The Development of Western Civilization

Narrative Essays in the History of Our Tradition from Its Origins in Ancient Israel and Greece to the Present

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THE ANCIENT GREEKS

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Foreword

The proposition that each generation must rewrite history is more widely quoted than practiced. In the field of college texts on western civilization, the conventional accounts have been revised, and sources and supplementary materials have been developed; but it is too long a time since the basic narrative has been rewritten to meet the rapidly changing needs of new college generations. In the mid-twentieth century such an account must be brief, well written, and based on unquestioned scholarship and must assume almost no previous historical knowledge on the part of the reader. It must provide a coherent analysis of the development of western civilization and its basic values. It must, in short, constitute a systematic introduction to the collective memory of that tradition which we are being asked to defend. This series of narrative essays was undertaken in an effort to provide such a text for an introductory history survey course and is being published in the present form in the belief that the requirements of that one course reflected a need that is coming to be widely recognized.

Now that the classic languages, the Bible, the great historical novels, even most non-American history, have dropped out of the normal college preparatory program, it is imperative that a text in the history of European civili-
zation be fully self-explanatory. This means not only that it must begin at the beginning, with the origins of our civilization in ancient Israel and Greece, but that it must introduce every name or event that takes an integral place in the account and ruthlessly delete all others no matter how firmly imbedded in historical protocol. Only thus simplified and complete will the narrative present a sufficiently clear outline of those major trends and developments that have led from the beginning of our recorded time to the most pressing of our current problems. This simplification, however, need not involve intellectual dilution or evasion. On the contrary, it can effectively raise rather than lower the level of presentation. It is on this assumption that the present series has been based, and each contributor has been urged to write for a mature and literate audience. It is hoped, therefore, that the essays may also prove profitable and rewarding to readers outside the college classroom.

The plan of the first part of the series is to sketch, in related essays, the narrative of our history from its origins to the eve of the French Revolution; each is being written by a recognized scholar and is designed to serve as the basic reading for one week in a semester course. The developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will be covered in a succeeding series which will provide the same quantity of reading material for each week of the second semester. This scale of presentation has been adopted in the conviction that any understanding of the central problem of the preservation of the integrity and dignity of the individual human being depends first on an examination of the origins of our tradition in the politics and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and the religion of the ancient Hebrews and then
on a relatively more detailed knowledge of its recent development within our industrial urban society.

The decision to devote equal space to twenty-five centuries and to a century and a half was based on the analogy with the human memory. Those events most remote tend to be remembered in least detail but often with a sense of clarity and perspective that is absent in more recent and more crowded recollections. If the roots of our tradition must be identified, their relation to the present must be carefully developed. The nearer the narrative approaches contemporary times, the more difficult and complicated this becomes. Recent experience must be worked over more carefully and in more detail if it is to contribute effectively to an understanding of the contemporary world.

It may be objected that the series attempts too much. The attempt is being made, however, on the assumption that any historical development should be susceptible of meaningful treatment on any scale and in the realization that a very large proportion of today's college students do not have more time to invest in this part of their education. The practical alternative appears to lie between some attempt to create a new brief account of the history of our tradition and the abandonment of any serious effort to communicate the essence of that tradition to all but a handful of our students. It is the conviction of everyone contributing to this series that the second alternative must not be accepted by default.

In a series covering such a vast sweep of time, few scholars would find themselves thoroughly at home in the fields covered by more than one or two of the essays. This means, in practice, that almost every essay should be written by a
different author. In spite of apparent drawbacks, this procedure promises real advantages. Each contributor will be in a position to set higher standards of accuracy and insight in an essay encompassing a major portion of the field of his life’s work than could ordinarily be expected in surveys of some ten or twenty centuries. The inevitable discontinuity of style and interpretation could be modified by editorial co-ordination; but it was felt that some discontinuity was in itself desirable. No illusion is more easily acquired by the student in an elementary course, or is more prejudicial to the efficacy of such a course, than that a single smoothly articulated text represents the very substance of history itself. If the shift from author to author, week by week, raises difficulties for the beginning student, they are difficulties that will not so much impede his progress as contribute to his growth.

