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Geoffrey Neale Cross

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CHAPTER I

EPIRUS AND THE EPIROTS

IN antiquity the merchant sailing from Greece to Sicily, anxious to avoid the dangers of the open sea, followed the coast line of the Balkan peninsula to a point opposite the heel of Italy and then turned westwards across the Straits of Otranto.¹ A long stretch of this coast line—from the gulf of Ambracia northwards to the Acroceraunian cliffs—lay outside the frontiers of Greece as they were drawn in the sixth and fifth centuries before Christ, and all this region, the home of barbarian tribesmen, the Greek sailor of that time knew simply as “Epirus”—the Mainland—in contrast with the islands, Leucas, Corcyra and the rest, which lay opposite it. For a general geographical term to be applied in this way to a particular region is not so very unusual—for us, for example, the Peninsula means the Spanish peninsula—but in the case of Epirus there is this peculiarity that the name given by the foreigner came to be adopted by the natives themselves. In time the inhabitants of the “Mainland” developed from a group of separate barbarian tribes outside the pale of Greek civilisation to a united state within it, but they never found another name to describe their unity than that of “Mainlanders” or Epirots, so that the geographical term gradually acquired a political sense and the “Mainland”, like the Netherlands, became the name of a country.

¹ The usual route was that taken by Aeneas—Virgil, *Aeneid*, III. 270–569. In the summer months it was not uncommon to cross from Corcyra to the Lacinian headland—Livy, xxxvi. 42—but the direct passage westwards from the mouth of the Gulf of Corinth was at any time a considerable adventure—Plutarch, *Dion*, 25.

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The incorporation of Epirus in Greece took place in the course of the fourth and third centuries and is one instance of that general spreading of Greek culture and language beyond the old boundaries of which the hellenisation of the Levant in the same period is the outstanding example. It is with it, and in particular with the constitutional development that accompanied it, that this essay is chiefly concerned, but before trying to describe the hellenisation of Epirus, I should, perhaps, refer to a question which may seem vital to the subject and excuse myself for shirking it—the question whether the Epirots were Greeks by race or not. One might think that before speaking of the hellenisation of a people it would be necessary first to establish that they were not originally Hellenes, and that the problem of the racial origin of the Epirots—the subject of a controversy in which great names can be cited on either side¹—would have to make its appearance in these pages. Fortunately this is not the case. For my purpose the ethnological truth about the Epirots is of little importance: it is sufficient to recognise the admitted fact that the Greeks from thinking of them, rightly or wrongly, as bar-

¹ Beloch, I. 2. 33, and Wilamowitz, *Staat und Gesellschaft*, p. 44, are in favour of an Hellenic origin, while Meyer, II. 1. 271, and Nilsson, pp. 1–17, hold that the Epirots were of Illyrian stock. The arguments by which the controversy is sustained are mainly linguistic and their value is most difficult to estimate. My own view—for what it is worth—is that of the three big Epirot tribes the Chaones were definitely non-Greek (their name appears again in the form Chones among the Iapygians of Apulia who appear to have been allied to the Illyrians, cf. Wilamowitz, *op. cit.* p. 14), but that the Thesprotians and Molossians were essentially Greeks, members of the so-called Dorian stock which seems to have spread from Illyria over Aetolia and parts of the Peloponnese about 1000 B.C., cf. *C.A.H.* II. 518 seq. Subsequently, of course, they may have been contaminated by infiltration from the north. There is evidence to show that the Chaones stood in some degree apart from the Thesprotians and Molossians—Hellanicus ap. Steph. Byz. s.v. “Chaonia”; Plutarch, *Pyrrhus*, 1; Nepos, *Timotheus*, 2. See also Tarn, *Antigonos Gonatas*, p. 55 and the literature there referred to.

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barians came in time to regard them as fellow-countrymen, and since a slight sketch of this change of attitude, in particular as illustrated by the use of the word "Epirus", may serve as an introduction to rather an obscure subject, I will give it at once.

