

XXIII THE GREEKS

Now while after Solomon (whose reign was probably about 960 B.C.) the divided kingdoms of Israel and Judah were suffering destruction and deportation, and while the Jewish people were developing their tradition in captivity in Babylon, another great power over the human mind, the Greek tradition, was also arising. While the Hebrew prophets were working out a new sense of direct moral responsibility between the people and an eternal and universal God of Right, the Greek philosophers were training the human mind in a new method and spirit of intellectual adventure.

The Greek tribes as we have told were a branch of the Aryan-speaking stem. They had come down among the Ægean cities and islands some centuries before 1000 B.C. They were probably already in southward movement before the Pharaoh Thothmes hunted his first elephants beyond the conquered Euphrates. For in those days there were elephants in Mesopotamia and lions in Greece.

It is possible that it was a Greek raid that burnt Cnossos, but there are no Greek legends of such a victory though there are stories of Minos and his palace (the Labyrinth) and of the skill of the Cretan artificers.



STATUE OF MELEAGER

Note the progress in plastic power from the earlier wooden statue on left

Photo: Sebah & Foaillier

Like most of the Aryans these Greeks had singers and reciters whose performances were an important social link, and these handed down from the barbaric beginnings of their people two great epics, the *Iliad*, telling how a league of Greek tribes besieged and took and sacked the town of Troy in Asia Minor, and the *Odyssey*, being a long adventure story of the return of the sage captain, Odysseus, from Troy to his own island. These epics were written down somewhere in the eighth or seventh century B.C., when the Greeks had acquired the use of an alphabet from their more civilized neighbours, but they are supposed to have been in existence very much earlier.

Formerly they were ascribed to a particular blind bard, Homer, who was supposed to have sat down and composed them as Milton composed *Paradise Lost*. Whether there really was such a poet, whether he composed or only wrote down and polished these epics and so forth, is a favourite quarrelling ground for the erudite. We need not concern ourselves with such bickerings here. The thing that matters from our point of view is that the Greeks were in possession of their epics in the eighth century B.C., and that they were a common possession and a link between their various tribes, giving them a sense of fellowship as against the outer barbarians. They were a group of kindred peoples linked by the spoken and afterwards by the written word, and sharing common ideals of courage and behaviour.

The epics showed the Greeks a barbaric people without iron, without writing, and still not living in cities. They seem to have lived at first in open villages of huts around the halls of their chiefs outside the ruins of the Ægean cities they had destroyed. Then they began to wall their cities and to adopt the idea of temples from the people they had conquered. It has been said that the cities of the primitive civilizations grew up about the altar of some tribal god, and that the wall was added; in the cities of the Greeks the wall preceded the temple. They began to trade and send out colonies. By the seventh century B.C. a new series of cities had grown up in the valleys and islands of Greece, forgetful of the Ægean cities and civilization that had preceded them; Athens, Sparta, Corinth, Thebes, Samos, Miletus among the chief. There were already Greek settlements along the coast of the Black Sea and in Italy and Sicily. The heel and toe of Italy was called Magna Græcia. Marseilles was a Greek town established on the site of an earlier Phœnician colony.

Now countries which are great plains or which have as a chief means of transport some great river like the Euphrates or Nile tend to become united under some common rule. The cities of Egypt and the cities of Sumeria, for example, ran together under one system of government. But the Greek peoples were cut up among islands and mountain valleys; both Greece and Magna Græcia are very mountainous; and the tendency was all the other way. When the Greeks come into history they are divided up into a number of little states which showed no signs of coalescence. They are different even in race. Some consist chiefly of citizens of this or that Greek tribe, Ionic, Æolian or Doric; some have a mingled population of Greeks and descendants of the pre-Greek "Mediterranean" folk; some have an unmixed free citizenship of Greeks lording it over an enslaved conquered population like the "Helots" in Sparta. In some the old leaderly Aryan families have become a close aristocracy; in some there is a democracy of all the Aryan citizens; in some there are elected or even hereditary kings, in some usurpers or tyrants.



RUINS OF THE GREAT TEMPLE OF ZEUS AT OLYMPIA

Photo: Fred Boissonnas

And the same geographical conditions that kept the Greek states divided and various, kept them small. The largest states were smaller than many English counties, and it is doubtful if the population of any of their cities ever exceeded a third of a million. Few came up even to 50,000. There were unions of interest and sympathy but no coalescences. Cities made leagues and alliances as trade increased, and small cities put themselves under the protection of great ones. Yet all Greece was held together in a certain community of feeling by two things, by the epics and by the custom of taking part every fourth year in the athletic contests at Olympia. This did not prevent wars and feuds, but it mitigated something of the savagery of war between them, and a truce protected all travellers to and from the games. As time went on the sentiment of a common heritage grew and the number of states participating in the Olympic games increased until at last not only Greeks but competitors from the closely kindred countries of Epirus and Macedonia to the north were admitted.

The Greek cities grew in trade and importance, and the quality of their civilization rose steadily in the seventh and sixth centuries B.C. Their social life differed in many interesting points from the social life of the Ægean and river valley civilizations. They had splendid temples but the priesthood was not the great traditional body it was in the cities of the older world, the repository of all knowledge, the storehouse of ideas. They had leaders and noble families, but no quasi-

divine monarch surrounded by an elaborately organized court. Rather their organization was aristocratic, with leading families which kept each other in order. Even their so-called "democracies" were aristocratic; every citizen had a share in public affairs and came to the assembly in a democracy, *but everybody was not a citizen*. The Greek democracies were not like our modern "democracies" in which everyone has a vote. Many of the Greek democracies had a few hundred or a few thousand citizens and then many thousands of slaves, freedmen and so forth, with no share in public affairs. Generally in Greece affairs were in the hands of a community of substantial men. Their kings and their tyrants alike were just men set in front of other men or usurping a leadership; they were not quasi-divine overmen like Pharaoh or Minos or the monarchs of Mesopotamia. Both thought and government therefore had a freedom under Greek conditions such as they had known in none of the older civilizations. The Greeks had brought down into cities the individualism, the personal initiative of the wandering life of the northern parklands. They were the first republicans of importance in history.



THE TEMPLE OF NEPTUNE (POSEIDON), PÆSTUM, SICILY

Photo: Alinari

And we find that as they emerge from a condition of barbaric warfare a new thing becomes apparent in their intellectual life. We find men who are not priests seeking and recording knowledge and enquiring into the mysteries of life and being, in a way that has hitherto been the sublime privilege of priesthood or the presumptuous amusement of kings. We find already in the sixth century B.C.—perhaps while Isaiah was still prophesying in Babylon—such men as Thales and Anaximander of Miletus and Heraclitus of Ephesus, who were what we should now call independent gentlemen, giving their minds to shrewd questionings of the world in which we live, asking what its real nature was, whence it came and what its destiny might be, and refusing all ready-made or evasive answers. Of these questionings of the universe by the Greek mind, we shall have more to say a little later in this history. These Greek enquirers who begin to be remarkable in the sixth century B.C. are the first philosophers, the first "wisdom-lovers," in the world.

And it may be noted here how important a century this sixth century B.C. was in the history of humanity. For not only were these Greek philosophers beginning the research for clear ideas about this universe and man's place in it and Isaiah carrying Jewish prophecy to its sublimest levels, but as we shall tell later Gautama Buddha was then teaching in India and Confucius and Lao Tse in China. From Athens to the Pacific the human mind was astir.