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978-1-108-08220-4 - A History of Greece: To the Death of Alexander the Great

John Bagnell Bury

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A History of Greece

This book, originally published in 1900, was the major work of the classical historian J.B. Bury, became a standard textbook on the topic of ancient Greek history to the death of Alexander the Great for almost a century, and in its updated form is still studied today. Bury had studied philosophy as well as classics at Trinity College, Dublin, and had travelled widely in Greece, but was better known until the publication of this work for his two-volume *History of the Later Roman Empire* (also reissued in this series), and many of his other works also deal with the Byzantine period. He describes in the preface his decision to limit the extent of his history: 'compression into a single volume often produces a more useful book'. This magisterial and very readable synthesis of political and military history encompasses nearly three millennia and the whole of the Mediterranean and Near East.

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A
HISTORY OF GREECE
TO THE
DEATH OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT

BY

J. B. BURY, M.A.

HON. LITT.D. DURHAM; HON. LL.D. EDINBURGH; CORRESPONDING MEMBER OF THE
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WITH MAPS AND PLANS

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PREFACE

IN determining the form and character of this book, I have been prompted by two convictions. One is that while, in writing a history based on the original authorities and from one's own personal point of view, it is natural and certainly easier to allow it to range into several volumes, its compression into a single volume often produces a more useful book. In the case of a new history of Greece, it seemed worth while to undertake the more laborious task. The other opinion which I venture to hold is this. So far as history is concerned, those books which are capable of enlisting the interest of mature readers seem to me to be best also for informing younger students. Therefore, while my aim is to help education, this book has in view a wider circle than those merely who are going through a course of school or university discipline.

It was a necessary consequence of the limitations of space which I imposed upon myself, that literature and art, philosophy and religion, should be touched upon only when they directly illustrate, or come into some specially intimate connexion with, the political history. It will be found that I have sometimes interpreted this rule liberally; but it is a rule which could be the more readily adopted as so many excellent works dealing with art, literature, and philosophy are now easily accessible. The interspersions, in a short political history, of a few unconnected chapters dealing, as they must deal, inadequately with art and literature seems useless and inartistic.

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The existence of valuable handbooks, within the reach of all, on constitutional antiquities has enabled me, in tracing the development of the Athenian state or touching on the institutions of other cities, to omit minor details. The reader must also seek elsewhere for the sagas of Hellas, for a geographical description of the country, for the topography of Athens. On the topography of Athens, and on the geography of Greece, he will find excellent works to his hand.

There are two cautions which I must convey to the reader, and it will be most convenient to state them here. The first concerns the prehistoric age, which is the subject of the first chapter of this work. The evidence gathered by the researches of archaeologists on the coasts and islands of the Aegean during the last twenty years, as to the civilisation of prehistoric Greece, brought historians face to face with a set of new problems, for which no solutions that can be regarded as certain have yet been discovered. The ablest investigators differ widely in their views. Fresh evidence may at any hour upset tentative conclusions and force us to seek new interpretations of the data. The excavations which are now to be undertaken in Crete, at last restored to its own Greek world, may lead to unexpected results that may transform the whole question. Thus prehistoric Greece cannot be treated satisfactorily except by the method of discussion, and in a work like this, since discussion lies outside its scope, a writer can only describe the main features of the culture which excavation has revealed, and state with implied reserve the chief general conclusions, which he considers probable, as to the correlation of the archaeological evidence with the literary traditions of the Greeks. He must leave much vague and indefinite. The difficulty of the problems is increased by the circumstance that the literary evidence concerning the doings and goings of the early Greek folks is largely embedded in myth and harder to extract from its bed than buried walls or tombs from their coverings of earth. The importance of the pre-Greek inhabitants of Greece, the mixed ethnical character of the historical Greeks,

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the comparatively early date of the "Ionian" migration, the continuity of Aegean civilisation, the relation of the so-called "Mycenaean" culture to the culture described by Homer,—these are the main points which I have been content to emphasise.¹

The second caution applies to all histories of Greece that have been written since the days of Ephorus. The early portion of Greek history, which corresponds to the seventh and sixth centuries B.C., is inevitably distorted and placed in a false perspective through the strange limitations of our knowledge. For at that time (as well as in the centuries immediately preceding, which are almost quite withdrawn from our vision) the cities of the western coast of Asia Minor formed the most important and enlightened part of the Hellenic world, and of those cities in the days of their greatness we have only some disconnected glimpses. Our knowledge of them hardly begins till Persia advances to the Aegean and they sink to a lower place in Greece. Thus the pages in which the Greeks of Asia should have the supreme place are monopolised by the development of elder Greece; and the false impression is produced that the history of Hellas in the seventh and sixth centuries consisted merely or mainly of the histories of Sparta and Athens and their immediate neighbours. Darkness also envelops the growth of the young Greek communities of Italy and Sicily during the same period. The wrong, unfortunately, cannot be righted by a recognition of it. Athens and Sparta and their fellows abide in possession. *Les absents ont toujours tort.*

In the Notes and References at the end of the volume I have indicated obligations to modern research on special points. Here I must acknowledge my more general obligations to the histories of Grote, Freeman (*History of Sicily*), Busolt, Beloch, E. Meyer (*Geschichte des Altertums*), and Droysen. Though other histories of high reputation, both English and foreign, have

¹ It has been a disappointment to me that Professor Ridgeway's promised work on the "Mycenaean" age has not yet appeared.

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been respectfully consulted, it is to those mentioned that I am chiefly indebted. But I owe perhaps a deeper debt to the writings of one who, though he has never written a formal history of Greece, has made countless invaluable contributions to its study—Professor U. von Wilamowitz-Möllendorff. With some of his conclusions I do not agree, but I would express here deep sympathy with his methods and admiration for the stimulating virtue of his writings.

Several friends have been good enough to help me. The book has had the advantage of the criticisms of a master of the subject, Mr. Mahaffy, who most kindly read through the proof-sheets. The first chapter is enriched by a small map of the “Mycenaean” sites of Crete, marked for me by Mr. J. L. Myres. Mr. Cecil Smith assisted me in the matter of illustrations taken from antiquities in the British Museum; and Professor Percy Gardner superintended the preparation of some photographs from busts in the Oxford Galleries.

All the plans and many of the maps (including Bactria and North-Western India) were roughly sketched by myself and then properly drawn by the skilful cartographers Messrs. Walker and Boutall. In the case of a plan or map that is not current, I have stated in the List of Illustrations to what work I am indebted. Nearly all the reproductions of coins are from coins in the British Museum.

My obligations to Messrs. R. and R. Clark will be understood by those who have had the good fortune to have had works printed at their press.

J. B. BURY.

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