GREEK SOCIETY

FOURTH EDITION

FRANK J. FROST

Greek Society

Fourth Edition

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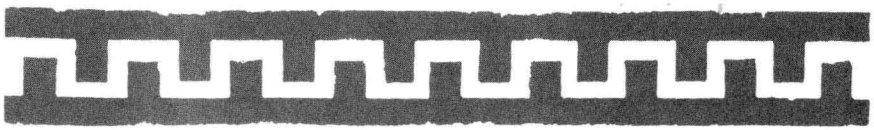
University of California,
Santa Barbara



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To my wife, Mandy

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Preface

The first edition of *Greek Society* appeared twenty years ago. Rather than feeling personally flattered by the book's longevity, I attribute its continuing popularity primarily to the subject matter: the eternally fascinating society and culture of the Greek people during the approximately twenty centuries from the Bronze Age to the fall of the Roman Empire in the West. It is the Greeks' achievement that will keep drawing students back to the story of Greek origins, Greek history, and eventual Greek cultural domination of the ancient Mediterranean world.

When I wrote the preface to the first edition of this book I felt compelled to explain, almost apologetically, that I did not intend to write just one more political and military chronicle of Greek history. Instead, I wished to describe the lives of the ordinary Greek people in their cities and farms; and, with a few exceptions, I kept to this plan, sketching the environment, explaining typical Greek attitudes and behavior through anecdotes, trying to make the reader feel like a spectator of events in an exciting and creative society. Since that time, most college textbooks have increased their emphasis on social and cultural developments in all periods of history. I no longer feel that I have to explain why I follow the career of the Greek people far down into Roman times or why I pass over most military history in silence. (Actually, in this edition I have relented to the extent of adding a section on the conquests of Alexander the Great.)

I have kept intact the chapters in which, instead of dealing with Greeks en masse, I take certain interesting and representative individuals and show them at work (or play). The career of one person often brings the whole history of the age into more dramatic relief, and such treatment is more in accord with the philosophy of the Greeks themselves, who have always clung stubbornly to the belief that the individual is more important than any abstract concept of the state.

Greek Society continues to be based, for the most part, on study of the primary sources: Greek and Latin writers and evidence uncovered by archaeology. At the end of each chapter I have indicated briefly which ancient and modern writers contribute most to an understanding of the period or subject in question. I have been both selective and arbitrary in listing the works of modern scholars; the titles that appear have either been very helpful to me or will provide both comprehensive treatment and full bibliographical references to anyone who wishes to investigate further.

One recent work I mention here if only to dispose of it. In *Black Athena* (Rutgers University Press, 1987), Martin Bernal has claimed that modern scholars have overemphasized the "European model" (i.e., the white and "Aryan" aspects) of Greek culture at the expense of the Semitic and Egyptian influences that shaped that culture. But the controversy Bernal attempts to create is irrelevant. The Greeks insisted on being influenced by every culture with which they came in contact. What they created from all these influences, however, was an entirely *Greek* culture—not "European" or "Afroasian" or anything else. I urge readers to examine closely the argument of *Black Athena*, together with the picture of Greek society I have tried to draw, and make up their own minds.

Since the third edition of this book appeared in 1987, I have continued to invite suggestions from colleagues, friends, and the ultimate critics—my students—as to how the work might be improved, expanded, or in some cases corrected to remove misleading or inaccurate impressions. In this edition I have adopted most of these suggestions and have also revised some sections simply because archaeology in the Greek world continues every day to modify our picture of the development of Greek society, particularly in the earlier periods.

I am grateful to D. C. Heath for this opportunity to revise and improve *Greek Society*. Many thanks to the reviewers of the manuscript—A. R. Littlewood, University of Western Ontario; Charles Murison, University of Western Ontario; and Josiah Ober, Princeton University—for their suggestions and corrections.