This essay, *The Ancient Greeks*, by Mr. Morton Smith, is written to introduce the reader to the lively, restless, curious, and imaginative people who inhabited the Aegean world in the eleventh through third centuries B.C. Although the beginner in the field of European history is likely to know somewhat more about the civilization of the ancient Greeks than about that of most other early peoples, he is likely also to have glimpsed it through the golden haze of the traditional humanistic style of classical scholarship. Mr. Smith has achieved the unusual and refreshing feat of presenting the well-known heroes, writers, artists, statesmen, and philosophers in the cold light of everyday, where they can be seen at their intensely human—if still awe-inspiring—activities of fighting, farming, trading, arguing, playing, building: in short, creating that world of city-states which
served as no other human institution to educate its members
and posterity.

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Edward Whiting Fox

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THE ANCIENT GREEKS

By MORTON SMITH
II. The world of the Greeks
CHAPTER 1

Beginnings

GREEK culture developed around the Aegean Sea. Such parts of the Greek mainland as were important in the process were almost all coastal areas and mostly on the east coast of the peninsula. With them, the islands of the Aegean and the west coast of Asia Minor early took a major part in shaping the new civilization. And it was across seas, from the islands and coastslands of the Aegean, that the culture spread, to the shores of the Black Sea and the coasts of Italy, Sicily, and North Africa. In the Greeks, then, we have a people situated not on a land mass, but around a sea, a people who think of earlier times as a series of "thalassocracies," of periods when one or another power controlled the seaways.

Across the southern end of the Aegean Sea lies the island of Crete. Here civilization had begun to rise above the neolithic level at about the end of the fourth millennium B.C., when the use of copper was introduced apparently from Syria or southern Asia Minor. Trade with Egypt and with the islands of the Aegean accelerated this development, and by the end of the third millennium the island saw the flowering of a brilliant culture. The ruins of great, unfortified palaces testify to the wealth of the rulers, the
stability of the domestic government, and the control of the seas, which gave security from foreign enemies. The remains of towns from a somewhat later period testify to a considerable middle class, with a surprisingly high standard of living. Above all, a native artistic tradition, of unusual elegance and vitality, has left us frescoes, engraved gems, metal work, terra cotta, pottery, and carvings in stone and ivory. These show an amazing sense of color and feeling for line and an interest in movement which is unparalleled among the artistic works of the ancient Near East. They show a people, luxurious, sensuous, with both an intense delight in the human body and a liveliness in its representation, a people delighting in athletics, in boxing and displays of agility, but also in the world around them, in flowers and animals and the grotesque shapes of marine creatures. Among these remains are some which throw light on the religious practices current in the culture. Statuettes of goddesses or priestesses holding serpents have analogues in later Greek religion, and we can see, also, that bulls' horns and the double axe were important religious symbols. It is not unlikely that the powers of the underworld and of fertility were worshiped, particularly in the form of one or more great goddesses, but the subject remains speculative.

This Cretan culture has been called the Minoan, from a legendary king of Crete named Minos. Minoan culture was carried by traders to the shores of the countries around the eastern end of the Mediterranean. To Egypt and Syria, which had highly developed civilizations of their own, it contributed little. But in Greece about 1600 B.C. it inspired a new culture, the Mycenaean, named from the town of

\(^1\) All dates are B.C. unless otherwise specified.
Mycenae in the Peloponnese. The remains of this culture are widely distributed and are especially frequent around the coasts of the Peloponnese and up the eastern coast of Greece as far as Thessaly. They are sprinkled also across the southern islands of the Aegean and along the west coast of Asia Minor and are frequent in Rhodes. From Rhodes the Mycenaeans evidently moved on about 1400 to colonize Cyprus. At the same time their trading settlements in some towns along the Syrian coast became so important that they must have been almost in control of the towns. They carried on an extensive trade with Egypt, and in the west their connections extended to south Italy and Sicily. Such an expansion of trade was possible only at the expense of their Minoan rivals. From about 1500 on there is evidence that the Mycenaeans were replacing the Minoans as carriers and were manufacturing cheap imitations of Minoan ware. In the years following 1400 many sites in Crete were sacked and burned. It is plausible to attribute the destruction to Mycenaean raiders. From this time on, Minoan culture rapidly declined.

