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978-1-108-04235-2 - Notes and Observations on the Ionian Islands and Malta: With Some Remarks on Constantinople and Turkey, and on the System of Quarantine as at Present Conducted: Volume 1

John Davy

Excerpt

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## NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

ON

## THE IONIAN ISLANDS AND MALTA.

## CHAPTER I.

## HISTORICAL NOTICES OF THE IONIAN ISLANDS AND MALTA.

Features of Difference between the Ionian Islands and Malta. Points of Resemblance in their History. Early flourishing Condition of the Ionian Islands in the Homeric Age. Their subsequent Fluctuations, and Subordination to Greece and Rome. Their further Degradation and Subjection in the Middle Ages. Form of Government when subject to Venice. Changes undergone before coming under the Protection of Great Britain. Obscurity of the Early, and imperfection of the Later, History of Malta, extending from the Fabulous Period to the 16th Century, when ceded to the Knights of St John. Condition of the Island under the Rule of the Order. Particulars in Illustration. Surrender of the Island to the French. Flourishing Condition under the Protection of Great Britain, as a great Commercial Entrepôt. The Plague of 1813. Its Consequences; with the Opening of the Ports of Europe on the Cessation of War in 1814.

SITUATED in the same sea, distant from each other little more than three hundred miles, enjoying essentially the same climate,—it might, perhaps, be expected, that the Ionian Islands and Malta would be very similar, and that the history of the one would be very little different from that of the other; but

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the contrary of this is the case, and in a remarkable manner, and not even limited to the civil history of the two countries.

Although their solid geological structure and the incumbent soils are very analogous, yet the aspects presented in their scenery are very different, as are also their productions. The Ionian Islands generally are distinguished for beauty of landscape, for luxuriance of vegetation. Malta is remarkable for apparent nakedness of surface, and an almost total absence of those features which constitute beauty. Where cultivation is neglected in the one,—the myrtle, the arbutus, the ilex, the cypress, commonly spring up, especially where most conspicuous, in the low grounds near the shore; whilst, in the other, similarly circumstanced, in the place of such a rich and beautiful shrubbery, will be found only low plants, such as can exist in a shallow soil capable of bearing long continued drought, amongst which the thistle may be mentioned as most conspicuous. Nor are the products of cultivation (confining the attention to the more prominent, and, as it were, the staples) less strongly marked: these in Malta are chiefly annual crops, principally of grain and cotton; whilst in the Ionian Islands, they are principally the olive and the vine,—one perdurable, the other of great durability.

Comparing the two countries, I apprehend it is not fanciful to say, that the one has more the European character, the other more the African: and, if

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their productions and aspect suggest this idea, it is greatly heightened by their population. The inhabitants of the Ionian Islands, it can hardly be questioned, are the descendants of the ancient Greeks; the antique beauty is common amongst them; they speak the same language, use the same written character, and, as far as regards person, may be considered a fine example of a European race. The Maltese speak a dialect of the Arabic, and are decidedly of Arabian descent,—with which their dark complexion accords, as well as many of their habits and manners.

The remains of antiquity, too, in the two countries, scanty as they are in both, point to the same difference. In the Ionian Islands, the most conspicuous are the old Greek walls, commonly called, from the magnitude of the blocks composing them, Cyclopians,—and tombs, formed as were the ancient Greek tombs, and containing similar relics.\*

In Malta, including Gozo, the most remarkable are, the Giant's Tower in the latter, reminding one

\* The only tombs I ever saw opened in the Ionian Islands, were some in the neighbourhood of the Cyclopians Walls of Samos in Cephalonia. They were in the form of oblong chests, about six feet long and three broad, and about the same depth, either made of four slabs of limestone, nicely fitting, or cut out of the limestone rock, and covered to the depth of about a foot with earth; their direction was commonly east and west; bones were found in most of them; in some, vases with ashes; in many, large quantities of bones, as if they were family vaults; the common accompaniments were a piece of money in the mouth, lamps arranged here and there, vases for wine and oil of elegant antique shapes.

