

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69796-6 - Mediterranean Culture: The Frazer Lecture 1943

John L. Myres

Excerpt

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## MEDITERRANEAN CULTURE

## AN ESSAY IN GEOGRAPHICAL HISTORY

In the Frazer Lecture of 1937, Henry Balfour distinguished and compared what he described as ‘spinners’ and ‘weavers’ in anthropological research; those who supply the substantial well-scrutinized threads of attested fact, and those who will unite these, in the textile process, into a fabric with a pattern, interlacing the ‘warp’ of facts with the ‘weft’ of argument. Some of the most eminent of my predecessors have been ‘spinners’ and ‘weavers’ as well, like him whom these lectures have commemorated. But in a short hour, so few threads can be added to the warp, so few passes of the weft to the fabric and the pattern, that I propose to stand aside from the loom, and see how that fabric and pattern begin to look, into which any warp or weft of mine may have been interwoven. The fabric and the pattern: but not, I fear, the living colour: not because this is a lecture, not a book; nor because some of the colours have faded everywhere, and in some parts all; but because a more generous humanity and another order of literary art are required for *Psyche’s Task*. Yet of institutions and ideas, as of monuments, it is proper to ask, not only *what* they are, and *how* they work, but *when*, and *where*.

It is over fifty years since I first met Frazer, not as the author of the recent *Totemism* or *The Golden Bough*, but as explorer of Greek sites, prospective illustrator of

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*Pausanias*, and sympathetic observer of those beliefs and customs which lay nearest to the soil, in the substructure of Greek society; of those 'little gods', whom Homer and his Olympians might ignore, but whose divinity Hesiod acknowledged, when with Homer he 'made for the Greeks their gods'. In Italy, too, it was one of those 'little gods' in the grove of Aricia who furnished the text for *The Golden Bough*. My present concern, however, is not with gods, great or small, nor with those all-but-superhuman individuals, who like Hesiod's 'heroes' not only had authority and initiative in their lifetime, but continue to direct the course of events by their achievements. Both gods and immortals, in this sense, I take for granted, and turn to the 'little men' to whom both meant so much, the common folk of that *orbis terrarum*, round the Midland Sea, over which Greek freedom spread and Roman authority. What are the permanent features of their mode of life, without which nothing could have been achieved, either by gods or by heroes; upon which have been erected noble superstructures; into which, in evil times, Mediterranean man withdraws to recuperate? What, on the other hand, have been the fortunes of those outland peoples who have been injected into this unique region from elsewhere, deranging that primary culture, and themselves disintegrated by encounter with it?

*Orbis Terrarum.*

Let us take for granted—together with gods and heroes, and on the other side of the account—the physical and

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biological circumstances—what Buckle, Marx, and other physicists regarded as ‘controls’—which make this geographical region unique as a home for man; not for maintenance only, but for a good life, among those ‘external goods’ and enjoying them; an aspect of the matter on which Frazer loved to lavish his descriptive skill. But let us note, by way of precaution, how this regime, within a remarkable uniformity, nevertheless varies between oceanic and continental, and how the Mountain-zone, which embraces, or borders, or traverses the main sea-basins, is continuous also eastward into Iran.

Let us take for granted, also, the fundamental trinity-in-unity of its human population; again with the qualification that the men of the Mountain-zone and of the northern and the southern Flatlands remain continuous and relatively homogeneous breeds within their ancient habitats; and that where they have interpenetrated and interbred, the fair-seeming regime of these sea-boards austerely purges and clarifies that *sentina gentium* to a Mediterranean effluent. That regime, moreover, has itself been made austerer by man’s agelong devastation, replacing virgin forest by goat-ridden scrub-land or rain-swept rubble and rock. The ‘Hill of the Graces’, described by Herodotus as ‘rich in all kinds of trees’, was in the Tarhuna moorland between Misurata and the Wad-el-Kebir. Ovid’s *foliis umbrosa Calymne* has no trees left at all. Yet of unexploited Mediterranean we have vivid glimpse in Homer’s description, as Odysseus draws in-shore to Cyclops-land, and notes, prospector-like, both

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what it provides, and what it does *not* yet offer, but might be made to yield.

