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The Ancient Greeks

M. I. Finley



THE ANCIENT GREEKS

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TO
PASCAL COVICI

CONTENTS

List of Plates	9
Preface	11
1 Who Were the Greeks?	15
2 The Dark Age and the Homeric Poems	19
Periods of Greek History	29
3 Archaic Greece	30
COLONIZATION	36
TYRANTS AND LAWGIVERS	40
THE COMMUNITY, RELIGION AND PAN-HELLENISM	46
4 The Classical City-State	54
WAR AND EMPIRE	60
ATHENS	70
SPARTA	82
THE DECLINE OF THE POLIS	87
5 Literature	94
POETRY	96
TRAGEDY	99
COMEDY	106
PROSE	110
6 Science, Philosophy and Popular Morals	117
SCIENCE	120
PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS	128
POPULAR ATTITUDES AND MORALS	135

CONTENTS

7 The Visual Arts	151
ARCHITECTURE AND CITY-PLANNING	156
SCULPTURE	160
PAINTING	166
8 The Hellenistic Age	170
GREEK CITIES AND ABSOLUTE MONARCHS	172
GREEKS AND ROMANS	178
Chronological Table	181
Notes on the Plates	185
Bibliography	193
Index	199

MAPS

The Greek World	14
The Greek Mainland	31

PLATES

- 1 Greek writing
- 2 Theatre at Segesta
- 3 Theatre and temple of Apollo, Delphi
- 4 a. Rim and handle of Vix urn
b. Graeco-Scythian gold bracelet
c. Terra-cotta antefix, Gela
- 5 Athenian *kouroi*
- 6 Charioteer, Delphi
- 7 Bronze from Bay of Marathon
- 8 Silver coins
- 9 Sculpture from Parthenon pediments
- 10 Erechtheum
- 11 Detail from the Erechtheum
- 12 Marble tombstone, Athens
- 13 Metope, Foce del Sele
- 14-15 The three architectural orders
- 16 Sculpture from temple of Zeus, Olympia
- 17 Three-sided marble relief (the 'Ludovisi throne')
- 18 Terra-cotta: knucklebone players
- 19 Dipylon amphora
- 20 Athenian black-figured amphora
- 21 Athenian red-figured amphora
- 22 Corinthian cup
- 23 Bronze head, Cyrene
- 24 Great altar, Pergamum

PREFACE

THE first thing that needs to be said in prefacing a book like this is what it is not. I have written neither a narrative nor a reference book. I have tried, instead, to discuss and, where it seemed possible, to explain how Greek civilization developed in its various aspects, its strengths and weaknesses, materially, socially, politically, culturally. The emphases, and the omissions too, reflect my own judgement of what is most interesting and important in Greek history, with one exception which requires special mention. I have not attempted to cope in such a restricted space with technical subjects, whether in poetry, art, philosophy or science. This is a personal analysis, not a summary or least common denominator of the views held by other historians. I hope I have succeeded in distinguishing between a generally accepted fact and an inference, a conclusion, an interpretation of my own; I have tried to suggest in a general way the nature of the evidence; and I have appended a long enough bibliography to provide anyone who wishes with titles to which he may turn either for different interpretations or for detailed studies of special topics and periods. I should also say that Greek civilization after Alexander the Great (the so-called Hellenistic Age) has been treated rather as an epilogue, the Greeks under Roman rule scarcely at all. It was therefore unnecessary to write 'B.C.' after a date except in a few instances where confusion might otherwise arise.

I am deeply grateful to Mr G. S. Kirk and Professor A. Andrewes, who read the manuscript and discussed many points with me; to Professor R. M. Cook, particularly for his help with Chapter 7: to Mr Michael Ayrton, Mr Willard Hutcheon, Professor A. H. M. Jones, Dr W. H. Plommer,

PREFACE

Mr J. G. Pollard and Professor Martin Robertson for their suggestions and criticisms; to Mr Roger Toulmin, who produced the series on the Greeks in Network Three of the B.B.C. early in 1961, for which I wrote the booklet out of which this volume grew; and to my wife, who not only read the final manuscript but lived through all its preliminary stages.

Acknowledgement is made for the pictures in the detailed notes on the plates which appear at the end of the volume.

M.I.F.

27 May 1962

A few minor revisions, particularly in the bibliography, have been made for this edition, and a chronological table has been added.

M.I.F.

13 November 1965

WHO WERE THE GREEKS?

GREEK-SPEAKING people first migrated southward into the Greek peninsula at the beginning of the second millennium B.C., almost certainly before 1900.* Whatever their cultural level when they entered, they eventually helped fashion the technically advanced Bronze Age civilization of the period 1400-1200 which we call Mycenaean, and which had its main centres in the Peloponnese (the southern part of mainland Greece) at such places as Mycenae, Argos and Pylos. The recent decipherment of their syllabic script – the so-called Linear B (Plate 1a) – has proved that, in the palaces at least, their language was an early form of Greek. That was a startling discovery, but its implications can easily be exaggerated. The southern Balkans had a long Stone Age and Bronze Age history before the Greeks appeared on the scene. What happened on their arrival is unknown apart from the material remains, and these do not show any sudden burst of innovation that can be credited to migrants. On the contrary, more centuries were to go by before the brilliant Mycenaean period was to emerge, and it is impossible to disentangle a 'Greek' contribution to it from the 'pre-Greek', just as it is useless to try to sort out the genetic elements in the biologically mixed stock which now made up the population. Race, language and culture had no simple correlation with each other then, any more than at other times or places in history.

About 1200 Mycenaean civilization came to a fairly abrupt end, and some historians attribute this to a new Greek immigration, that of the Dorians. The following four hundred years were a Dark Age – dark to us, that is to say, because we know

* All dates in this book are B.C. unless otherwise indicated.

(and can know) so little about it. It is tempting also to think of it as 'dark' in the way the Middle Ages used to be known as the Dark Ages: the art of writing disappeared, the centres of power crumbled, there was much petty warfare, tribes and smaller groups migrated within Greece and eastward across the Aegean Sea to Asia Minor, and all in all the material and cultural levels were poverty-stricken by contrast with the Mycenaean civilization. Yet for all that, the story is not just one of decay and decline, for it was in this Dark Age, by a process we can only vaguely glimpse in archaeological finds and in the myths as told by later Greeks, that a major technological revolution occurred – the coming of iron – and that Greek society was born. The old Mycenaean world, despite the Greek language of the palaces, had its closest kinship among their contemporary, highly centralized and bureaucratic states farther east, in northern Syria and Mesopotamia. The new world, the historical Greek world, was (and remained) altogether different, economically, politically and culturally. There were continuities, of course, but they were fragments worked into a new, unrecognizable context. The fundamental technical skills and knowledge in agriculture, pottery-making and metallurgy were retained, and the Greek language survived this social transformation, as it survived all subsequent changes up to the present day.

In their own language the Greeks have never called themselves 'Greeks' (that word comes from the Roman name for them, *Graeci*). In Mycenaean times they were apparently known as Achaeans (judging from contemporary Hittite records), one of several names they still bear in the Homeric poems, the earliest surviving Greek literature. In the course of the Dark Age, or perhaps at its very end, the term 'Hellene' permanently replaced all others, and 'Hellas' became the collective noun for the Greeks taken together. Today Hellas is the name of a country, like France or Italy. In antiquity, how-