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at the same time of the Cyclopien architecture of Greece, and of the Druidical of Britain, supposed to be Phenician,\*—and the tombs in the rocks, cut out of their solid substance.†

\* This very singular structure is composed of two portions, parallel, adjoining and similar, one larger than the other, each containing three compartments, communicating. The walls (no roof is remaining, if there ever was one) are formed of large stones, mostly of irregular form; some of them of enormous dimensions, more than fifteen feet long, and hardly less in breadth, and, like the old Greek walls, not connected by cement. In the enclosed spaces, which are circular, or elliptical, there are the remains of altars, or what have been conjectured to be such. No inscriptions or coins have been discovered in the excavations hitherto made; and nothing throwing any satisfactory light on the age of the work, or even of the people by whom raised. It is pretty clear that it is neither Grecian nor Roman in character; the evidence that it is Phenician, I apprehend, is rather negative than positive. Similar remains, and on a more extensive scale, have recently been brought to light in Malta, close to the village of Krendi.

† Such tombs are common in Malta; the most remarkable, independent of the catacombs under Rabbato, are the excavations in the steep rocky side of the hill of Bengemma, in the wild, almost desert district about two miles to the north-west of Citta Vecchia. They are described and figured by Abela, but not very accurately;—he mentions and represents three rows in the face of the rock;—I found only two. The excavations are probably of a mixed nature, some designed for dwelling apartments, others as burying-places. The largest I saw might be 12 or 14 feet wide, about 24 feet long, and 12 high. There was a niche in the inner wall opposite the entrance, slightly hollowed, as if for holding water; and in the side walls, in several places, the rock was perforated, as if for the purpose of passing a cord through to fasten cattle. It is the smaller excavations that have the character of tombs. The catacombs just mentioned have also been described by Abela; but the plan he gives of them is too irregular; they are evidently a necropolis, and a very curious one.

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But, though dissimilar in some respects,—in others, in their history they perfectly agree, especially in their dependency on foreign states, their successive occupancy by different dominant powers, the changes of government to which they have been subjected in consequence, and, as far as we can see, the inconsiderable effect which has been produced on either thereby. I allude, of course, to the mass of the people, and chiefly the lower ranks,—the inhabitants of the country and villages,—not the upper classes in the towns, the educated few, who are exposed to all the influences of the local government, with which they are commonly connected, and on which they are almost always dependent.

Of the Ionian Islands the earliest account we have we owe to Homer. Judging from his descriptions, which have much of the charm of verisimilitude, if not drawn from the life, these islands, at that early period, appear to have been well cultivated and populous, and in relation to the arts, in a more advanced state, perhaps, than at present. Take, for instance, the poet's description of the palace of Alcinoüs :—

“ Ulysses, then, toward the palace moved  
Of King Alcinoüs ; but immersed in thought  
Stood, first, and paused, ere with his foot he press'd  
The brazen threshold ; for a light he saw  
As of the sun, or moon, illuming clear  
The palace of Phæacia's mighty king.  
Walls plated bright with brass, on either side,  
Stretch'd from the portal to the interior house,

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With azure cornice crown'd ; the doors were gold,  
 Which shut the palace fast ; silver the posts,  
 Rear'd on a brazen threshold ; and above,  
 The lintels, silver, architrav'd with gold.  
 Mastiffs, in gold and silver, lined the approach  
 On either side, by art celestial framed  
 Of Vulcan, guardians of Alcinoüs' gate,  
 For ever unobnoxious to decay."\*

The abundance of gold and silver, of brass, and of ivory, at that time, judging from Homer's mention of their application to ordinary purposes, is very remarkable, and, with other circumstances, indicative of enterprise and success in commerce, much superior to its present languid state in these islands. And a similar remark, perhaps, applies to agriculture. Even of Ithaca he says :—

“ Rugged it is, not yielding level course  
 To the swift steed ; and yet no barren spot,  
 However small, but rich in wheat and wine ;  
 Nor wants it rain or fertilizing dew,  
 But pasture green to goats and beeves affords ;  
 Trees of all kinds, and fountains never dry.”

Forests, it is probable, then were not uncommon. Mount Neritos, in Ithaca, now a naked mountain, was then said to have been clothed with wood ; and Zante, then, as afterwards by Virgil, was characterized as wooded. The diet of the people seems then to have been far more substantial than in the present time, and to have consisted almost entirely of animal food and bread, with wine for drink, and that old.

\* *Odyssey*, B. vii., translated by Cowper.

