

CHAPTER I

THE BACKGROUND OF GREEK ECONOMICS

THE GREEKS

ALFRED MARSHALL once said that it was as difficult, or impossible, to interpret the past as to anticipate the future, and the truth of that statement becomes abundantly evident to the modern economist who essays the difficult task of evaluating the economic life of the ancient Greeks. To the modern mind their history is full of events that amaze and perturb the reader; their actions and policies are such as to baffle our theories and defeat our sympathies. In art and philosophy, poetry and the drama we may draw very near to them, for such are timeless and the spirit of man is eternal. But politics and statecraft, social systems and economic expedients, are of the age of which they are a product, and we of another age cannot enter fully into the spirit that prompted them. We may chronicle their happening, and explain with reasonable certainty the circumstances that led to their adoption; but that is as far as we can go; between us and them time has reared an impassable barrier. Our vision is obscured by the pre-occupations of our own age. We see the long vistas of antiquity fore-shortened, and we do not comprehend, or but dimly grasp, the passage of centuries. The economic conditions of the ancient world were radically different from those of to-day and must be judged, if they ever can be judged, by totally different standards.

But the difficulties that confront us need not deter us from trying our best to form a picture, faulty though it may be, of the economic system of that ancient people to whom we owe so much. We shall find ourselves only too often in uncertainty; and at best our conclusions, especially in the earlier periods, and hardly less so even in the later, in default of actual written records, and sometimes in spite of them, can only be intelligent guesses, which are constantly modified, corrected, and restated as modern discoveries bring new evidences to bear on the problems concerned. It is like trying to fit together a mosaic

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that has been broken up and even some of the pieces lost. Here and there can be found pieces that evidently go together, while other fragments are too small to allow of more than tentative and, very often no doubt, wrong reconstructions. A chance reference, a few words in one of the ancient authors, an inscription, only too often broken and half defaced, a papyrus found in desert sands, such are the materials with which we must work; never perfectly sure, but always trying new combinations, new arrangements, hoping that our guesses are right; a fascinating, tantalising and often a wearisome task. There is a romance, an adventurousness, in the patient toil of the archaeologist as he digs in the mounds that once were great cities. At any moment his spade may unearth a treasure that will throw a flood of light on questions that now baffle the learned world. And so we need not utterly despair, as we watch year by year the records of remote times being pieced together.

THE GEOGRAPHIC FACTOR¹

True though it may be that much in the character of the Greeks is difficult to understand and disconcerting to realise, yet there are factors to be taken into account which may well prove illuminating in our study. Of these the principal is, what we may call, the geographic or environmental, which must in every age and place profoundly modify the circumstances of existence of the people living within its influence.

We are accustomed to speak of two great factors which shape the destiny of races, heredity and environment, and of these the Greeks were very well aware. Strabo, criticising the theories of Poseidonius, remarks: "As regards the various arts and faculties and institutions of mankind, most of them, when all men have made a beginning, flourish in any latitude whatsoever, and in certain instances even in spite of the latitude. So that some local characteristics of a people come by nature, others by training and habit. For instance, it was not by nature that the Athenians were fond of letters, whereas the Lacedaemonians and also the Thebans, who are still closer to the Athenians,

¹ E. C. Semple, *Influence of Geographic Environment*, *passim*; Holland Rose, *The Mediterranean in the Ancient World*; Busolt, *Griechische Staatskunde*, I, 102ff.

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were not so; but rather by habit. So also the Babylonians and the Egyptians are philosophers, not by nature but by training and habit.”¹ In this judgment we may agree with Strabo, although he leaves serious questions still unanswered. It was not by “nature” that the Athenians were different from the Spartans; to that we may assent. But from whence came that “habit” that shaped their destiny? The point is an interesting one. The Athenian was a cosmopolitan; to his harbour came all the ships of the world, and his wits were sharpened by daily contact with the people of all nations. Upon him had been thrust the government of an empire, and his navy policed the seas. Whatever else the Athenians did, they “thought imperially”; which was a very different “habit” from that of the Spartans, who were singularly averse from thinking of anything that lay beyond the narrow confines of their own small land. The Spartan had shut himself in and applied himself with extraordinary precautions and elaborate safeguards to one single thing—his domination as a privileged caste in his own land. It was inevitable that a different habit of mind should have shaped itself in the consciousness of the Spartan. It is illuminating in this connection to realise that early Laconian art was equal to any produced in other parts of Greece. But the Spartan had turned away from such distractions; his political necessities had made him into a specialist in one thing only, domination through military fitness. To that all his efforts were turned; his very existence depended upon it.

