-Greek, which is a different thing.

Another Athenian legend may take us a little further. One of the best known of Athenian stories was that there was once a contest between Athena and the god Poseidon for the possession of the Acropolis. Athena came off best, but the god also obtained a footing there. Now, Poseidon appears to be a

Greek god – it might perhaps be less confusing to say ‘Hellenic’: Athena is non-Hellenic. The interpretation of legends like these is not a matter of certainty, but it is tempting to see in this one the memory of the collision, in Attica, of an incoming Hellenic people with the indigenous worshippers of Athena, a collision which found a peaceful issue, with the natives absorbing the incomers.

The later Greeks themselves believed in an original non-Hellenic population which they called Pelasgian, remnants of which still remained pure in classical times, speaking their own language. Herodotus, who was interested in nearly everything that came to his notice, was interested in the origin of the Greeks; and of the two main branches of the later Greek people, the Ionians and the Dorians, he asserts that the Ionians were Pelasgian by descent. Indeed, in distinction to the Ionians he calls the Dorians ‘Hellenic’. He goes on to say ‘What language the Pelasgians used I cannot say for certain, but if I may conjecture from those Pelasgians who still exist ... they spoke a barbarian language’ – meaning by ‘barbarian’ no more than ‘non-Hellenic’.

This tallies well enough with what we have conjectured about the Athenians, for they claimed to be the leaders and the metropolis of the Ionian Greeks, and they also claimed to be indigenous.

This then would be the picture, if we could trust the traditions. An indigenous non-Hellenic race inhabited Attica and the Peloponnese. At some time that cannot be determined Greek-speaking peoples from further north migrated into this region – no doubt very gradually – and imposed their language on them, much as the Saxons did on England. This was not a sudden, catastrophic invasion: the archaeological records show no sudden break in culture before the Dorian invasion of about 1100. Pelasgian ‘pockets’ which escaped the influence of these incomers continued to speak a language unintelligible to Herodotus.

I have said that the date of these migrations cannot be determined; it is, however, possible to set a lower limit. It is quite certain that these Dorian Greeks of about 1100 were not the

first bringers of the Greek tongue to Greece, for they were preceded, by at least two centuries, by Achæan Greeks, about whom we know something, though not enough. Some of these have, to generations of Englishmen, been more familiar than our own Egberts and Egwiths and Aelfrics, for Atreus' sons Agamemnon and Menelaus were Achæans, and Achilles and the other heroes of whom Homer was to write, three hundred years or so later.

Were these Achæans then the first Greek-speakers in Greece? Nothing obliges us to think so; indeed, nothing but the tradition really obliges us to think that anything other than Greek was ever the dominant language in Greece, for it is conceivable, though not perhaps very likely, that non-Hellenic names like Athens are intrusions.

But is there any reason to believe these traditions? A hundred years ago historians said no. Grote wrote, for example, that the legends were invented by the Greeks, out of their inexhaustible fancy, to fill in the blank space of their unknown past. To believe that a King Minos had ever ruled in Crete, or that a Trojan War had ever been fought, would be foolish: equally foolish to deny the possibility. An earlier historian of Greece, Thucydides, treated the traditions quite differently, as historical records – of a certain kind – to be criticized and used in the appropriate way.

His account of the Trojan War, given in the early chapters of his history, is a fine example of the proper handling of historical material – for it never occurred to Thucydides that he was not dealing with historical material. On Minos the legendary King of Crete he writes:

Minos is the earliest ruler we know of who possessed a fleet, and controlled most of what are now Greek waters. He ruled the Cyclades, and was the first colonizer of most of them, installing his own sons as governors. In all probability he cleared the sea of pirates, so far as he could, to secure his own revenues.

Thucydides, like most Greeks, believed in the general truth of the traditions: modern writers disbelieved. But Grote's admirable history had not passed through many editions before