Mycenaean culture differed from Minoan in a number of respects. Instead of the rambling Cretan palaces the Mycenaeans often built fortified citadels of which the interior plans were at least relatively simple and well organized: a central sequence of courtyards and vestibules leading to a great hall with a hearth in the center. The fortification shows a military concern which often appears in Mycenaean art and is absent from most Cretan work. Mycenaean art gen-

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2 The Peloponnese is often referred to by another transliteration as the Peloponnesus. Since Greek does not transliterate accurately into English, students must expect to find variations in the spelling of Greek geographical terms in common usage.
erally is cruder and more vigorous, less decorative and more narrative, less concerned with women and with religious subjects, more apt to show horses and hunting, than is Minoan art. Amber is more frequent in Mycenaean remains and argues closer trading connections with northern Europe. Probably in the interests of trade, but perhaps also for military purposes, considerable road building was done around Mycenae. Elsewhere we find the Mycenaeans reclaiming marshlands by large drainage projects. Such public works suppose a supply of labor, probably forced, and capable organization.

Our knowledge of Mycenaean culture from archaeological remains can be filled out cautiously from such cultural memories in the Homeric poems as that which must lie behind the account of two rustic heroes entering the palace of a king:

They marveled at the house of the King nurtured of Zeus. For a glory as of the sun or of the moon shone from the high-roofed house of renowned Menelaüs. But when they had seen it to their satisfaction with their own eyes, they went and were bathed in well-polished bathtubs. Then, after the maids had washed them and anointed them with oil and wrapped woolen garments about them, they sat down on chairs beside Menelaüs the son of Atreus [Odyssey 4. 43–51].

And not only such general recollections of ancient glory, but even a number of details, references to the shapes of shields, for instance, have been proved by archaeological discoveries to be true to Mycenaean fashion.

These correspondences have been thought to prove the substantial truth of the historical events reported by the

[The English translations of Greek texts cited in this essay are by the author. Ed.]
poetic tradition behind the Homeric poems: Paris, a prince of Troy, visited the court of Menelaüs, King of Sparta, and went off with Helen, Menelaüs’ wife. Agamemnon, King of Mycenae, Menelaüs’ brother, organized a Greek expedition to get her back. The Trojans refused to give her up and the Greeks therefore besieged Troy for ten years. The city was finally taken by a stratagem—the Greeks pretended to go away, but left a huge wooden horse filled with soldiers; the Trojans breached their walls to get the object inside their city; that night the soldiers emerged and their friends returned. After the destruction of the city the Greek warriors went back to their homes, encountering various adventures on their various ways. When excavation of Troy showed that a city there had, in fact, been destroyed toward the end of the thirteenth century, the main outlines of the story above were thought to have been confirmed. But the ruins of the city do not prove that it was sacked for the reasons or by the people reported, and the historical value of the Trojan story remains dubious.

Between the most plausible date for the Trojan war, the last half of the thirteenth century, and the most plausible date for the present form of the Homeric poems, the ninth or eighth century, lie the dark ages of Greek history. They began with a wave of invasion across Asia Minor and down the Syrian coast, destroying the ancient civilizations of those areas as well as the more recent Mycenaean markets there. The invaders were beaten off from Egypt shortly after 1200, but kept their hold on the Syrian coast. Their piratical activities must have cut into the trade between Egypt and Mycenae. It is probable that Greece was invaded at the same time. Mycenae was destroyed about 1150, but whether by invaders or domestic revolution is un-
certain. The archaeological finds at excavated sites show no sudden introduction of a new culture, but rather a gradual deterioration of the traditional styles in the manufacture of pottery and other artifacts. It is likely, however, that a ruling class of invaders would have made the natives work for them, so the archaeological evidence does not prove that no invasion occurred. Greek traditions tell of several tribal movements in the three centuries after the Trojan war: a group of tribes called the Dorians moved from northern through central Greece into the Peloponnesse, of which they occupied the southern and eastern regions up to and including the Isthmus of Corinth; hence they pushed on through Crete and the southernmost Aegean islands to Rhodes and the southwest corner of Asia Minor. The Achaeans, whom the Homeric poems show ruling in Mycenae and the southern Peloponnese, now moved to the northern coast of the Peloponnese and drove out the Greeks who had been living there, who belonged to a group called the Ionians. These Ionians with the help of kinsmen from the neighborhood of Athens, and of other groups also, took over the central islands of the Aegean and the central area of the west coast of Asia Minor, while a similar migration by another group, the Aeolians, occupied the island of Lesbos and the northern section of the coast up to the Hellespont.