The time at which Epirus became recognised as a part of Greece cannot be exactly defined, but we can confine it within fairly narrow limits. When Pericles sent envoys to every Hellenic state to summon delegates to a conference at Athens the north-western boundary of mainland Greece was at Ambracia, but a century later we find that this boundary has been extended to include the area between that city, the Acroceraunian headland and the Pindus watershed.¹ As with the country so with the people. To Thucydides the Epirots are barbarians, but in the third century they are everywhere recognised as Greeks and are among the members of King Antigonus Doson's Panhellenic League.² Meanwhile in harmony with this development we can trace another by which one among many "mainlands" becomes "the Mainland" *par excellence*, and the new Greek state gains the name that it has never lost. In Homer, where mention is made of the "mainland" opposite Ithaca, the use is purely geographical,³ but when we read in Pindar that "Neoptolemus reigns over all the wide extent of Epirus with its upland

¹ Compare Herodotus, VIII. 47, and Plutarch, *Pericles*, 17, with Plutarch, *Phocion*, 29.

² Compare Thucydides, II. 80-81, with Polybius, IV. 9. 4. The Epirots were not members of the League of Corinth, but this does not show that they were not considered to be Greeks in 337, for there were special reasons which made their membership of that body almost impossible; see p. 40 below. Polybius, XVIII. 5. 8, gives the names of some other tribes which had become Greek by the third century, and shows that a distinction was sometimes drawn between them and the "old" Greeks.

³ *Iliad*, II. 635. Cf. Rylands Papyri 18, where Beloch, I. 2. 279, thinks that it is the mainland of North-West Greece that is in question.

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pastures that slope from Dodona down to the Ionian Strait",¹ we can see that the "Mainland" when applied to that particular region is already acquiring a capital letter, though its inhabitants were still no more than a group of barbarian tribes. To Greeks of the Aegaeon, however, it might well seem that if any mainland was to have pre-eminence it should be the continent of Asia rather than any part of the Balkan peninsula, and so one finds at this time a certain conflict of usage which is well illustrated in a passage of Euripides' *Andromache*. Hermione accuses Andromache of having given her drugs to make her barren. "For", she says, "an Epirot woman (Ἡπειρώτις) is skilled in such practices." Now Andromache was, of course, a native of the Troad, and so it is clear that Euripides is using the word Epirot primarily in its sense of Asiatic, but since the play was written with reference to the Balkan Epirus, which according to tradition became Andromache's second home, and since, too,—the Epirots had an evil reputation as poisoners and casters of spells—it seems likely that a *double entendre* was intended.² In the next century the gradual hellenisation and unification of the country made it increasingly natural to limit the use of "Mainland" without a context to the land of the Epirots, but the great authority of Isocrates kept up the use of the word as a synonym for Asia,³ and it is not until the age of Alexander that we can say that just as the Epirots are now Greeks so Epirus has taken its place beside Aetolia and Acarnania as the name of a Greek state. With so much by way of introduction, I will attempt to set out the little that is known of the early history and institutions of the more important Epirot

¹ *Nemean*, iv. 51. Cf. Wilamowitz, *Pindaros*, p. 401 n.

² Euripides, *Andromache*, 159–60 (c. 420 B.C.). See also p. 12 n. 4 below. Aelian, *Nat. An.* xv. 11. Robertson in *Classical Review*, 1923, p. 60 n. 13.

³ Harpocration, s.v. "Epirus".

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tribes, the elements of which the state of Epirus was to be composed.

