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978-1-107-66368-8 - The Greek House: Its History and Development from the Neolithic Period to the Hellenistic Age

Bertha Carr Rider

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THE study of the Greek house, which but a decade ago began with those shadowy indications of plan and disposition found in the Homeric poems, has suddenly been carried back into the darkness of untold centuries by the amazing discoveries in Crete, and the consequent revelation not only of an advanced pre-Hellenic civilisation extending over thousands of years but of a complete chain of evidence right back into the dark ages when Europe first began to be inhabited by man.

This miraculous disclosure of a social era replete with life and artistic interest, the very existence of which was almost unsuspected before 1900, not only necessitates a new survey of Greek development as a whole but leads the question of the Hellenic house back into periods where a comparison with the dwellings of widespread and far roaming early tribes is essential, and even an examination of the house in its most primitive form in Europe.

It may be useful, then, at the outset to take a brief review of the general conditions of those early ages in Europe and the immediately connected area, North Africa, once joined to it through Spain and Sicily, in order to study the question of the probable origin of the Greek house, its primitive form and its connection with other synchronous buildings of a similar character.

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Though the presence of man in the Pliocene or last division of the Tertiary period seems in the light of recent discovery possible¹, yet no evidence from the nature of the case can be forthcoming as to his dwelling; we can only presuppose that it was natural and consisted of any shelter which he found ready to hand and which offered him a refuge from the danger of the moment².

With the Pleistocene or first division of the Quaternary period the evidence is rich and full with regard to Palaeolithic man, who lived

ὥστε ἀήσυροι
μύρμηκες ἄντρων ἐν μυχοῖς ἀνελίοις. (Aesch. *P.V.* 460.)

Like little ants in the sunless recesses of caves,

but had as yet no artificial shelter, and no graves or burial customs which have left any trace. The wonderful artistic activity of this stock is proved by such finds as those from the cave of La Madeleine in Dordogne³.

Our information concerning Palaeolithic man in the East European area is gleaned for the most part from North Africa, Asia Minor and Syria, for whether Crete was in those remote ages the connecting link with the African continent or not, it remains a fact that no vestiges whatever of Palaeolithic man have been found in that island⁴, though the evidence is so singularly complete from the succeeding period onwards.

The connection between Palaeolithic and Neolithic man, though it seems natural to assume a continuous evolution, has never been clearly proven⁵, and must have been interrupted by some sudden cataclysm, or perhaps the last Glacial Age.

¹ Cf. Sergi's "Tertiary Hominidae"—*Europa*, p. 70 sqq.

² Meitzen, *Wanderungen*, III. p. 464.

³ de Mortillet, *Le Préhistorique*, p. 411.

⁴ *B.S.A.* VI. p. 25.

⁵ Keane, *Ethnology*, p. 73.

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However this may be, there is but little doubt that Europe was repopulated after the last Ice Age by extensive migratory movements from the South and South-East, the seats of the earliest Neolithic culture¹, and that streams of emigrants spread gradually across the Straits of Gibraltar and up the Iberian peninsula to Gaul and Britain, as well as up the Danube to Central and West Europe. It need be a matter of no surprise, then, when similar funeral monuments are found in countries so far apart as Ireland and Greece, on the other hand it is quite natural to look for analogies in structure where men of the same common stock have been.

With the advent of the Neolithic culture, a much more advanced state of civilisation is found², the troglodytic stage is abandoned, monolithic and megalithic monuments make their appearance over an extended area, human dwellings of various kinds including lake dwellings are constructed, barrows and sepulchral chambers are made, and it is in this first period of extraordinary architectural activity that our study of the house must really begin.

The constructive energy of these tireless builders in stone is little short of miraculous, and many of their monuments are still standing in their simple heavy grandeur, to bear witness directly and completely with regard to the manner and style of the early artificial forms.

Before considering apart structures belonging to this period built on Greek soil, it will be well to form an idea of the parallel and often strikingly analogous arrangements in other connected areas.

At the very outset arises the question of the true relationship of the tomb and the house, and of the

¹ Ripley, *Races of Europe*, c. xvii. p. 463.

² Keane, *Ethnology*, c. vi.

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deductions which may legitimately be drawn from the one with regard to the other.

The palaeolithic troglodytes of Belgium and France buried their dead in natural grottoes and caves like those in which they lived¹, so that at this epoch no distinction is to be made. For later periods it has generally been assumed that the tomb of any given age may be taken as evidence for the house of preceding ages², religious conservatism preserving for the sacred rite of burial the architectural forms of by-gone generations. The Esquimaux actually leave the dead in the house they occupied when alive³; most races, however, have found a resting place for them in the earth, either in some sort of depository or in a chamber imitative of the house of the living.

The further question arises as to which was ultimately the earlier form, the house or the tomb. Man in the early stages of his development is a superstitious being standing in awe and dread before his departed ancestors, so that even if the tomb, as seems quite possible, does not precede the house in historic development⁴, it was yet so much more carefully and solidly built that it has come down to us intact through the ages, and provides us with some of the earliest architectural evidence we possess, where information regarding the actual house of the living is either inadequate or utterly lacking.