F. J. F.

Chronology

Date	Historical Developments	Cultural and Intellectual Landmarks
ca. 1700–1100 B.C.	Mycenaean civilization arose on the Greek mainland, spreading to Crete and Asia Minor.	Palace architecture, cultural and economic uniformity. An early form of the Greek language was used for keeping records.
ca. 1225	The Trojan War.	
ca. 1100–800	Mycenaean civilization disappeared. The Greek communities were reduced to scattered and isolated rural settlements.	Protogeometric pottery ca. 1025–900. The first iron tools and weapons appeared.
ca. 800–700	Overseas trade revived. The first colonies were established in Sicily and south Italy.	Geometric pottery ca. 900–700. Literacy was rediscovered. Homer and Hesiod composed their poems.
ca. 700–550	The great age of colonization also saw the beginnings of organized governments, law codes, constitutions.	Orientalizing (Corinthian) pottery. Lyric poets flourished. Philosophers began to speculate about the nature of the universe.
550–500	The Persian Empire expanded to dominate the Greeks of Asia Minor. Athens grew to prominence while Sparta was dominant in the Peloponnesus.	Athenian black figure pottery rivaled Corinthian. Temple architecture and sculpture advanced rapidly all over the Greek world.
490–479	The Persians attacked the Greeks, who won great victories at Marathon (490), Salamis (480), and Plataea (479).	Aeschylus began to produce tragedies. Athenian red figure pottery became standard.
476–431	The Athenians created an empire which was resented by other Greeks. Pericles was politically dominant at Athens ca. 454–429.	Tragic drama was produced by Sophocles and Euripides. The Sophists began to teach. The Parthenon and other buildings were built.
431–405	The Peloponnesian War between Athens, Sparta and their allies led to total defeat of Athens and installation of a pro-Spartan tyranny.	Socrates began to teach. Aristophanes produced comedies. Histories were written by Herodotus (ca. 425) and Thucydides (ca. 404).
403	The Athenian democracy was restored.	
396–356	Athens, Sparta, and Thebes competed for leadership unsuccessfully while Persia recovered the Greek cities of Asia Minor.	Plato founded the Academy, taught the Socratic path to virtue. Xenophon wrote his history, the Hellenica. Political rhetoric became a fine art.
356–338	King Philip of Macedon rose to power in the North and eventually defeated Athens and Thebes at the battle of Chaeronea (338).	Aristotle left the Academy to found his own school, then was hired by Philip to tutor the young Alexander.

336–323	Philip was assassinated. Alexander (356–323) invaded Persia (battle of Gaugamela, 331) and conquered the East as far as northwest India before dying in Babylon.	Alexandria was founded. Aristotle and Demosthenes both died in 322.
322–272	Alexander's generals fought over his empire, finally creating the three Hellenistic kingdoms of Egypt, Syria, and Macedon.	The Alexandrian Library was founded. Zeno and Epicurus created the Stoic and Epicurean philosophies. Many Greeks emigrated to Egypt and the Middle East.
272–146	The zenith of Hellenistic civilization. The Aetolian and Achaean leagues rose. Cleomenes led the Spartans to revolution 229–222. The Romans began to intervene in 200, finally conquering Greece and Macedon in 146.	Great age of scientific research in Alexandria and elsewhere saw Euclid's geometry, Archimedes' inventions; Eratosthenes measured the circumference of the earth. Polybius wrote his *History*, tracing the rise of Rome and decline of Greek independence.
146–30	The Romans completed the conquest of the Hellenistic world, converting it all to Roman provinces.	Greek philosophy and culture began to dominate Rome.
31 B.C.–A.D. 181	The PAX ROMANA. Zenith of Graeco-Roman culture.	
330–1453	Survival of the Eastern Roman, or Byzantine Empire, ended with the capture of Constantinople by the Turks.	Much classical Greek literature was preserved and copied in monasteries.
1453–1821	The Greek world languished under Turkish rule.	The Western world rediscovered Greek literature during the Italian Renaissance.
1821–1831	The Greek War of Independence expelled the hated Turks.	

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Maps

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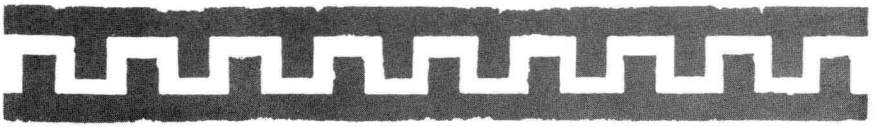

ABOUT 2,000 years before the Christian era, wandering tribes began to descend into the southern part of the Balkan Peninsula. There they found an indigenous population the origins and antiquity of which is impossible to guess. It would be misleading to call the invaders Greeks because we know nothing about their language or culture. One can only say that over the next four centuries their relationship with the local inhabitants produced a stable mixture of peoples with a language and a culture that would one day be Greek. By the beginning of the seventeenth century B.C., we can trace the rise of the first great civilization that can properly be identified as Greek, although it was called Achaean by Homer and Mycenaean by modern convention: a network of princely citadels surrounded by the fields and villages of farmers and craftsmen.