Of all these movements the dates and details are uncertain and the uncertainty extends to the definition of the groups concerned and of the Greeks in general. If we define the Greeks as those who used the Greek language, then there must have been Greeks in both the Minoan and the Mycenaean civilizations, for in the remains of both have been found documents written in a syllabic script known as
"Linear B," and these are composed in an early form of Greek. Further, the Greek population of Cyprus was evidently planted there by Mycenaean invasion. On the other hand, several other sorts of writing were current in Minoan culture and were probably used to write other languages. A considerable non-Greek population survived on Crete, Cyprus, and several islands of the Aegean and in some places of mainland Greece down to historical times. And Greek tradition reported that large non-Greek elements went into the make-up of the Ionians, in particular.

What is certain from the remains is that much of the Mycenaean cultural tradition was gradually lost. Monumental building disappeared. The spirals and curved lines of Mycenaean decoration gradually hardened into the circles and zigzags and "Greek keys" of a style known appropriately as the geometric. In pottery, the appearance of a great variety of wares, none of which is distributed over any considerable area, testifies to the decline of trade. The average level of technical skill shown in figurines and utensils sank to the level of barbarism. Writing disappeared.

Gradually a new cultural tradition began to establish itself, not only on the Greek mainland, but also in Ionia—that part of the coast of Asia Minor and its offshore islands settled by the Ionians. Mycenaean settlements had been planted here in the period before the invasions. Many later settlers may have come as refugees from the invaders of the mainland and have brought with them elements of the older civilization. We have seen that such elements are preserved in the Homeric poems, and the Homeric poems are the products of this new development. They stand at the beginning of Greek literature, at once the summary and supreme achievement of its peculiar virtues. Concerned with
man rather than the gods or the physical world, with individuals rather than society, but above all with men in their relations to each other, they have an intense delight in the strength and beauty of their bodies, the dexterity of actions, the power of speech and the glory of song, a dramatic delight which is the more intense because they see the human drama as a tragedy: Men are not like the blessed gods who live forever; the hero must kill and be killed; the traveler's destination is the grave. From the time of these poems forever the Greeks were set apart from all other peoples of the ancient world by the importance to them of the poetry of men.

The traditions about Homer, his blindness and his wanderings, may or may not have some historical basis, but the skillful construction of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* makes it probable that each was edited, if not composed, by a single genius. This is argued, too, by the peculiar position of the poems in Greek literature. They are far from containing all the material dealing with the Trojan cycle. The *Iliad* treats only of one incident toward the end of the war: Achilles, the best fighter on the Greek side, was insulted by Agamemnon and withdrew from the fighting. After his friend Patroclus was killed by the Trojan hero, Hector, he returned and killed Hector. The *Odyssey* treats only of the adventures of one hero, Odysseus, his wanderings after the siege of Troy and his return to kill the suitors who had moved into his household on the pretext of courting his wife, Penelope, and were plotting to murder his son, Telemachus. There was a large body of traditional poetry dealing with the other episodes of the war and its aftermath. Some of this poetry was cast into epic form by other poets, and some of their poems were occasionally attributed,
by individual critics, to Homer; but throughout antiquity the _Iliad_ and the _Odyssey_ held a place apart. On the other hand, it is doubtful that the same man produced both, and it is certain that both contain, not only general cultural tradition, but also accumulations of poetic material from the dark ages whence they both emerge. Both represent poets as singers attached to royal courts, who sang for the pleasure of their patrons, especially during and after meals, and who celebrated in their songs the deeds of famous men. Both present a common picture of the rulers for whom the court poets of the dark ages sang, and of their society, as those rulers wished to see it.

