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Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

The linguistic ecology of the Mediterranean

Introduction

All modern human societies are reliant on language. Human languages, whether spoken or signed, are unlike any other communication system in the natural world. Language has the capacity to allow us to express new ideas or to interact with each other in new situations, and to structure the ways in which we understand events and institutions. *Homo sapiens* is the only creature on the planet endowed with a communication system of such utility and complexity, and the origin of language is intricately bound up with the evolution of our species. Humans have been speaking to each other for at least 100,000 years;¹ but for 95 per cent of that time there was no means of keeping a record of speech. The first writing systems that could fully represent human language arose in the Ancient Near East around 3000 BCE, and thereafter the practice of writing, in numerous different scripts, gradually spread westward across the Mediterranean and into surrounding lands. With the advent of writing, the historic record begins. Surviving written texts from the ancient world, when understood, can provide unmatched detail about everything from the price of fish to philosophical speculation on the origin of the universe.² Writing also reveals something about the linguistic variety of past societies, both through the range of languages and dialects spoken, and through the different ways in which individuals and societies chose how to express themselves.

This book explores how ancient languages and language use can function as a window onto the history of the ancient world. My principal focus is the Greek and Roman civilizations between around 800 BCE and 400 CE.

¹ See Tallerman and Gibson (2012: 26–31) for an overview of possible dates for the origin of fully-fledged language among *homo sapiens*.

² Parsons (2007) shows how the written record of one city in Roman Egypt can give a vivid picture of everyday life.

Most of the historical evidence for this period comes from texts written in two of the major languages of the Mediterranean in the period, Greek and Latin, and much of this book will be concerned with evidence for ancient societies gleaned from the use of the Greek and Latin languages. But, as will become apparent, these were not the only languages spoken in this area – indeed, before the conquests of Alexander (356–323 BCE), Greek was but one of many languages spoken along the shores of the eastern Mediterranean, and, until the last century of the Roman Republic, Latin was a minority language even in Italy. For the bulk of the period under consideration in this book, the majority of the inhabitants of the lands around the Mediterranean spoke neither Greek nor Latin as their first language. By the end of the Roman Empire, this earlier linguistic diversity had largely disappeared, and a now unquantifiable number of languages had given way to Greek or Latin (in the eastern half of the Empire, and along the coast of North Africa, Greek and Latin were themselves later to yield ground in the face of migrations and conquest by speakers of Slavic languages, Turkish and Arabic). The mass extinction of ancient languages is one of the enduring effects of the Greek and Roman ascendancies in the Mediterranean, and I shall consider in later chapters of the book, particularly in Chapter 6, the factors accounting for the linguistic dominance of Greek and Latin, and the processes by which earlier languages ceased to be spoken. But in this opening chapter I shall give space to the other languages of the ancient world, most of which are now irretrievably lost. What languages were spoken in the ancient world, and how do we know that they existed?

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The change in the linguistic landscape during our period can be seen most clearly by comparing the two maps of languages of the ancient world in 500 BCE and 400 CE (Maps 1.1 and 1.2). The first map is mostly a patchwork, bearing names that range from the familiar to the obscure. Greek is spoken (in various dialects) throughout Greece, and by colonists on the coasts of Sicily, Italy and southern France, and Phoenician is scattered across the whole length of the Mediterranean, but other than these, no language spreads beyond a territory of roughly 600 km at its furthest extent, while very few cover an area of more than 100,000 km² (roughly the size of the US state of Virginia). The same spaces occupied today by the largely monolingual modern states of Turkey, Italy and France were inhabited by speakers of a number of languages, many of which were completely unrelated to their neighbours. Even ancient Greece was home to speakers of languages other

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than Greek. The lack of shading in parts of the map shows that modern scholarship has little knowledge of languages at this period outside the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean basin. If we compare the second map, the picture is dramatically changed. Some languages still survive 900 years later, particularly in remoter mountains and deserts, but most of the earlier diversity has been lost, and Latin and Greek have extended their scope massively, with each covering well over 1 million km².