Theopompus, writing at a time when Epirus was not yet a political unit, speaks of fourteen Epirot tribes, and Strabo, three hundred years later, while complaining that the ruthlessness of Roman conquest and the uniformity of Roman rule had all but obliterated the old boundaries, has preserved the names of eleven of them. Most, if not all, of these came at one time or another to be included in the state of Epirus, but its nucleus was formed by three tribes far larger than the rest—the Thesprotians, Molossians and Chaonians—and it is with them alone that we need at present concern ourselves.¹ The territory of the Thesprotians stretched along the coast from Ambracia northwards to the river Thyamis and inland to Dodona; Chaonia lay between the Thyamis and the Illyrian border which ran eastwards from the Acroceraunian headland; while the homeland of the Molossians was in the interior about the township of Passaron.² Of the three it was natural that the Thesprotians should be in early days the best known to the Greeks, for the mountain range of Pindus formed such a barrier against the traveller from the east that the Greek visiting Epirus would generally approach it from the south and the sea. Furthermore, the object of his visit was as likely as not the holy place of Dodona, where a little pocket of Greeks left behind in some early migration maintained the cult and oracle of Zeus, the sky god of the

¹ Theopompus ap. Strab. vii. 323. The other eight tribes mentioned by Strabo (323–6) are the Athamanians, Aethices, Tymphaeans, Parauaeans, Orestae, Atintanes, Amphilochoi, and Cassopaeoi. When Klotzsch (p. 10 n. 1) says that we know of many more than fourteen Epirot tribes he is reckoning in subdivisions of tribes which may never have existed as independent political units.

² For Thesprotia see Thucydides, i. 46, and Pausanias, i. 11. 2. For Molossia, Hecataeus ap. Steph. Byz. s.v. “Dodona” and Plutarch, *Pyrrhus*, 5.

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Hellenes;¹ and the territory of Dodona was originally under Thesprotian control. But about the time of the Persian Wars the Molossians seem to have pressed down from the north, to have established a sort of suzerainty over the Thesprotians and to have taken their place as the masters of Dodona. When Aeschylus speaks of “the land of the Molossians and the oracle of Thesprotian Zeus” his words seem to express the change—the temple no longer in Thesprotian territory, but the god with a proper conservatism retaining the name of the former masters of his shrine.² The appearance of the Molossians at Dodona is an event of the first importance in the history of Epirus, for the

¹ The oracle at Dodona and its “personnel” were definitely Greek, Herodotus, iv. 33. Cf. Glotz, *Histoire Grecque*, I. 97, and Meyer, II. I. 269–70. Originally it seems to have been closely connected with the Achaeans of southern Thessaly, Homer, *Iliad*, xvi. 233 seq. and II. 681. Meyer observes that its cult at this early time differed considerably from the later forms which we hear of in Herodotus and Strabo, e.g. in the *Iliad* it appears as a “dream” oracle, whereas in later times Zeus spoke in the rustling of the oak leaves. Whether this change was in any way due to Dorian influence or whether the character of the oracle in later times was Dorian or Achaean it is impossible to say. At all events, Dodona formed a little island of hellenism in the midst of peoples which were considered—rightly or wrongly—as barbarian. For traces of a pre-Greek cult see Tarn, *Antigonos Gonatas*, p. 59 n. and literature there cited.

² The Thesprotians are the only Epirot tribe mentioned in Homer, e.g. *Odyssey*, xiv. 315. Strabo, vii. 328, records that Dodona was originally controlled by them but later by the Molossians. The first definite reference to Molossian control is Hypereides, *pro Euxenippo*, 36 (c. 330), and since Strabo (*l.c.*) says that Pindar and the tragic poets spoke of “Thesprotian” Dodona, and Herodotus, II. 56, couples the oracle with the Thesprotians, it has been thought that the change of control did not come about until c. 400. But the poetic use can be easily explained as traditional (cf. *Prometheus Vincitus*, 829–30, which I have quoted in the text) and Herodotus is referring to the foundation of the oracle many centuries before his own visit to Dodona. On the other hand, Pindar speaks of Neoptolemus as having ruled a Molossian kingdom which included Dodona, *Nemean*, iv. 53; *Paeon*, 6. 109, and since he is at pains to emphasise that the hero’s descendants are still kings of the Molossians, *Nemean*, vii. 39, it seems to me clear

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closer contact with the Greek world which the tribe enjoyed in consequence of it encouraged its royal clan to put forward the claim that they were descendants of the hero Achilles and in this way to take the first step along the road which was to lead to the hellenisation of the whole country. The origin and history of this claim is of itself of some interest and I need not, perhaps, apologise for describing it in detail.