From the tomb, therefore, many of our deductions with respect to man's primitive artificial dwelling must necessarily be drawn. Its subterranean position is natural and fitting, so that an underground tomb built after a

¹ Lubbock, *Prehistoric Times*, p. 312.

² Cf. A. Buckland, *Journ. Anthropol. Inst.* ix. p. 152.

³ Lubbock, *op. cit.* p. 128.

⁴ Keane, *op. cit.* p. 126, note 1.

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house model does not perforce imply a previous underground dwelling, but is to be regarded simply as the house of the living transferred to the silence and darkness of the realms of the dead.

At the same time the view has been held (cf. Adler¹) that such tombs have their origin in the hut dug out in the hill-side, and point unmistakably to a stage when the dwellings of the living were also subterranean.

Leaving aside the monolithic types of building such as the menhirs, cycloliths, etc., which though eminently characteristic of this age do not immediately concern our subject, we will turn to the polyolithic types built up generally round a cell as embryo, in which the dead body was laid.

In some cases the mortuary nature of the monument can only be inferred, since it is often most difficult to decide in the case of a Neolithic structure badly used by the elements or by human hands, whether it was a house for the living or a tomb, but in general the older types would seem to be the dwellings of the dead. In any case we need not insist on any distinction in the earliest ages, for in some countries the evidence will be of one nature, in others of the other, and both sepulchral and domestic types are equally useful for the earliest styles of building.

¹ Preface to Schliemann, *Tiryns*, p. xxix. Cf. "weems" of present day in Scotland: Wilson, *Prehistoric Annals of Scotland*, 1. pp. 107-8.

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CHAPTER II

NEOLITHIC PERIOD IN NORTH AFRICA AND WEST MEDITERRANEAN BASIN

LET us then take a rapid glance at the earliest constructions in *North Africa and the Mediterranean basin*, in order to form an idea of the prevailing types in the regions surrounding Greece through which she might be influenced in her primitive development.

In North Africa the simplest forms of the polyolithic or cell type, viz. the cromlechs or dolmens, are found scattered all over the surface of the land along a coast line 1500 miles in length¹, from Tangiers and Lebdou to Tunis and Tripoli, and in view of the excavated finds no doubt remains that they were sepulchral chambers².

For example, on the plain of Gorra alone there are from two to three hundred burials³, showing all the various primitive types. The very simplest form consists of a table or large slab without supports, and we may perhaps assume that the corpse was buried in a hole in the rock beneath⁴. In the next stage the rock tomb is closed in front by a slab, in some three artificial walls

¹ Rhind, *Archæologia*, xxxviii. "On vestiges of ortholithic remains in N. Africa," p. 260.

² *ibid.* p. 254: pottery and bones were found in the cromlechs of Bainum.

³ Carton, *Découvertes épigraphiques et archéologiques faites en Tunisie*, p. 328.

⁴ *op. cit.* p. 331.

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occur, and finally we reach the real artificial cell composed of four sides on which the table or horizontal slab rests¹. This is surrounded by a tumulus consisting of large stones with a filling of small ones, which lean inwards towards the horizontal slab and almost reach it, so that the general form of the monument is that of a truncated cone², a probable prototype of the Nuraghi of Sardinia described below.

Another similar monument on the plain of Gorra has a rectangular sepulchral chamber approached by a descending passage or dromos, and surrounded by a regular circular enclosure of stones³, an arrangement recurring in the Talayots of the Balearic Isles and perhaps formerly in the Nurhags though no traces now remain.

This plan also occurs at Teboursouk. The tombs are of small proportions, one for instance at Teboursouk measuring 4.25 m. in diameter from the exterior, so that the limbs of the corpse must have been bent when it was deposited in the small rectangular chamber, an early example of a crouch burial⁴.

When two or three burials occur in the same enclosure the small rectangular tombs are side by side, and the enclosure often tends to become oval in form, while still remaining small⁵. One such at Dougga containing two rectangular sarcophagi has a diameter of 6 m.⁶

To the S. W. of Dougga is another large group of two or three hundred tombs with round, elliptical and square enclosures⁷: at Kern el Kebch also all types occur, from the simple slab to the twin tombs side by side with a common dividing wall and a circular enclosure⁸.

¹ Carton, *op. cit.* pp. 332–36.² *op. cit.* pp. 338–9.³ *op. cit.* p. 341, fig. 143.⁴ *op. cit.* p. 348, fig. 149.⁵ *op. cit.* p. 349, fig. 152.⁶ *op. cit.* p. 361, fig. 174.⁷ *op. cit.* p. 362.⁸ *op. cit.* p. 365, fig. 179.

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It is curious to notice how many of these dolmens, especially at Gorra and Bulla Regia, seem to assume the form of the neighbouring rocks, so that in the distance they are hardly to be distinguished from them.