Neither of these two maps can be understood to be as accurate as a modern linguistic atlas would be. Both reflect the epigraphic and literary sources as closely as possible, but even so, much of the detail is filled in through guesswork and conjecture. There is no secure way of knowing what people spoke before the advent of writing, and there may well have been other languages that have left no record at all. The knowledge and use of script spread relatively rapidly from the east to the west of the Mediterranean basin after 1000 BCE, particularly in coastal sites, where either Phoenicians or Greeks traded and founded permanent settlements. The earliest surviving Phoenician inscriptions from the west come from Sardinia and are dated to the ninth century BCE (Amadasi Guzzo 1990:48); the earliest example of alphabetic Greek writing was found in a woman's grave near Rome from around 770 BCE (*SEG* 42.899). However, the practice of writing in the vernacular (i.e. the local language) on an imperishable material such as stone or metal only ever took hold in a very limited number of communities before the Roman Empire. For many corners of the ancient world, the only texts available are those associated with colonists, merchants, invaders or other incomers. Even where there is a surviving corpus of inscriptions from a particular locality, difficulties of decipherment or interpretation may mean that the linguistic situation is uncertain. Furthermore, in some cases where a modern decipherment has established a region's written record, these findings are not completely in accord with ancient accounts of the languages spoken in that area.

We can illustrate these points through consideration of various localities around the Mediterranean. First, Map 1.1 shows the existence of a language spoken in north-western Italy and into south-eastern France, called Ligurian. Many ancient sources identify a people called the Ligurians (in Greek *Lígues*, in Latin *Ligures*) living in an area of the north of Italy, the Alps and the south of France.³ We even have some Ligurian glosses in

³ Early Greek sources use the term far more promiscuously, and populate an area from the South of Tuscany to Spain with Ligurians; see Arnaud (2001) for details and discussion, and Mees (2003) for changing views of the Ligurian language over the last century.

ancient Greek and Roman sources (the term *gloss* refers to the citation of individual words with translations).⁴ For example, the fifth-century BCE Greek historian Herodotus, discussing the name of the people called Sigynnae (Greek *Sigúnnai*) who live ‘beyond the Danube’, notes that the word *sigynnae* is in use among the Ligurians who live ‘up beyond Marseille’ to refer to traders (Herodotus 5.9.3). But there is scarcely anything that is identifiable as a sentence or even a phrase in the Ligurian language. Around sixty inscriptions written in a version of the North Etruscan alphabet, dating from as early as the sixth century BCE, have been found in the area, nowadays in Italy and Switzerland, around Lake Como and Lake Maggiore. Although scholars once identified these by the label Ligurian (or Celto-Ligurian), it is now clear that they are in a variety of Celtic (an Indo-European language family that includes Welsh, Irish and ancient Gaulish), known today as Lepontic.⁵ Scholars of the Iberian language, known from inscriptions in Spain and south-western France, have sometimes seen Ligurian (or what is more tentatively labelled ‘Paraligurian’) in the Iberian texts, but this is highly uncertain.⁶ From the Italian province of Liguria, only a handful of pre-Roman inscribed items has turned up. All are very short, and written in forms of the Etruscan script, and most can be identified as Etruscan in language through the use of words or formulae known from Etruscan texts.⁷ A few of these inscriptions may, however, display non-Etruscan elements: for example, a late sixth-century BCE stone stele from Zignago near Spezia has a text of just two words: *mezu nemunius* (ETLi 1.3).⁸ It seems certain from the anthropomorphic design of the stele and parallels from elsewhere in Italy that the text *mezu nemunius* records the name of a deceased man. Neither of these names is attested in Etruscan sources, so it could be a Ligurian formula, although it isn’t matched by other onomastic (i.e. name-forming) elements from the area (Untermann 2006). If this text really does represent the indigenous language of Liguria (and is not in a local variety of either Etruscan or Celtic), it does not shed much light. There is no way of testing whether it has any connection with the linguistic variety from which Herodotus’s gloss *sigynnae* originally came. The label ‘Ligurian’ merely serves to conceal our ignorance.