About 1600 B.C. or so, the Mycenaean power expanded to include the island of Crete, where the non-Greek Minoans had created an elegant and wealthy civilization. The Mycenaeans evidently destroyed the Minoan capital of Knossos, occupied and rebuilt it, and remained as

stewards of the surrounding area for the next four centuries. By 1300, Mycenaean culture had spread to the shores of Asia Minor and westward to Italy. But a major war against Troy, about 1200 or earlier, dangerously drained the power of the Mycenaeans. A century later that civilization lay in ruins, while a far more primitive population of Greeks took over the fields and flocks, but not the palaces. There, only the wind moaned in the ruined battlements, lizards scampered in the great audience halls, and in the counting rooms spiders wove their webs. It would be another three centuries before an urban society of any complexity reappeared on the shores of the Aegean Sea.

The evidence for Mycenaean society is threefold: the ancient legends, archaeological excavation, and actual written records. The traditional tales were never forgotten and were preserved by Homer, the poets, and later compilers of mythology. These legends describe the founding of the great Mycenaean states by sons and grandsons of the gods, the great deeds of these heroes, and finally, the culmination of Mycenaean military adventures in the grand, tragic war of the Greeks against the Trojans. But legends preserved by oral tradition and folk memory can be confusing and contradictory. An inevitable element of the supernatural and the miraculous in every legend also makes it easy for the skeptical to condemn the entire tradition. Therefore, as little as a hundred years ago, in an era when scientific method was beginning to be demanded of history, classical scholars treated the Greek myths only as a contribution to world folk literature.

One person went to the opposite extreme. Heinrich Schliemann (1822–1890), a brilliant and wealthy German merchant, had been so captivated in his youth by Homer's account of the Trojan War that he resolved to find the actual site of Troy, long forgotten to the world. In 1870, believing that every word of Homer could be taken literally, Schliemann started to dig at Hissarlik, in the northwestern corner of Turkey. Almost immediately, he came upon massive fortifications, one level of which had been destroyed in a vast conflagration. Despite Schliemann's crude methods and overly romantic interpretation of the evidence uncovered, when he left Troy three years later he had laid the groundwork for Greek archaeology. Few scholars would now deny that there was a Troy and that Schliemann had found it.

Crossing to the Greek mainland, Heinrich Schliemann began to excavate the great Mycenaean palaces, most of which were far better preserved than the city of the Trojans. His work, carried on by generation after generation of modern archaeologists, has demonstrated to the world that the Greek legends contain a considerable nucleus of accurate historical data. Some of the palaces of the Achaeans (as Homer called them) are where Homer said they were. Mycenaean cemeteries proved to contain a race of warrior nobles such as those described in the Greek epic tradition. And the uniformity of the pottery and other

hardware found in graves and in the ruins of the citadels showed conclusively that Mycenaean society was the product of a civilization unified culturally and economically, as the tradition suggested.

By the 1930s, archaeology had revealed a whole new world to historians of ancient Greece, who had once been content to scoff at myths and confine their research to libraries whole continents away from the shores of the Aegean. One thing only was lacking to provide better understanding of Mycenaean society and to confirm for once and for all that the Mycenaeans were the real ancestors of the Greeks: literary documents of some kind.

In 1939, the American archaeologist Carl Blegen located the ruined and forgotten palace of King Nestor of Pylos, known to all readers of the *Iliad* for his wise (and often lengthy) counsel. Almost the first day of work, the excavators came across thousands of clay tablets inscribed with a peculiar syllabic script and baked in the conflagration that had destroyed the palace. Similar tablets had been found many years previously in the great Minoan palace at Knossos, and it had been taken for granted that they were written in the unknown Minoan language. Now here was a far greater number, preserved in the archive rooms of a society that Blegen, for one, was convinced was Greek. The Second World War intervened to delay publication and study of the tablets, but in 1953, a brilliant young English architect named Michael Ventris deciphered the script and demonstrated to the world that the language was in fact an archaic form of Greek, written in a script borrowed from the Minoans (as the Greeks were later to borrow the Phoenician alphabet).

The tablets are records from the Mycenaean archives, and similar ones have subsequently been found at Mycenae and Thebes. Because of their nature they are often difficult to interpret, being no more than the accounts and receipts of royal accountants. But despite the difficulties and sometimes bitter controversy that surrounds the tablets and their use, they have provided a vitally important link in the network of evidence for the workings of Mycenaean society.

The Mycenaean Environment

In the so-called Catalogue of Ships, in the second book of the *Iliad*, epic tradition has preserved the names of all the cities and towns that sent troops and ships to the Trojan War. The reader might assume the task of the archaeologist to be a simple one: locate these towns and start digging. But discovery is not that easy; a great deal of effort has been expended in finding even some of the most famous of the Mycenaean citadels. The Catalogue, therefore, has proved most useful only in indicating the main regions of Mycenaean settlement and in suggesting the relative population of these areas.