One of the many stories which dealt with the fortunes of the heroes of the Trojan War after the city's fall related that Neoptolemus, the son of Achilles, lived for a short while among the Molossians in Epirus on his way back to his home in Thessaly. Hitherto it had not been suggested that Epirus contained any traces of his stay there, but it happened that the royal clan which supplied the Molossians with their kings revered as its original ancestor a certain Pielos—a figure quite unknown to Greek mythology, but one whose name bore a resemblance to that of Achilles' father Peleus. This coincidence now enabled some ingenious mind to put forward a story which made Pielos or Peleus a son of Neoptolemus who had been named after his great-grandfather and who continued his father's brief rule over the Molossians. The intervening generations were filled in with some dozen appropriate names and the reigning monarch, whose own name was probably Admetus, appeared at the end of the list as a direct descendant of Achilles.¹

that they too must have controlled Dodona at the time when Pindar wrote those odes, i.e. from about 485 onwards. In addition to gaining control of Dodona the Molossians must also, I think, have exercised a suzerainty over the Thesprotians about this time. Pindar speaks of Neoptolemus' Epirot kingdom stretching from "Dodona to the Ionian Strait" and of the hero having landed at Ephyra on the Thesprotian coast, *Nemean*, iv. 53 and vii. 38, I cannot believe that the rule of Neoptolemus' descendants was less extensive. Nilsson, however, is not of this opinion (p. 21).

¹ For the history of the claim to descent from Achilles, see Appendix I, p. 100. Eusebius, *Chronicon*, i. pp. 233-4 in Schoene's edition,

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Without advertisement the pedigree might have had slight currency and little effect, but the dynasty was fortunate enough to secure in the poet Pindar a sponsor who spread a knowledge of it far and wide in the Greek world. Since there was little in the circumstances of the Molossians themselves to invite the attention of the laureate of the age, the guest-friend of the princes of Acragas and Syracuse, we may guess that it was Zeus of Dodona that formed the link between the poet and the tribe. Among the *Hymns* was one written in honour of the god, and Pindar himself may well have visited Dodona in connection with its performance, perhaps as a member of that mission of ceremony which his native Thebes sent each year to Zeus' temple there.¹ At Dodona he would naturally meet the leading men among the Molossians, but whether he met them or not the fourth and seventh Nemean odes bear witness to his interest in their pedigree.² The tribesmen did the little that was in their power to repay the debt, but the office of Molossian "proxenos" at Thebes can have meant little to the man on whom Athens had conferred a like honour in return for a single laudatory epithet:³ to the Molossians, on the other hand, Pindar's aid was invaluable.

The hall-mark of hellenism was admittance as a competitor at the Olympic games, and sooner or later the Molossian kings must have proved their pedigree to the

says that Pyrrhus was twenty-third in the list. There were seven kings between Pyrrhus and Tharypas, and Pausanias, I. 11. 1, says that the latter was the fifteenth in descent from the hero. There were, therefore, about a dozen to bridge the gap from about 480 to heroic times.

¹ Only fragments of the hymn survive, 57–60 in Schröder's edition. For the mission from Thebes to Dodona, see Strabo, IX. 402.

² For Pindar's part in the origin and spreading of the Aeacid pedigree, see the scholia to *Nemean*, VII. 64, and Wilamowitz, *Pindaros*, p. 167. To say with Nilsson (p. 24) that that pedigree is a creation of the fourth century is to neglect the evidence of Pindar and Euripides altogether.