In the absence of other evidence, the study of place-names (a science known as toponomastics) may help give a better understanding of the

⁴ Collected in Conway et al. (1933 II 159–60).

⁵ See Marchesini (2009: 62–4) for brief introduction and bibliography of these inscriptions.

⁶ See Simkin (2012: 82). ⁷ The texts are gathered in Rix et al. (1991 II 330–1).

⁸ It would also be possible to read the name as *mezune munius*.

language of the Ligurians.⁹ Place-names in Liguria recorded in ancient and modern sources often end in *-co* (after a vowel), *-sco* and *-nco*, which chime with Celtic place-names ending *-āco(n)* (such as the ancient name of York, first attested in a Greek source, *Eborākon* (Watts 2004: 711)). Was Ligurian perhaps actually a Celtic language then?¹⁰ Further evidence to support this hypothesis may come from the striking similarity between the names of Genoa (ancient *Genua*) and Geneva (ancient *Genaua*). In the Celtic branch of the Indo-European language family, words beginning *genu-* or a derivative can mean ‘mouth’; Geneva is indeed situated at the mouth of the Rhône on Lac Léman, while Genoa lies between the mouths of the Bisagno and Polcevera rivers (Falileyev 2010: 129). But toponomastic evidence can also support a conclusion that Ligurian was a member of the larger Indo-European language family (of which the Celtic languages form a subgroup), but not actually Celtic. There is a widespread Indo-European root *genu-* meaning ‘knee’, and it is possible to imagine that both Genoa and Geneva were so named because they were situated on a bend in the shoreline. The name of the river *Polcevera* itself has been given an Indo-European etymology: its ancient spelling is *Porcobera* (or *Procobera* or *Porcifera*), which has been explained as a compound meaning ‘salmon-bearing’ (Olsen 1906; for the element *porc-* compare Latin *perca* ‘perch’, not Latin *porcus* ‘pig!’). Celtic languages lose the initial *p* of this word, for example in the Irish word for ‘salmon’, *orc* (the Orkney islands may have been originally ‘salmon islands’), so this etymology can be used to argue against a specifically Celtic origin for Ligurian. Furthermore, a recent survey showed that in the area of the modern Italian province of Liguria there are few place-names that are solidly identifiable as Celtic (although a much higher concentration is found in western Switzerland).¹¹ The best single conclusion to draw from this is probably that place-names are always fertile ground for unverifiable speculation, but do not provide a secure basis for assigning language identity. We do not know whether separate elements of place-names all come from the same language: note the notorious example of the place-name Breedon-on-the-Hill in the English Midlands (Leicestershire), where the elements *Bree*, *don* and *Hill* mean ‘hill’ in Celtic, Old English and Modern English respectively, so the whole means ‘Hill-hill on the Hill’. Even if we were sure that the elements come from the same language, there is no way to verify what feature the

⁹ The following examples have been taken from Delamarre (2001) (with the review of Falileyev (2003)), Sims-Williams (2006), Falileyev (2010) and Delamarre (2012).

¹⁰ See Falileyev (2011) for a recent review of the literature connecting Ligurian with Celtic.

¹¹ Sims-Williams (2006).

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name-element refers to in the absence of speakers. Thus the element *genu-* of Genoa and Geneva may mean ‘mouth’ or ‘knee’, but it may mean ‘settlement-by-the-water’ in some language to which we no longer have access. The connection between *Porcobera* (or *Procobera* or *Porcifera*) and words meaning ‘a type of fish’ and ‘carry’ in other Indo-European languages may simply be a fortuitous coincidence; most Ligurian place-names cannot be so neatly explained.