The region of Thessaly was the land of Jason, Achilles, and many another hero, but so far, only the citadel at Iolchos has been identified with certainty, on the Gulf of Pagasae in central Greece. It was evidently from this secure harbor that Mycenaean influence spread northward into the broad plains of Thessaly, rich in wild grasses and famed later on for superb cavalry. But exploration and excavation have hardly begun in Thessaly. Much more solid archaeological evidence is needed before scholars can even start to test the rich body of tradition about this wild land on the northern borders of the Mycenaean world.

South of Thessaly is the broad and fertile valley of Boeotia, ringed with mountains and dominated by the citadels of Orchomenos, Gla, and Thebes, home of the unfortunate Oedipus and his unhappy family. Excavation and surface exploration have proved what the numbers and names from the Catalogue would seem to indicate: that the well-watered

fields around Lake Copais satisfied the needs of a large population residing in many small settlements surrounding the fortified centers.

"Boeotian swine and Attic salt" was an old saying that contrasted the rich farmland of Boeotia with the parched and rocky profile of the peninsula of Attica (it also contrasted the reputed sluggishness of the Boeotian peasant with the wit of the Athenian mariner). But there are many pleasant districts in Attica. The acropolis of Athens invited occupation from earliest times, and the rulers of the Mycenaean citadel here may have commanded the obedience, if not the loyalty, of the many settlements scattered about the Attic countryside.

The political and perhaps military center of gravity of the Mycenaean world was the plain of Argos, located in the eastern Peloponnesus, where Agamemnon's palace, the citadel of Mycenae, crowns a low hill and even today gives mute evidence of the warrior breed that made this plain such a military power. This is a bleak countryside. The mountains are stark and unforested; the bones of the earth lie close to the surface here; and there is often more rock than soil in the fields. Modern irrigation techniques have produced endless citrus orchards, but in ancient times rainfall was meager in this part of Greece. The plain supported only a limited amount of grain farming, and the thistles and weeds of the hillsides nourished few flocks. It is easy to imagine this harsh land giving birth to generations of robber barons—and the Mycenaean code, all heroics aside, was basically that of the robber baron. To topple city walls, to slaughter the defending champions, to drive away fat cattle, to seize gold and silver, and to carry away prisoners for ransom and maidens for pleasure—these were the finest accomplishments of the Mycenaean gentleman, idealized by Homer and imitated all too often in later centuries. The tombs of Mycenae's rulers were stocked with treasures; only an idealist would argue that all these goods arrived through the normal avenues of peaceful trade. One has only to look at the walls of Mycenae, or her neighbor Tiryns (where some stretches are forty feet thick). These fortifications are so ponderously strong that later generations of Greeks believed them built by a race of giants. They are living testimony to the fact that Mycenae's primacy was won by the sword.

Across the central mountains of the Peloponnesus, in its southwest corner, lies a softer land. This is Messenia, home of King Nestor. The first clues to the way of life in Nestor's principality come from the palace: it was virtually unfortified, and in one storeroom were found over 2,400 drinking cups. Maybe Nestor had gone soft. Or perhaps he relied on the combination of a strong navy (he sent ninety ships to Troy) and two more strongly fortified bastions on his northern borders. Whatever the answer, the surrounding countryside is far more congenial than the plain of Argos. The hills are lower and covered with trees, the

The martial values of Mycenaean society are illustrated by this file of soldiers on the so-called Warrior Vase. (*National Archaeological Museum, Athens*)

meadows are deep and fertile, and the valleys are rich with springs and small brooks. As one might expect, a survey team recently discovered enough evidence to show that Messenia was probably the most heavily populated region in the Mycenaean world.

In contrast to its neighbors, the rich province of Messenia was poor in heroes, according to the traditions remembered by later generations. Although King Nestor admits in the *Iliad* that he had stolen cattle once or twice in his youth, his domain, unlike Mycenae, never seems to have produced more epic deeds than could be consumed locally.

These are the principal regions of Mycenaean occupation on the mainland, but the mainland was by no means the limit for Mycenaean ambitions. This first Greek society seems to have had the same irresistible drive to expand overseas that possessed every succeeding generation of Greeks. Although Homer's Catalogue mentions no provinces west of the island empire of Odysseus in the Ionian Sea, Mycenaean settlements in Sicily and southern Italy are well attested. As for the Aegean, the conquest of Crete was only one part of a wave of expansion that saw Mycenaean trading posts established on the islands and along the coast of Asia Minor, where Hittite records indicate they had become a force to be reckoned with.