At Bainum again about a hundred such tombs are preserved, scattered over an area of from ten to twelve acres¹, and at Djelfa the tombs are surrounded by circles of stones and sometimes even double circles².

Thus we have in North Africa a complete series of all the early forms, which we shall find reproduced and modified over an extended European area, probably peopled by tribes emanating from this vast continent. Even crouch burial which is so common a custom in Mycenaean times would seem to have been practised here in far earlier ages³.

The natural bridges to Europe are Sicily, Sardinia and Spain, where similar remains are found of tombs and houses.

About midway between the coast of Africa and Sicily lies the little island of *Pantelleria*⁴, whose interesting prehistoric remains may be briefly noticed. The grim, barren nature of its volcanic coast and the entire absence of earth made it necessary for the handful of inhabitants who must have been tempted to settle there on their way from Africa to Sicily to modify somewhat the original type of tomb, though the form is practically the same as in North Africa.

The remains of the dead were here deposited in artificial mounds, called *Sesi*, scattered about in the lava, and though more modest in character than the *Nuraghi* or *Talayots* they are yet wonderful constructions for

¹ Rhind, *l.c.* p. 253.

² Rhind, *l.c.* p. 258.

³ *vide* p. 7.

⁴ Orsi, *Pantelleria Mon. Ant.* ix. p. 451 sqq.

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men working in such an unyielding material without metal implements.

These tombs may be considered to be of the tholos type, though naturally somewhat rough in execution, and consist of a tapering mound 7 or 8 m. in height formed of unworked blocks of lava, the interstices being filled in with lava rubbish: the width at the base may be 10 m., at the top 5 m.

Within this mound or hillock is a number of small circular cells, each approached by a gallery, also of narrow dimensions. A typical tomb is No. 30 in Orsi's account: the mound is here elliptical, its dimensions being 8·70 × 8·40 × 2·40 m., the south-east gallery is 2·75 m. long by ·65 m. wide while the cell attached is 1·05 m. × 1·31 m. × 1·25 m. The "Sese Grande" though of nobler dimensions is of the same type¹.

In connection with a subsequent discussion we may notice here that the elliptical form occurs not only in some of the mounds but also in a Mursian house of the prehistoric epoch², while remains have been brought to light of two rectangular huts³. The bones found between the walls of these houses perhaps point to an age when the dead were actually interred in the house or quite near it as on other Neolithic sites, *e.g.* Spain⁴, Dimini and Sesklo⁵, Thoricus⁶, Orchomenos⁷, etc. This is a practice which did not entirely die out, for Semiramis the widow of Ninus, according to Diodorus Siculus⁸, had her husband

¹ Orsi, *Pantelleria Mon. Ant.* ix. pp. 491–2, figs. 38, 39 and 40.

² *l.c.* p. 460, fig. 8.

³ *l.c.* pp. 458–9, figs. 6 and 7.

⁴ Siret, *Les premiers âges du métal dans le sud-est de l'Espagne*, pp. 95, 102, 174.

⁵ Tsountas, *Αἱ προϊστορικαὶ ἀκροπόλεις Διμηρίου καὶ Σέσκλου*, pp. 131, 383.

⁶ 'Εφ. 'Αρχ. 1895, p. 228.

⁷ Bulle, *Orchomenos*, p. 67.

⁸ Diod. Sic. ii. 1.

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interred in the enclosure of the palace, and in our own times Wagner was buried in his garden.

The above-mentioned constructions are of great interest as evidence for the early appearance of the elliptical and rectangular house in South Europe, side by side with the circular tomb.

In the neighbouring island of *Malta* at Hagiar Kim and Mnajdra¹ considerable remains have been found of sepulchral chambers ovoid in form which must have had roofs of corbelled vaulting and may have been surrounded with a mound. They are probably of Neolithic origin, though Caruana regards them as Phoenician². The Tomb Caves which have been artificially worked with sharp metal tools certainly belong to a later period³. In the centre of the adjacent island of *Gozo* Neolithic remains of the same character are also standing⁴.

The prehistoric inhabitants of *Sicily* belonged, according to Orsi, to the same Mediterranean stock which came from Africa and was diffused through all the islands and coasts of the Mediterranean. The Sicani, the older branch, were a Neolithic people and left no trace of metal; the Siculi were Aeneolithic but belonged to the same race. Many rock-hewn tombs of Neolithic period consisting of a rectangular chamber, sometimes with others communicating, have been found, especially in the south-east of the island⁵.

The round form predominates in *Sardinia*, the soil of

¹ Caruana, *Megalithic antiquities of Hagiar Kim, Malta*, p. 3. *Archaeologia*, xxix. pp. 227–240, pls. 23–28.

² Caruana, *l.c.* pp. 8, 9.

³ *l.c.* p. 7.

⁴ Fergusson, *Rude Stone Monuments*, p. 416.

⁵ Orsi, *Atti del congresso internazionale di Scienze Storiche*, 1903, v. "Quattordici anni di ricerche archeologiche nel sud-est della Sicilia," p. 167.