Crete and Cyprus have much richer and longer epigraphic traditions than Liguria, and the distinct advantage that both are islands bounded by the sea, so that we can be sure that when ancient sources refer to Cretans or Cypriots we know exactly who they are talking about. However, the linguistic history of these islands is still full of uncertainty. Crete has the longest tradition of writing anywhere in Europe, with the first appearance of evidence for a local script (in the form of short hieroglyphic inscriptions, mostly found on seals) at the end of the third or beginning of the second millennium BCE.¹² There is no doubt that the Cretan origin of writing is one of a series of copycat innovations of literacy from the eastern end of the Mediterranean at around the same period. Contacts with the palace bureaucracies of Mesopotamia and Egypt led other emerging urban communities to adopt the idea of writing, even though they did not take over the same script-system or signs in use elsewhere; similar examples of what grammatologists term ‘stimulus diffusion’ are attested elsewhere in the world.¹³ Early Crete has a rich tradition of scripts. The hieroglyphic script was the earliest, and it seems to have been replaced after about 200 years by a script now known as Linear A, which survives on a number of clay tablets as well as metal and stone prestige items.¹⁴ A second hieroglyphic script, found on Crete, is principally known from one enigmatic object, a clay roundel (known as the Phaistos disc) which has signs imprinted in a spiral on both sides and which has proved a magnet for would-be decipherers. The Linear B script is a later development of Linear A, probably first in use around the middle of the second millennium.¹⁵ Many more tablets survive written with Linear B than the other Cretan scripts (with archives of tablets also found on the Greek mainland). This abundance of material, and the brilliant insight of the amateur scholar Michael Ventris, led to its decipherment in 1952.¹⁶ Ventris demonstrated that the language of the Linear B

¹² Cretan hieroglyphic inscriptions are collected in Olivier and Godart (1996); see Younger (1999) for an overview.

¹³ Trigger (2004). ¹⁴ Linear A texts are published in Godart and Olivier (1976–1985).

¹⁵ Driessen (2008).

¹⁶ Chadwick (1967) is still the most readable account of the scripts and the decipherment.

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tablets was an early form of Greek, and that the script was a syllabary (unlike an alphabet, in a syllabary each syllable has a separate sign, so that the Greek word for ‘bath-tub’ *asáminthos* is written in Linear B with just four signs: *a-sa-mi-to*). Linear A and hieroglyphic Cretan are also likely to be syllabic writing systems of the same type, but no one has convincingly shown what languages (or language) they convey; the only certainty is that neither script conceals any form of Greek. In the sixth century BCE, nearly a thousand years later than the last Linear A inscription, a non-Greek language again makes an appearance in the epigraphic record. Half a dozen stone inscriptions survive from the east of the island in a script that can be read (they are written in the Greek alphabet) but in a language which has proved so far unintelligible; nothing in vocabulary or grammar corresponds to any other known language (Duhoux 2007).

In addition to this rich Cretan epigraphical tradition, there is also literary evidence to take into account. Crete is not just the first place in Europe to record writing, it is the first place for which we have something approaching a linguistic description by the ancient Greeks. In book 19 of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus attempts to convince Penelope that he is a travelling Cretan, and gives a brief linguistic and demographic description of the island:

There is a land called Crete, in the middle of the wine-dark sea, an island fair and fertile. In it there are many men – a countless number, and ninety towns. Different languages are mixed together: there are Achaeans; great-hearted Eteocretans, Cydonians, the threefold¹⁷ Dorians and divine Pelasgians. (Homer *Odyssey* 19.172–7)

Odysseus’ description cannot be taken as a genuine ethnographic account. The poet doubtless wanted to project the account back to the time of the legendary kings Minos and Idomeneus of Crete, and give an impression of what the social mix of the island might have been at that time. Of the people listed by Odysseus, the Achaeans and Dorians are Greek speakers, but the other three groups, Eteocretans, Cydonians and Pelasgians, are usually understood not to have spoken Greek, although it is not clear what languages they did speak. The Pelasgians are notoriously difficult to pin down, since they are associated with different areas by different authors, sometimes in Athens, sometimes in Thessaly or on the Tyrrhenian coast of Italy; the tradition becomes so muddled that it is now impossible to link