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The same fruits appear to have been common then as now, excepting the orange, and lemon, and pomegranate, which were long after introduced.\* But the olive, probably, was not plentiful then, nor used ordinarily for the table; it seems chiefly to have been cultivated for its oil, which was applied to the purpose of anointing after bathing. In viewing the favourable picture of these times and regions, as drawn by the poet, allowance must of course be made for the aiming at effect by poetical embellishment; but all due allowance made, sufficient proof, I apprehend, is still afforded of what has been advanced above. In the notice of the garden of Alcinoüs, various kinds of fruit trees are described as always in fruit and flower,—the plum, the pear, the apple, and grape. That these fruits were the produce of the gardens of Corfu at that time, may perhaps be considered as fact; and the perpetual flowering and bearing fruit, as the embellishment for heightening effect; and so of other particulars. Then, as for many centuries after, in political condition the Ionian Islands seem to have been analogous to Continental Greece, and, at that very time, to have been under a mixed government, not, perhaps, unlike the government of Scotland, when an independent king-

\* The orange, probably, has not been known in these islands above two centuries. Bishop Pratt, in his *History of the Royal Society*, published in 1667, noticing the beneficial effects of transplanting, and how they redound to the great advantage of the undertakers, adds, “The orange of China being of late brought into Portugal, has drawn a great revenue every year from London alone.”

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dom,—a monarchy, checked by an aristocracy in the lowlands, and by clanship in the mountains.

This early and poetical period of the history of the Ionian Islands, is by far the most brilliant and interesting, affording a remarkable proof of the power of genius in its hold of the human mind, especially when contrasted with that which followed, namely, of authentic history. From the remote Homeric time, down to the present time, with a very small number of exceptions, these islands have been little conspicuous in the page of history, whether from a want of prominent events, or of historians, or of both. They never appear to have taken any lead in the affairs of Greece, or, with the exception of one or two occasions, to have entered into rivalry with the influential states, or to have availed themselves of any of the many opportunities which offered, of earning honourable distinction. Whilst Greece was free, in its best times, the more important of these islands, as Corfu, Zante, and Cephalonia, appear to have enjoyed a certain degree of freedom, under republican forms of government,—sometimes, it may be inferred, independent, but more frequently in alliance, and under the influence and control either of Athens, or of Sparta, and never united in common league.

When Xerxes invaded Greece, these islands seem to have attained considerable power, especially Corfu; sixty triremes were prepared by the latter island on that emergency; and in the message of the Corcyrians



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## THE IONIAN ISLANDS.

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to the Persian King, they described themselves as a naval power, second only to the Athenians, of which, in the occurrences that led to the first Peloponnesian war, they afforded demonstrative proof, in the great naval victory gained by them over the Corinthians, with the capture of fifteen ships. In the same war, Zante also gave proof of its strength and of its prowess. It afforded aid to Corfu of one thousand men; and when invaded by the Lacedemonians with a fleet of one hundred vessels and one thousand light-armed troops, the Zantiots successfully opposed, and expelled them. During the struggle of this terrible war, the courage of the Ionian people, as of the Greeks generally, appeared to more advantage than their morals. The great historian of the tragic events describes a thorough licentiousness to have prevailed; and speaking specially of Corfu, he says —“ The whole order of human life was, for a season, confounded in that city.” On the decline of Grecian liberty, these islands were alternately the prey of one or other conqueror, until they became, in common with Greece, an integral part of the Roman empire, included in the province which bore the name of Achaia. Under Roman rule, they appear to have remained undisturbed in ignoble tranquillity, like so many other parts of the Roman dominions, until the invasion of the Goths, A.D. 255, when Valerianus and Gallienus were emperors, and when they were cruelly devastated. Then it is supposed that the principal monuments of the ancient times were de-

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stroyed, and so unsparingly, by the barbarians, that hardly a vestige was left; thus accounting for the remarkable deficiency of such remains now observable.

In the barren annals of the lower empire, few events of importance or interest are recorded of these islands. Ravaged and conquered by the Vandals, they were recovered by Belisarius. When the provinces of the empire underwent subdivision, shortly after, in the reign of Heraclius Libicus, the Ionian Islands were attached to the prefecture of Lombardy, and so continued, either united to Lombardy or Sicily, for the space of 250 years, until the time of Leo the Philosopher, who formed them into a province apart, under the title of Tema of Cephalonia. This arrangement lasted about 300 years, until the beginning of the thirteenth century, when the Greek empire was broken up by the conquests of the Franks. During the period that elapsed from this event to that of their coming under the Venetian rule, the history of the Ionian Islands is very confused. They appear to have been variously governed, principally by chiefs of Norman extraction, and by princes of the house of Valois. In 1386, Corfu was yielded up to Venice, on certain conditions, settled between the Republic and the Corcyrian delegates, not unfavourable, at first sight, to the interests of that island, and which were joyfully accepted by the people; \* and in

\* This was after the death of Charles, the third king of Hungary, Jerusalem and Sicily, under whose protection the island had been.