The king was primarily the leader of his people in war. When they were not at war he lived, in his great house, the life of a country gentleman, concerning himself with management of his estate, sacrifice to the gods, and maintenance of order among his people. Of his domestic virtues the poets most emphasized hospitality to strangers (a virtue in which they themselves had an interest). The essential royal virtues, however, were those of the military leader—wisdom in planning, courage, skill in fighting, physical strength. Leadership had first to be exercised in the small circle of the king’s council, the chiefs of the families or tribes over which he ruled. Here, too, he needed the other virtues characteristic of a warlike society, especially an extreme courtesy in dealing with men who were intensely concerned about their personal honor and apt to fight. The same courtesy was shown in dealing with women, especially of the upper class, and was normally extended to persons of lower class, so long as they knew their place and behaved accordingly.

Next in rank beneath the chiefs came their free male
followers, and these, both in peace and in war, formed an assembly which had to be won over to carry out the leader's proposals. That a member of the assembly, even in wartime, should speak against the leader was not unknown; when the situation arose, the leader might deal with it by giving the offender a public beating and threatening to strip him naked if he repeated the offense. This treatment would be most effective if the offender were ugly or, better yet, a cripple—to these poets a cripple was always good for a laugh. Such measures, however, were not usually necessary, particularly if the leader had that form of wisdom which was most admired—skill in speaking. To speak well in the assembly or the council was a gift of the gods, and the assembly in particular was, like the battle, the place where men attained honor. Since the Homeric poems soon became and long remained the standard texts memorized in elementary education, they exerted an immense influence throughout antiquity and in modern times by presenting this ideal of the gentleman.

For a people living on the shores of a sea, warfare, piracy, and trade were at first hardly distinguishable. So the king was also the leader in maritime adventures, in which the methods were adapted to the opportunities. Travel by sea was dangerous. The waters were uncharted and the ships were tiny—down to the beginning of the fifth century even warships customarily had no more than fifty oars. With oars and with a single removable mast on which a single square sail could be hoisted, they crept along from headland to headland, island to island, avoiding whenever possible the open sea. At night the ships were beached and the men camped on the shore. Yet by these methods they had already in Homeric times made the circuit of the
Mediterranean and gone beyond it. The stories of Odysseus' adventures reflect not only the legends of the ancient Near East, but also the yarns of sailors who had already been wind-bound on sand bars off Egypt, escaped from savages in Sicily, scraped through the straits of Messina, conversed with nymphs on the islands of the western Mediterranean, and sailed across the Black Sea to the magic land of Colchis and the misty marshes of the great rivers of the North, the land of the dead.

This world was full of gods. Almost any fortunate or unfortunate or extraordinary or important occurrence—the impulse to shoot an arrow, the fact that it hit or missed its target, the sort of wound it made if it did hit—was apt to be attributed to "a god" or "the god," without further identification. Besides this naïve piety, however, the Homeric poems describe a society of particular gods with local habitations, names, and well-defined characteristics. They are represented, roughly speaking, as members of the Homeric aristocracy, but with supernatural powers and subnormal inhibitions. As such they were conveniences for lively narrative and for the expression of ideas which in later literature were represented by the use of abstract terms. In concrete Homeric Greek it is impossible to say, abstractly, that the supernatural power which sanctions marriage worked to bring about the downfall of Troy. And even if possible, the abstract statement would have been colorless, an objection which cannot be brought against the Homeric way of putting things: Hera so hated the Trojans that she wanted to walk through the gates and eat them raw. Just how far Homer or the poets before him deliberately or unconsciously, in the process of literary creation, developed this naturalistic picture of the gods, we
can never be sure. On the one hand, some Greeks early came to believe that the picture was largely due to the influence of the Homeric poems. On the other, there is no doubt that the poems built on popular concepts and cults of the gods who figured largest in them: Zeus, god of the sky, Poseidon of the sea and of earthquakes, Hera of marriage, Athena of wisdom and skills (including warfare), Aphrodite of sexual pleasure, Apollo of the arts of young men (especially archery, music, and prophecy), Artemis of wild things (hence childbirth and hunting), Hephaestus of fire and metallurgy, Hermes of roads, and Ares of the fury of battle. From the earliest times, therefore, Greek religion contained the antithesis (which was to be important for philosophy) between general piety toward an indefinite divine power and specific worship of particular gods about whom fairly definite conceptions were current. By creating extremely anthropomorphic pictures of the gods and by giving these pictures the widest circulation, the Homeric poems sharpened the antithesis, but they did not create it.

