

A Smaller History of Greece

by William Smith

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CHAPTER I. GEOGRAPHY OF GREECE.

Greece is the southern portion of a great peninsula of Europe, washed on three sides by the Mediterranean Sea. It is bounded on the north by the Cambunian mountains, which separate it from Macedonia. It extends from the fortieth degree of latitude to the thirty-sixth, its greatest length being not more than 250 English miles, and its greatest breadth only 180. Its surface is considerably less than that of Portugal. This small area was divided among a number of independent states, many of them containing a territory of only a few square miles, and none of them larger than an English county. But the heroism and genius of the Greeks have given an interest to the insignificant spot of earth bearing their name, which the vastest empires have never equalled.

The name of Greece was not used by the inhabitants of the country. They called their land HELLAS, and themselves HELLENES. At first the word HELLAS signified only a small district in Thessaly, from which the Hellenes gradually spread over the whole country. The names of GREECE and GREEKS come to us from the Romans, who gave the name of GRAECIA to the country and of GRAECI to the inhabitants.

The two northerly provinces of Greece are THESSALY and EPIRUS, separated from each other by Mount Pindus. Thessaly is a fertile plain enclosed by lofty mountains, and drained by the river Peneus, which finds its way into the sea through the celebrated Vale of Tempe. Epirus is covered by rugged ranges of mountains running from north to south, through which the Achelous the largest river of Greece, flows towards the Corinthian gulf.

In entering central Greece from Thessaly the road runs along the coast through the narrow pass of Thermopylae,

between the sea and a lofty range of mountains. The district along the coast was inhabited by the EASTERN LOCRIANS, while to their west were DORIS and PHOCIS, the greater part of the latter being occupied by Mount Parnassus, the abode of the Muses, upon the slopes of which lay the town of Delphi with its celebrated oracle of Apollo. South of Phocis is Boeotia, which is a large hollow basin, enclosed on every side by mountains, which prevent the waters from flowing into the sea. Hence the atmosphere was damp and thick, to which circumstance the witty Athenians attributed the dullness of the inhabitants. Thebes was the chief city of Boeotia. South of Boeotia lies ATTICA, which is in the form of a triangle, having two of its sides washed by the sea and its base united to the land. Its soil is light and dry and is better adapted for the growth of fruit than of corn. It was particularly celebrated for its olives, which were regarded as the gift of Athena (Minerva), and were always under the care of that goddess. Athens was on the western coast, between four and five miles from its port, Piraeus.

West of Attica, towards the isthmus, is the small district of MEGARIS.

The western half of central Greece consists of WESTERN LOCRI, AETOLIA and ACARNANIA. These districts were less civilised than the other countries of Greece, and were the haunts of rude robber tribes even as late as the Peloponnesian war.

Central Greece is connected with the southern peninsula by a narrow isthmus, on which stood the city of Corinth. So narrow is this isthmus that the ancients regarded the peninsula as an island, and gave to it the name of PELOPONNESUS, or the island of Pelops, from the mythical hero of this name. Its modern name, the MOREA, was bestowed upon it from its resemblance to the leaf of the mulberry.

The mountains of Peloponnesus have their roots in the centre of the country, from which they branch out towards

the sea. This central region, called ARCADIA, is the Switzerland of the peninsula. It is surrounded by a ring of mountains, forming a kind of natural wall, which separates it from the remaining Peloponnesian states. The other chief divisions of Peloponnesus were Achaia, Argolis, Laconia, Messenia, and Elis. ACHAIA is a narrow slip of country lying between the northern barrier of Arcadia and the Corinthian gulf. ARGOLIS, on the east, contained several independent states, of which the most important was Argos. LACONIA and MESSENIA occupied the whole of the south of the peninsula from sea to sea: these two countries were separated by the lofty range of Taygetus, running from north to south, and terminating in the promontory of Taenarum (now Cape Matapan), the southernmost point of Greece and Europe. Sparta, the chief town of Laconia, stood in the valley of the Eurotas, which opens out into a plain of considerable extent towards the Laconian gulf. Messenia, in like manner, was drained by the Pamisus, whose plain is still more extensive and fertile than that of the Eurotas. ELIS,

on the west of Arcadia, contains the memorable plain of Olympia, through which the Alpheus flows, and in which the city of Pisa stood.

Of the numerous islands which line the Grecian shores, the most important was Euboea, stretching along the coasts of Boeotia and Attica. South of Euboea was the group of islands called the CYCLADES, lying around Delos as a centre; and east of these were the SPORADES, near the Asiatic coast. South of these groups are the large islands of CRETE and RHODES.