It has been remarked, and there is a great deal of truth in it although it must not be pushed too far, that the Greek could not extend the sphere of his cultural influence beyond the limit of cultivation of the olive, a delicate plant and one demanding a climate peculiar to itself.² Alexander, a Macedonian who came from a region outside the olive belt, pushed his victories to the extreme limit of the cultivation of the vine, a far sturdier plant. It might be argued with considerable plausibility, if not with entire conviction, that the shrivelling of his empire was due to the absence of those climatic conditions which favoured the genius of the Greek husbandman. Certainly the Greek was

¹ ii, 3, 7 (c. 103) (Loeb trans.).

² Newbigin, *Mediterranean Lands*, p. 24.

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not a success in Egypt, in which neither olive nor vine attains successful cultivation.

In Greece itself the smallness of the holdings and the intensity of agriculture allowed of a dense population where large-scale production was impossible. The Greek could not have used the modern agricultural machinery; his fields were too small, so he tilled his lands with the ox-drawn plough, or more often with hoe and mattock and lived in villages.¹ He was typically a town-dweller, as the Chinese are to-day; the isolated farm in the middle of a hundred acres or more was unknown to him.

The problem of subsistence was an ever-pressing one which allowed of no slackening in effort. An interruption of the day-to-day toil was serious; war and the destruction of vineyards and olive groves was an almost irremediable disaster, as the Athenians found after the Peloponnesian war. So priceless were the gifts of nature and so anxiously must the gods be propitiated that around their agriculture was thrown the sanctity of religion. The olive was sacred, a gift from Heaven, and to cut down a tree was sacrilege. The rites of Demeter the Corn Goddess as practised in the Eleusinian mysteries are significant. Water was poured on the earth, for water is a precious thing and fit offering to give a goddess; without water the earth will not yield its fruits. A sacred drama in honour of the deity was performed in a hall brilliantly lit by torches to represent the sunshine necessary for ripening the crops.² To trifle with these mysteries was a very serious thing, as Alcibiades found to his cost.

As the standard of living rose with increased wealth the problem of feeding the populace became more acute as wheat was demanded in place of the more easily grown barley. In this Attica was at a great disadvantage; like the modern Great Britain she could not possibly feed her own people and foreign wheat had to be imported which must be paid for somehow, either by silver from the mines of Laurium or by exports. Boeotia was a far richer country, but without access to the sea, and the Athenians thought the Boeotians dull and stupid. Such a community could satisfy all its own material needs. The

¹ Newbigin, *Mediterranean Lands*, p. 55.

² References to cult of Demeter very numerous. Cf. Frazer in *Golden Bough*, "Spirits of the Corn and the Wild", cap. 2.

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Boeotians did not even want Athenian pottery, and living within a severely restricted area could not help but be backward as compared with Attica, where poor lands and ready access to the sea provided an unending stimulus, for hunger is a wonderful sharpener of wits. The Saronic gulf is calm and sheltered, and on the north-east the isthmus of Megara contains Mount Geraneia, which served as a natural rampart for Athens.

Easy access to the sea made communication by land unnecessary, especially when land routes are difficult through the complex relief and indented coast-line of the mainland. The Greeks were not great road builders, because they did not find any pressing need for them. Similarity of climate and natural products made inland commerce within Greece unnecessary; they had little to exchange. Athens bought vegetables and eels from Boeotia, but had little to give in exchange except money.¹ But overseas were to be found wheat in limitless quantities and timber, a vital necessity for a land denuded of its forests, and these could be paid for with oil, wine, figs and pottery, which the barbarians of Macedonia and South Russia were eager to buy. To keep the trade routes open, to police the Aegean and keep the pirates in order became a vital necessity if Athens was not to starve, so the Athenians were forced onto the sea. If the typical Athenian was none too fond of hard labour he could hardly have been any fonder of the back-breaking labour of tugging at an oar. But if he shirked his duty on shipboard he knew his city would go hungry; so he served as a rower in the war galleys as cheerfully as the trying circumstances allowed and made the best of a bad job.

It is to the influence of the sea that we must attribute most of the prevailing forms of Greek culture and economic evolution. Living in lands none too fertile and often rocky and barren, where the increase of population beyond the limits of subsistence drove them of necessity to seek new homes, the early Greeks built their frail ships and launched out into the deep. We must not forget that the Greeks were never a seafaring nation like their great rivals the Phoenicians, nor like the modern British and other peoples on the Atlantic sea-board.

¹ Newbigin, *Mediterranean Lands*, pp. 132, 137–8. Boeotia wants nothing from Attica (Aristoph. *Acharn.* 899).