¹⁷ The Greek word *trikháikes* is here translated as ‘threefold’, which seems to be how Hesiod interpreted it (fragment 233); the word may originally have meant ‘with flowing hair’, see Russo, Fernández-Galiano and Heubeck (1992: 84–5), Hall (1997: 42) and *LfggE* IV 634–5.

the name with any certainty to a single region, or a defined ancient people or language.¹⁸ In contrast, the meaning of the name ‘Eteocretan’ has aroused interest, since it can be translated ‘true’ or ‘genuine’ Cretan, and seems to recognize them as the aboriginal inhabitants of the island. It is no coincidence that modern scholars have labelled the language of the texts written in Greek letters, but not in Greek, ‘Eteocretan’. But if we are to map the languages of Crete, should we also include Cydonian and Pelasgian?

Similar problems face the scholar trying to sort out the languages spoken on ancient Cyprus. One of the first pieces of writing from the island is a three-line text from the middle of the second millennium BCE, written in a syllabary linked to those found on Crete and called Cypro-Minoan (or sometimes Linear C).¹⁹ There are well over 200 documents written in one of four varieties of this script from the island and the neighbouring Syrian and Turkish coasts before 1000 BCE, when the first evidence of Greek appears on Cyprus (also written in a variant of the Cypro-Minoan script).²⁰ In the first millennium BCE, inhabitants of Cyprus continued to write both Greek and a non-Greek language in the syllabic script derived from the earlier Cypro-Minoan writing system. Modern scholars (e.g. Masson 2007) refer to the non-Greek language of the tenth to fourth centuries BCE as Eteocypriot (on the analogy of Eteocretan discussed above). Eteocypriot has been identified in around two dozen inscriptions documented in the area around the town of Amathus, and may be preserved in a couple of later Greek glosses which attribute words to the speech of the Amathusians.²¹ Owing to the paucity of inscriptions, Eteocypriot is little understood and, like Eteocretan, it seems to bear no relation to any other known language. There is no clear connection between Eteocypriot and anything found in the Bronze Age Cypro-Minoan texts (these themselves may be written in several different languages, Duhoux 2013). But this does not mean that Eteocypriot cannot be the same as an earlier language spoken on the island. We may miss the relevant links for a number of different reasons: the corpus of texts written in the Cypro-Minoan scripts in Cyprus is very small; the texts themselves have diverse functions, from accounting and administrative documents in the early period to

¹⁸ Gruen (2011: 239–43).

¹⁹ This tablet is edited in Olivier (2007: 60–1); Duhoux (2009) thinks it might be an *aide-mémoire* list of the signs of the script.

²⁰ The Cypro-Minoan corpus is edited in Olivier (2007) and in Ferrara (2013). The first text to use Greek is given as Or70 in Olivier (2007).

²¹ A bilingual text with Eteocypriot and Greek will be discussed in some detail in Chapter 3.

grave-markers and honorary decrees later on; and the language may have changed considerably over a millennium. Although there is a long tradition of writing on Cyprus, it is consequently very difficult to draw any firm conclusions about either the number or the nature of the native languages spoken there, or their long-term survival.