The first human exploitation follows almost as a matter of course, but some aspects of it deserve attention. Materials for such an enquiry as this are the remains of settlements and cultivation terraces, of many periods, plotted on the map; occasional descriptions and allusions in the literatures; and a few significant words, gems and nuggets out of the shingle of speech—*agroikos*, *apoikia*, *demokratia*. Greek folk-memory had its ‘acorn-eating men’, its cannibal Laestrygonians, and wholly pastoral Cyclops-folk, as well as ‘milk-eating men without sustenance’; that is, without cereal agriculture. When the gift of grain came to Eleusis, there were only piglets to offer to the Giver. All elements of the Mediterranean, as of the Biblical food-quest, came from the Near East, yet many are but improved strains of what was found wild in Mediterranean lands; so acclimatization was easy. Goats and sheep counted, and still count, for more than either swine or oxen; but all herding is accessory to agriculture, and the meanest of livelihoods. Agriculture, though it has the ox-drawn plough, made (and makes) large use of the hoe. Its basis is threefold, and all three crops—corn, wine, and oil—are the *élite* of the regional plants; the nobler grasses, a deep-rooted deciduous shrub, and a berry-bearing evergreen. Stone-fruit, fig, and mulberry came later out of Anatolia. Confined to the North African coast-oases is a tropical intruder, the date palm. As the Arabs say: ‘Put its feet in the river and its head

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in hell': the Mediterranean has little of either. Yet in one lush cove of eastern Crete palms grow wild.

A mode of life so dependent on the produce of trees is necessarily sedentary. Cultivable land being everywhere limited, the farm, as population outgrew subsistence, was extended uphill by terracing, downhill by reclamation of fen, both at the risk of devastation by rain-sbate. But the evil day was only postponed, and perhaps aggravated; the smaller areas suffering most, and the islands worst of all. From Minos to Mussolini, the gods look out over that world, and see it overfull of men; and a robust nature-worship, approved by gods old and new, offers no remedy.

Had either Greek city-state, or Italic *municipium*, or mediaeval Italian city, been a fundamental or essential form, or political *idea*, we might have expected each of them to have made a better struggle for survival; and the fact that each was superseded in its turn challenges the question: *what is*, in contrast with these efflorescences, the cultural root out of which they emerged, and into which their people have relapsed, again and again?

That there has been such abiding type or pattern of community, must have been the discovery of many who know the modern country-side, in Spain, in Italy, in Greece, in Anatolia, in Palestine; above all in Cyprus, Crete, and Sicily; in Sardinia and Corsica, and in the highlands of Atlantic Africa; or who have compared the outlay of a Minoan village, a deserted Moslem site in Crete, and a village of the Aurès or Khoumiria. These

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likenesses are not casual, nor due to geographical 'controls' over settlements and peoples formerly different; for they recur in detail among the arts and crafts, and the rest of the cultural heritage. In the bazaar of Tripolitan Homs, the hand-made pottery, which has survived alongside Arab *bilbils* and Hellenistic *amphorae*, resembles that of neolithic Cyprus and Malta. The downward tapering columns of Minoan 'palaces' have their prototype in the tree-trunks which are set roots upwards in the Aurès for better lodgment of roof-beams. The Berber women pin their 'Doric chiton' with a fibula on either shoulder, and weave esparto cornbins of the same stature and basket-ornament as their clay skeuomorphs, the Knossian *pithoi*. Whether still within the frame of tribal society, as in North Africa and in Albania, or self-contained where tribal structure has been long disintegrated, these economic units have essentially the same social structure; an association of hereditary groups engaged in the same food-quest, and administered by a more or less formal council of the heads of these groups.

All this gives vivid reality to Aristotle's account of the *kômê* as an economic and social association 'for more than diurnal use', namely to subserve the farmer's year; and he expressly contrasts this, and some peculiar groupings of its members, with the more inclusive aim and end of the *polis*. Concentrating his learning and critical reason on the *polis*, and specifically on its political achievement, he has diverted attention from alternative modes of advancement, some within his own experience, like the

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federal unions of Western Greece. He studied Carthage, because he ranked it as a *polis*; but he passed by the Numidian kingdom and the queer Libyan societies known to Herodotus, as he passed by the *pagi* and *municipia* of Italy, the Iberian communities described later by Diodorus, and the *nomoi* of Egypt. Even his genuine interest in Macedonian kingship did not extend to the structure of the Macedonian kingdom.

On some Mediterranean coasts, Greek colonies devastated the native communities, and the local principalities in which they were sometimes aggregated—for we hear of ‘kings’ and other territorial magnates. But though there are examples of perennial resentment and recurrent aggression, the colonists often made friendly agreements for trade and transport. Eventually there seems to have been more or less explicit dependence of tribes and townships on the Greek city for defence; and of the Greek citizens on native cultivators for maintenance: with occasional revolt against oppression, or transference of allegiance to native aggressors, such as the King of Macedon, or the Sabellian peoples of Italy.