Moreover, important as kingship and war and seafaring and the Homeric gods might be, they were all secondary to the essential concern of the great majority of the Greeks of the dark ages. That concern was getting food out of the ground. Ancient Greece, including Ionia and the islands, was always a largely agricultural society, and in early days, at least, the agricultural concern was far more important than any other.

The poet in whose work the agricultural side of life first found full expression, Hesiod, lived probably at the end of the eighth century, within a hundred years or less of the completion of the Homeric poems. Like the Homeric authors, he had connections with Asia Minor—his father
had come from there to mainland Greece—and he used the meter and much of the vocabulary of the Homeric poems. But where the poets of the courtly tradition are known merely by inference, Hesiod thrusts himself on our attention as an individual of a lower class who wants his rights and is determined to be heard. He did not compose for the amusement of a court circle, but for practical purposes: to ridicule a shyster brother who was trying to do him out of his share of the family estate, to counterbalance his brother's bribes and set him an example of a way of life by which to earn an honest living.

The way of life Hesiod described in his poem entitled *Works and Days* was that which occupied most of the time of most of the Greeks from the tenth to the fifth centuries: ploughing in November and December, surviving the cold in January, pruning vines in February and March, sailing in April and May, reaping in May and June, threshing and winnowing in July, sailing again in July and August, vintage in September, woodcutting in October.¹ Along with agriculture, sailing was conspicuous, although Hesiod himself did not like it. The small farmer might also dabble in trade (or piracy). This versatility was a consequence both of the geographical position of the Greeks as a people around a sea and of the long, dry Mediterranean summer, with its months of enforced agricultural idleness in fine weather—a season made for sailing, fishing, fighting, athletic

¹ Notice that this is a man's calendar. It says almost nothing of the important domestic industries which were the work of women—the preparation of food and the manufacture of textiles. Also it says almost nothing of pottery and of metal work, which were done by men but were already, to a large extent, in the hands of relatively few specialists.
competitions, the recitation of epic poetry, and interminable conversations on every subject under the sun. Most of the rest of the year was filled with the drudgery of farming. The two staple crops were grain, usually barley, and grapes. Grain was the gift of Demeter and wine of Dionysus, the two great gods of the peasants, neglected in the Homeric poems. Both had been worshiped in Mycenaean times, and the fact that their cults had survived the dark ages argues that the peasant population had not been generally uprooted by the invasions. Hesiod did not mention the olive, but it was already being grown for food and was to become the third staple of Greek agriculture, not only a food itself, but a source of oil for lighting, for cooking, and for anointing the body. Apart from the staples, the Greek farmer might have some fruit trees (apples, pears, and figs) and garden vegetables (onions were already an important element in the Greek atmosphere), beehives (honey served for sugar), sheep and goats for wool and milk, pigs, pigeons, geese, and, most important and expensive of all, oxen for ploughing. Horses and hunting dogs were for the nobles. Chickens were probably not introduced till the sixth or fifth century. Meat was a luxury for the peasant, to be had only on festivals when an animal was sacrificed. (The inedible parts were usually offered to the god, the edible, reserved for the worshipers.) In these circumstances, fish, which the Homeric heroes would eat only to save themselves from starving and which Hesiod scarcely mentions, became more popular; by the fifth century it was one of the major items of Greek diet.