The examples of Liguria, Crete and Cyprus show just some of the pitfalls of attempting to map languages using inscribed textual remains, toponomastics and the statements of ancient writers. The epigraphic evidence is simply often not full enough, either owing to the paucity of actual inscriptions, or because of the underlying uncertainties of interpretation, and place-names are particularly hazardous if they are the only source of our information. In the face of these difficulties, scholars are often forced to rely largely on evidence from literary sources. But the Greek and Roman historians and ethnographers were on the whole not very interested in foreign languages. Unlike travellers in later Mediterranean cultures, such as the seventeenth-century Ottoman Evliya Çelebi who made transcriptions of several of the exotic languages he encountered,²² no ancient writer made a serious attempt to present an accurate linguistic description of barbarous peoples. Although some individual authors, notably Herodotus, Varro, Plutarch and Jerome, did take an interest in languages other than Greek (and, later, Latin), they did not have the means or the desire to create anything approaching a technical linguistic survey. It is true that some ancient dictionaries include material from other languages: Hesychius' lexicon, a fifth-century CE compilation of rare and unusual Greek vocabulary, also contains some non-Greek entries; and a recently edited papyrus text from Oxyrhynchus of the first century CE is a fragment of an earlier glossary of foreign and unusual words (Schironi 2009). However, from what we can judge, the level of accuracy of these is not high. Hesychius assigns the correct meaning to *capra*, which we know to be the Latin for 'goat', but he ascribes it to the Etruscans, not the Romans. The Oxyrhynchus glossary includes *milēkh*, meaning 'noble', in the language of the Caucasian Albanians, but it actually seems to be a Semitic word for 'king'.²³ It also lists Persian *menemani*, 'water',²⁴ although this word does not occur in any attested Iranian language, and cannot have been the

²² Examples of Çelebi's transcriptions of African languages are given in Dankoff (2004: 178–9); of Ladino in Dankoff and Kim (2010: 93–4); of German in Dankoff and Kim (2010: 247–8) and of Romani in Dankoff and Kim (2010: 277–8).

²³ *P. Oxy.* 1802 + 1842: 3 iii 12, following Schironi's correction of the text from the papyrus reading γένειον, 'chin', to γενναίον 'noble'.

²⁴ *P. Oxy.* 1802 + 1842: 3 ii 17.

normal term for water, which we know to be *āp-*, *apa-*, or a derivative in all ancient and modern Iranian languages.

For most ancient writers there was an obvious (and self-fulfilling) correlation between ‘people’ and ‘language’.²⁵ The general view in the ancient world was consequently that, if you were a Ligurian, what you spoke would be classed as ‘the Ligurian language’.²⁶ We plot a language called Ligurian on the map, because this is where the people known as the Ligurians are reckoned to have lived, and the few ancient authors who happen to mention anything to do with the people give no indication that they spoke anything other than what we now term Ligurian. However, it is clear that the ethnographic term ‘Ligurian’ in ancient historical and geographical writers is, like ‘Pelagian’, a fluid one (Shipley 2011: 92); this much is obvious from the Greek geographer Strabo’s account (probably written at the beginning of the first century CE) of the various different peoples who have been included under the label *Ligues* (*Geography* 4.6.1–4). Just as the category of the Ligurian people can sometimes appear to be open-ended, capable of being applied to anything in northern Italy and Europe, so also the Ligurian language. This is the import of a story in Plutarch’s *Life of Marius* about events at the Battle of Aquae Sextiae (102 BCE). Soldiers from Liguria were in the vanguard of the Roman army when they encountered the barbarian Ambrones, who were camped by the river Rhône. The origin of the Ambrones is unknown, but here they were partners to the Cimbri and the Teutones who both originated from what is now northern Germany. Plutarch states at *Marius* 15.4 that ‘their speech and cries were unlike those of other peoples’.²⁷ When roused from their dinner and bathing by the camp-followers of Marius, the Ambrones shouted out their tribal name to encourage one another; the Ligurians, ‘when they had heard and understood what the Barbarians were shouting, they themselves shouted back the word, claiming it as their own ancestral appellation; for the Ligurians call themselves Ambrones by descent’ (Plutarch *Marius* 19.4, translation B. Perrin, Loeb Classical Library).

Even if we were inclined to accept that all the peoples encompassed under the label ‘Ligurian’ once spoke the same language, it would be hard to believe that they continued to do so over a period of centuries. The

²⁵ See Diodorus Siculus 1.8.4 or Dionysius of Halicarnassus 1.29 for the equation of language and people, and Herodotus 1.57 for a case where a change of language is taken to indicate a change of people.

²⁶ Although note Arnaud (2001) for speculation that the Greek name of these people originally simply meant ‘barbarians’.

²⁷ Translation B. Perrin, Loeb Classical Library.