In Sicily, the fertile and populous interior was organized by a native leader, taking advantage of feuds between Dorian and Chalcidian cities on the coast to press the claim of ‘Sicily for the Sicilians’; and it was remembered against imperial Athens that not only did she intervene between Dorian and Chalcidian states, but supported a Sicel town, Egesta, against its Greek neighbour. Later, the ease with which Rome dominated the island was

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partly due to the desire of the Sicel communities to be rid of both Greek and Carthaginian parasites; and later again the so-called 'Slave Wars' were dangerous because the 'slaves' not only included native serfs, but had the support of the country-side, and held the Sicel sanctuary and fortress of Enna. In Sardinia and Corsica we know less of the native communities, but enough of their resistance to Rome, to draw similar conclusions. In Spain, the position had been complicated, before the Roman and even the Punic occupation, by Celtic immigration; and in the regions east of Celtic Italy, by Illyrian, Thracian, and earlier movements out of Danubian Europe. But the nearer we come to the north-western limit of Greek speech, the clearer is the evidence for 'unwalled villages'—the Aristotelian *kômê*—within the tribal framework, in classical times. In Roman Caria survived what Strabo calls 'systems of demes' and here a Turkish administrative district with about thirty villages is still called the 'Carian plain' (*kar·ova*). Thucydides describes 'unwalled villages' in Aetolia. From such *kômai* a *polis* was constituted at Mantinea and in Elis in the fifth century, and into them unwanted Mantinea was dissolved in the fourth. In Thales' remedy for federal inefficiency in Ionia, the cities 'were to be inhabited as before, but to rank as if they were *demes*'. Most notable of all, in the immemorial *demes* of Attica we have the social and economic indivisibles into which the tribal *polis* was dissolved by Clisthenes, and out of which the new ten tribes were compiled. It is quite unnecessary to suppose that the new



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political term *demokratia* was coined for Attic use. It is certainly older than Clisthenes, and goes back, as a term of abuse, to the Homeric contrast of *demos* and *polis*. In the mouth of the 'man-about-town'—*polites*, *asteios*, *agoraios*—it meant government by country-cousins—*agroikoi* or at best *demotai*—who had a 'tavern in the town' like the men of Decelea, but little more. Many other Greek city-states are known to have had such sub-structures, sometimes explicitly described as *demoi* or *kômai*.

It has been necessary to anticipate the study of such relations between primary economic associations, and the political organisms which embody them, in order to establish both their priority and a geographical distribution so wide that they may be accepted as characteristic, and probably ubiquitous, in Mediterranean lands, except where agriculture was impracticable.

Such, then, were the primary associations of sedentary folk, throughout Mediterranean lands; close-knit villages, producing, maintaining, replacing their inhabitants in such mode of life as their surroundings allowed; and governed by the headmen of each tribal group, or ward, which composed them. In the remoter regions, Tunis and Algeria, Balkan lands, Anatolia, and Syria, this is the normal aggregate, and limit of social advancement; into these all higher cultures relapse, where conditions become austere. Even Greek cities occasionally went into liquidation. When Athens became the capital of modern Greece, it was a dilapidated hamlet of this kind, its tiny church,

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the *monasteraki*, crouching by Hadrian's ruined market and the Turkish mosque. Defensible positions being rare, and water-supply within reach of them even rarer, proximity to the fields is secondary and a matter of degree: in the busiest season and shortest nights men keep their 'feast of tabernacles' in wind-breaks among the corn. Herdsmen, similarly, move with the flocks seasonally between upland and lowland pastures; and this transhumance, like all vestiges of nomadism, stunts economic and social advancement, as may be seen to-day in Sicily and South Italy, Eurafrica, Anatolia, and most of the Mountain-zone. Physical discontinuity of cultivable land obstructs intercourse, and concentrates attention on local affairs and especially on local grievances; for it is the least civilized individuals—upland goatherds, 'wild, seditious, rambling' like their charges—who encounter neighbours like unto themselves on the ridges.

For the satisfaction of needs or desires beyond this traditional and austere routine, men must seek abroad: (1) for maintenance, if that fails them at home—and to this we must return, (2) for material rarities—metals, drugs, amulets, and (3) for needs of the soul, when the 'little gods' are helpless. These external needs the *bazaar* and the *sanctuary* exploit, perennially, without claiming political dominance themselves; though either may become the regional base for dynastic rule—Damascus under Benhadad and Hazael, Palmyra under Zenobia, Jerusalem under Solomon and the Maccabees.

In a region so physically uniform it was necessary to