³ Isocrates, *De Antidosi*, 166.

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satisfaction of the stewards, the committee of privilege of Greece. There is no evidence to show that they took part in the games before the fourth century, but it is likely enough that they were no later in gaining the right to do so than the kings of Macedon whose descent from Heracles was proved about the time of the Persian Wars.¹ Both pedigrees, be it noticed, were in their origin confined to the ruling houses. The Aeacids were “Thessalians”—descendants of Achilles, a native of Thessaly—ruling over barbarous Molossians, while the Heraclids were the offspring of the Argive Heracles ruling in Macedon over an alien people.² But from the first the “hellenism” of the dynasty furthered the hellenisation of the people, and when in time the Molossians as a whole came to be considered Greeks, all equally laid claim to the heroic ancestry which had once been the privilege of their royal house.³

There is, then, some ground for saying that the hellenisation of Epirus began about the time of the Persian Wars, but we have, of course, no material of so early a date from which to trace a continuous history of the tribes in relation to the history of the Greek states. Our whole knowledge of the half-century between the Persian and Peloponnesian Wars is notoriously scanty, and from Epirus there is but a single incident preserved to us from it. It is possible—as

¹ Alexander the Phil-hellene of Macedon and the Olympic games: Herodotus, v. 22. In VIII. 137 he gives a list of kings going back to Perdicas, who migrated from Argos to Macedon.

² Strabo, VII. 326, calls the Molossian kings “Thessalians” in contrast to the “native” kings of the neighbouring tribes: Cf. Ἀχαιὸς ἀνὴρ in Pindar, *Nemean*, VII. 64, which refers to Pindar’s royal host and not to the Molossians in general. Herodotus, v. 20, speaks of King Alexander of Macedon as ἀνὴρ Ἑλλήν Μακεδόνων ὑπαρχος.

³ Appendix I, p. 100. Herodotus, VI. 127, mentions “Alcon from the Molossians” as one of the “Greeks” who were suitors for the hand of the tyrant of Sicyon’s daughter, but nothing can be deduced from this passage, for it is to be supposed that such a man would have been a member of the royal house.

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we have seen—that the foremost poet of Greece was once the guest of the Molossian king: it is probable that within a few years that king or his successor received the greatest of Greek statesmen in his home at Dodona. When the venom and uncertainty of Athenian politics drove Themistocles into exile, and his enemies were so many and so powerful that his life was not secure in any corner of the Greece that he had saved, he is said to have sought the protection of Admetus, the Molossian king, to whom in the days of his prosperity he had refused some small request. Envoys from Athens and Sparta came to demand his surrender, but Admetus, with a primitive respect for the claims of a suppliant, braved their threats and assisted his guest to cross the mountain passes of Pindus, to reach the Macedonian sea-board and at last to find safety from his countrymen in the splendid shelter of the Persian court.¹

Apart from this little incident, which seems somehow to have struck the imagination of the Greeks, since even after the lapse of eight centuries it is cited by a rhetorician of the Empire as an instance of the requital of evil with good,² we have no direct knowledge of Epirus between 480 and 430, but from our next view of the country—a view afforded by Thucydides—it is clear that these years had not been uneventful but had been marked by a decline of the Molossians before the rising power of the Chaonians, the last of the three great tribes. The homeland of this people lay—as we saw—to the north of the country between the river

¹ Plutarch, *Themistocles*, 24; Thucydides, I. 136. Meyer, III. 600, has suggested that it was at the time of the Leucas arbitration that Themistocles gave offence to Admetus. It seems possible that this same Admetus may have been Pindar's Molossian patron—the Achaean man of the 7th *Nemean*. Wilamowitz, *Pindaros*, p. 167, remarks that his name is appropriately Thessalian, but he also thinks—or thought—that the story that he befriended Themistocles is an invention, *Aristoteles und Athen*, I. 151.

² Libanius, *Epist.* 259.