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They dreaded and hated the sea, than which “there is nought else worse to confound a man howsoever hardy he may be”.¹ They never really forgot that they were sprung from inland dwellers of the grassy steppes, and their seafaring was forced upon them not by choice but of necessity. As Mr Holland Rose appositely says, not in all Greek literature, nor in Latin for the matter of that, do we ever find any lyrical outburst in praise of the sea, which was no “lover and mother of men” to them.² Such epithets as are applied to it are invariably harsh. The “wine-dark” of Homer pictures a forbidding tide under a lowering sky. Poseidon was always an angry god, who resented the presumption of man to invade his domain. So the Greeks gritted their teeth and took to the sea, not because they liked it but because they had to; it was their pathway about the world. Go on it they must, and there they found a wonderful source of foodstuffs in the fish, especially the tunny, which abounded in its waters. It has been suggested, with a good deal of reason, that it was following the tunny shoals that led the earlier Greek mariners up the Hellespont to the fishes’ starting-point in the Black Sea and westwards to the coasts of Italy in their long summer migration.³ The absence of currents and the generally calm weather which prevailed from April to October made navigation possible for the little square-rigged ships and clumsy gear of the pioneer Greek sailors. The Aegean is thickly dotted with islands, 483 of them, which allowed even the tiny craft of the early Greeks to put to sea without too great risk of disaster, when, on a storm approaching, a quick dash for land would carry them to safety. And lastly, the wind system of the Eastern Mediterranean was favourable to navigation in the summer months. The Etesian winds, the prevailing northerlies, carried them from Greece to Crete and Egypt; from whence by way of Syria, Cyprus and under the lee of Asia Minor they crept to the shelter of the Sporades.⁴

From the shores of Thrace to the southernmost point of the Peloponnesus all the valleys of Greece open out on the East or Asiatic side. Greece was at the threshold of the Orient, and the

¹ *Od.* viii, 138.

² With the possible exception of Aesch. *Prom.* 90.

³ Holland Rose, *The Mediterranean in the Ancient World*, p. 8.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 11.

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destiny of the Greek led him eastwards; there he won his greatest triumphs and there he met his final overthrow. From the first heroic struggle with the Persian, to the last convulsion of the Mithradatic wars, Greek and Asiatic found their destinies intermingled, and to this very day that fate has shaped his destiny.¹

Greece was, and still is, a little and a poor country; her agricultural resources were scanty and the configuration of the land prevented easy communication. Her little states were shut in by mountains, separated from one another by obstacles that induced a proud seclusion and a fierce and, only too often, an aggressive and truculent patriotism. In the plains between the mountains numbers multiplied, and there was always the problem of population increase pressing upon the bare means of subsistence. It was not to be wondered at, therefore, that there arose a vexing and oftentimes desperate land question, such as all countries encounter where a land-hungry people finds itself thwarted by a vicious or antiquated system of capitalist proprietorship, and where the problem can only be solved by violence or emigration, if it ever be completely solved. It was indeed this littleness that, in large degree, stimulated that early and precocious maturity which was so soon to wither and die. Life in a little Greek city was very vivid; it could also be very petty, and we cannot doubt tiresome and boring. The young men of spirit become restless, and, as Thucydides says at the beginning of the Peloponnesian war, are simply “spoiling for a fight”.² From the narrow confines of their homeland the surplus population is forced out to find a livelihood elsewhere. “A small cup soon overflows”, and finally the limitations of too small a home area step in to arrest national development, which in the end fades and decays.³

Do we not find in this never-ending land problem which, in the last analysis, was one of actual subsistence, the explanation of the extraordinary spirit of seclusion and aloofness that was so characteristic of the Greek? Why did the Spartan withdraw himself from the rest of Greece and refuse citizenship to any

¹ Semple, *Influence of Geographic Environment*, pp. 3, 259.

² ii, 8.

³ Semple, *Influence of Geographic Environment*, p. 416.

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that did not belong to the privileged class of “superiors”? Why do we find in the writings of the philosophers that never-ending insistence on exclusiveness, that deliberate attempt to shut out the foreigner and to limit the size of the state? The ostensible reason is the fear of corruption from outside sources, more particularly contamination from the Persians, and we must not disregard that motive. But deep down, unperceived by its authors, there must have been the age-long fear of over-population pressing upon the means of subsistence. The Spartan sought to exclude the foreigner because Laconia had little enough to support even the Spartan population, dwindling though its numbers were. Plato and Aristotle sought to limit the numbers of the citizens in their ideal states because they knew from actual observation the troubles that over-population engendered. They had anticipated by two thousand years the theories of Malthus.¹