The physical features of the country exercised an important influence upon the political destinies of the people. Greece is one of the most mountainous countries of Europe. Its surface is occupied by a number of small plains, either entirely surrounded by limestone mountains or open only to the sea. Each of the principal Grecian cities was founded in one of these small plains; and, as the mountains which separated it from its neighbours were

lofty and rugged, each city grew up in solitary independence. But at the same time it had ready and easy access to the sea, and Arcadia was almost the only political division that did not possess some territory upon the coast. Thus shut out from their neighbours by mountains, the Greeks were naturally attracted to the sea, and became a maritime people. Hence they possessed the love of freedom and the spirit of adventure, which have always characterised, more or less the inhabitants of maritime districts.

CHAPTER II. ORIGIN OF THE GREEKS AND THE HEROIC AGE.

No nation possesses a history till events are recorded in written documents; and it was not till the epoch known by the name of the First Olympiad, corresponding to the year 776 B.C., that the Greeks began to employ writing as a means for perpetuating the memory of any historical facts. Before that period everything is vague and uncertain; and the exploits of the heroes related by the poets must not be regarded as historical facts.

The PELASGIANS are universally represented as the most ancient inhabitants of Greece. They were spread over the Italian as well as the Grecian peninsula; and the Pelasgic language thus formed the basis of the Latin as well as of the Greek. They were divided into several tribes, of which the Hellenes were probably one: at any rate, this people, who originally dwelt in the south of

Thessaly, gradually spread over the rest of Greece. The Pelasgians disappeared before them, or were incorporated with them, and their dialect became the language of Greece. The Hellenes considered themselves the descendants of one common ancestor, Hellen, the son of Deucalion and Pyrrha. To Hellen were ascribed three sons, Dorus, Xuthus, and AEolus. Of these Dorus and AEolus gave their names to the DORIANS and AEOLIANS; and Xuthus; through his two sons Ion and Achaeus, became the forefather of the IONIANS and ACHAEANS. Thus the Greeks accounted for the origin of the four great divisions of their race. The descent of the Hellenes from a common ancestor, Hellen, was a fundamental article in the popular faith. It was a general practice in antiquity to invent fictitious persons for the purpose of explaining names of which the origin was buried in obscurity. It was in this way that Hellen and his sons came into being; but though they never had any real existence, the tales about them may be regarded as the

traditional history of the races to whom they gave their names.

The civilization of the Greeks and the development of their language bear all the marks of home growth, and probably were little affected by foreign influence. The traditions, however, of the Greeks would point to a contrary conclusion. It was a general belief among them that the Pelasgians were reclaimed from barbarism by Oriental strangers, who settled in the country and introduced among the rude inhabitants the first elements of civilization. Attica is said to have been indebted for the arts of civilized life to Cecrops, a native of Sais in Egypt. To him is ascribed the foundation of the city of Athens, the institution of marriage, and the introduction of religious rites and ceremonies. Argos, in like manner, is said to have been founded by the Egyptian Danaus, who fled to Greece with his fifty daughters, to escape from the persecution of their suitors, the fifty sons of his brother Aegyptus. The Egyptian stranger was elected king by

the natives, and from him the tribe of the Danaï derived their name, which Homer frequently uses as a general appellation for the Greeks. Another colony was the one led from Asia by Pelops, from whom the southern peninsula of Greece derived its name of Peloponnesus. Pelops is represented as a Phrygian, and the son of the wealthy king Tantalus. He became king of Mycenae, and the founder of a powerful dynasty, one of the most renowned in the Heroic age of Greece. From him was descended Agamemnon, who led the Grecian host against Troy.

The tale of the Phoenician colony, conducted by Cadmus, and which founded Thebes in Boeotia, rests upon a different basis. Whether there was such a person as the Phoenician Cadmus, and whether he built the town called Cadmea, which afterwards became the citadel of Thebes, as the ancient legends relate, cannot be determined; but it is certain that the Greeks were indebted to the Phoenicians for the art of writing; for both the names and the forms of

the letters in the Greek alphabet are evidently derived from the Phoenician. With this exception the Oriental strangers left no permanent traces of their settlements in Greece; and the population of the country continued to be essentially Grecian,uncontaminated by any foreign elements.

The age of the heroes, from the first appearance of the Hellenes in Thessaly to the return of the Greeks from Troy, was supposed to be a period of about two hundred years. These heroes were believed to be a noble race of beings, possessing a superhuman though not a divine nature, and superior to ordinary men in strength of body and greatness of soul.

Among the heroes three stand conspicuously forth: Hercules, the national hero of Greece; Theseus, the hero of Attica; and Minos,king of Crete, the principal founder of Grecian law and civilization.