The Greeks utterly failed to build up a political structure commensurate with their cultural achievements. This tragic failure, to which in the last analysis must be attributed their final downfall, may be traced principally to their inability to throw off those vicious animosities that had become so ingrained in them that a united Greece was an impossibility. And when the horizon so suddenly and amazingly widened, and Alexander gave the world to the Greek to play with, the old rivalries, the unappeasable jealousies of Greek towards Greek, continued on a vaster and more tragic scale. The confusion of the Hellenistic era which succeeded the conquests of Alexander was beyond description. Three great royal houses, that of Macedonia, the Seleucids of Asia and the Ptolemies of Egypt fought themselves to a standstill, and when they were not fighting each other they were tearing themselves to pieces in internecine strife within their own borders.² Rome was practically forced to step in and impose peace upon the successors of Alexander. But even after it had done so, the last and worst “flare up” followed in the terrible wars of Mithradates of

¹ A modern parallel may be found in the troubles that beset the Pitcairn islanders when newcomers invaded their little domain.

² Mr Tarn, in his *Hellenistic Civilisation*, is forced to the conclusion that in that age men were “a little mad”. World empire is a heady draught for any people; even the Romans yielded to its intoxication.

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Pontus against the Romans, and Hellenism went down in irretrievable ruin.

That last appalling catastrophe induces some sad reflections. That Athens should have thrown in her lot with Mithradates and defied the Romans was a piece of folly that is, at least to later observers, almost inconceivable. It is, of course, only too easy to be wise after the event, and it may even be agreed that Mithradates had at least even chances of beating the Romans. But in any event it was madness for Athens to risk everything by abandoning a neutrality that was her only chance of existence. It is related that the destruction of Corinth by Mummius was the outcome of an exasperation that at last broke down the patience of the Romans, whose treatment of Old Greece up to that time had not, on the whole, been ungenerous. If the Greeks would not behave themselves, if they were blind to their best interests and incapable of accepting the inevitable, they must be taught a lesson, and a bitter and sharp one it was. It is significant that Roman despised Greek; the “hungry Greekling” of Juvenal is not a pretty picture. We who study the writings of their philosophers, who find in the teachings of Aristotle and Plato the highest expression of political thought, must turn away in weariness and disgust from what we can only call the “political wrongheadedness” of the very people whose teachers they were.

THE ECONOMIC LIFE OF GREECE

But it is not with such sad reflections that we are concerned here. What of the Greek in his economic life, in the workshop, the market place, the counting house and in international commerce? Such is to be the theme of our inquiry, and although much of it will be interesting, even fascinating, yet we must realise that we are not treading the mountain tops nor concerning ourselves with the glories of Greek art or philosophy, but rather with the humdrum things of daily life, petty, mean affairs of shopkeepers, artificers and peddlers. We may even ask ourselves whether, after all, it is worth while to bother ourselves with such things. If we may thrill to the immortal protests of Demosthenes against the Macedonian who was to rob his city of her liberty, why should we bother ourselves with the speeches that he made

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in the law courts, or have been attributed to him, over some sordid case of cheating and sharp practice among the merchants of his time? Many will think the point well taken; but if we are to understand the Greeks we must know them in all the various aspects of their lives; in their great moments and in their pettiness, in their masterpieces and in their daily life of making a living. And so it is with the Greek as tradesman and worker and merchant, not as poet or artist or philosopher that we are concerned.

While the Greek was an excellent technician, so far as his limited means allowed him, a clever business man (a little too clever sometimes as the cases in the law courts show) and an extremely competent trader, yet we are confronted with what appears at first as a strange and anomalous contradiction that, apparently, the Greek despised work as beneath the dignity of a free man, and left to his slaves the labours that he was unwilling to perform himself. But we must be careful not to jump to a conclusion that is not really consonant with the facts. As a matter of actual fact, were manual labour, and indeed all gainful occupations, despised and shunned? Were the Greeks “workshy” idlers, who lived on the industry of their slaves and allowed foreigners, “Metics”, to amass wealth, without an effort to compete with them, content to mulct them with heavy taxes, and themselves live “on the dole”? It would be all too easy to answer all these in the affirmative, and dismiss the whole subject with a few well-known passages from the historians and philosophers. But the problem is not quite so easy and demands further scrutiny.

In the first place, it must be noted that any prejudice against manual labour among the Greeks was of comparatively late origin. Certainly, in the Homeric age, to labour with one’s hands was no disgrace; witness the prowess of Odysseus, who was a mighty worker, built his own house and even his own bedstead.¹ Nor was there any prejudice against manual labour in the time of Solon, who decreed that a father must see that his son be taught a craft.² Undoubtedly in the time of the

¹ But they did not like agricultural labour, which was beneath the dignity of a high-spirited warrior. Cf. *Od.* xiii, 31-4, xiv, 222-3.

² Plut. *Solon*, 22.