Multi-ethnicity and Population Movement in Ancient Greece: Alternatives to a world of ‘Red-Figure’ People

Our image of the Ancient Greeks is formed by iconographic stereotypes – a dark and beautiful Mediterranean race [Figure 1: Portrayals on Classical Red-Figured vases]. However our own experience of modern nations is rather one of considerable physical diversity and multiple ethnic origins.

The 3rd century BC traveller Herakleides Kritikos, journeying through parts of my own study region of Boeotia, Central Greece, tells us that in Thebes he saw blonde people, and in Anthedon red-haired people. Pfister, who edited these fragments, argues that we should take this text as a genuine contemporary account of life in Boeotia, if spiced by citations from contemporary comedies and from folklore (PFISTER, 1951).

A mixing of ethnic groups has usually been assumed for Ancient Greece, as a result of Dark Age migrations, and earlier more controversial folk movements in prehistory (and reflected in the maps drawn by scholars for the dispersion of the major Greek dialects in early historic times). However the mythical and semi-mythical accounts of ethnic migrations and the heroes who founded cities or peoples, do not offer a coherent and plausible history of the peoples of Greece. Although modern scholars still attempt to separate out layers of Greek myth corresponding to prehistoric periods (for example, DECOURT and DECOURT [2001] provide a recent clever use of Thessalian myth to try and identify the major phases of settlement in the landscape), closer study shows how contradictory and often imaginary most other Greek origin legends seem to be.

ROBERT BUCK has thus also much earlier (1979) attempted to find layers of myth, like archaeological layers, for Boeotia, but had to admit that the several versions of ethnic and city origins are generally incompatible [Figure 2], and show strong evidence of Archaic era manipulation to suit contemporary political agendas.

Indeed the study of ethnicity in Ancient Greece has been revolutionized by the publication of Jonathan Hall’s monograph on the subject (Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity, 1997), using both literary theory and anthropological approaches to Greek ethnic accounts to recast the whole field of study. Fast following have come edited volumes using the same approach (Ancient Perceptions of Greek Ethnicity, edited by IRAD MALKIN, 2001), and an excellent study of ethnicity in ancient Phokis (MCINERNEY, 1999) which I recommend as the most accessible and up-to-date statement of the new thinking into ancient Greek ethnicity. These key revisionary studies of the last six years have made a number of points very clear:

1. Ethnicity is generally seen to be in large part a cultural construct, aligning its study with the broader movement of ‘social constructivism’ in Social Studies.
2. Anthropological insights include this from FREDERICK BARTH: “Ethnicity is the pursuit of political goals – the acquisition or maintenance of power, the mobilization of a following – through the creation of cultural commonness and difference”.
3. The ‘Ethnos’ is an open and changeable structure, and many ethne arose as consensual social groupings designed to unify the inhabitants of a region even when their origins were heterogeneous.
4. The profusion of heroic genealogies anchoring ethnic groups to a heroic past are not historical documents of the Bronze Age attesting the deep antiquity of related clans and tribes, each deriving from an eponymous ancestor, but cultural artifacts of the C8th BC and later, manufactured to give legitimacy to the present.
5. Local application, e.g. "The emergence of the Phokian ethnos is from a highly variegated landscape in which dozens of small and medium communities remained physically autonomous – rather than see the ethnos as a relic of a tribal past, it is better to see it as a contemporary response to the dilemma of the Archaic period: the conflicting tendencies toward local separatism" (McInerney).

A very different but equally radical source of rethinking about ethnicity has come from Physical Anthropology, dealing with the difficult question of 'race' (cf. Ananthaswamy, 2002). Modern genetic studies show that genetic variation is greater within 'nations' than between them. Of course in appearance, i.e. the phenotype rather than the genotype, one can often spot distinctions between people who come from different parts of the world – most strikingly through skin colour. But such differences are in any case not permanently locked into our DNA – they arose through population adaptation to different climates. In time these outward differences will become blurred as people grow increasingly more mobile at the generational level around the world, and not just by intermarriage, because the human genes contain the potential to create all human population types. After all, human origins research tells us that we must all descend from Black Africans. Furthermore, historic research allied with DNA analysis in the Oxford Ancestor Project (Sykes, 2000), is now showing that our families can often stem from places we never heard of in our official family histories!

What this implies perhaps for Ancient Greece, is that although many different peoples may have moved in and out of the region, reflecting sometimes earlier physical adaptations to variable geographies, over time we might also expect to see a tendency towards some physical homogeneity to suit the local environment as well. 'Red-Figure' people may have been very common, but unlikely to have been alone, with local communities retaining for a long time rather contrasted physical, and maybe linguistic varieties. In addition, the tendency for long periods of relative stability of residence to promote regional and even district in-breeding, will have emphasized a significant degree of not only genotypical but also probably phenotypical contrasts. Many city-states practised wide-ranging limitations on immigration even from neighbouring poleis, or confined it to females, and then often in ways to minimize its effects on the traditional citizen body. Moreover, if we add to this variety – hidden by stereotypical iconography of a desirable, idealized physique – the modern ancient historians' case that most ethnic and city origin stories are artifical constructs with only limited historical truth about them, where do we arrive at if we come now to study any region and people of Ancient Greece?

Surely the first thing we can say now is that the legends the Greeks told of local origins must be contextualised into the period when they are likely to have been 'constructed' or at the very least 'drastically reorganized', usually long after the times they claim to be describing. We must 'deconstruct' them, since generally they are highly selective and often fabricated tales to suit later ideology and people's desire to assert a particular set of identities vis-à-vis other groups of people. Secondly, we can assume that the well-attested process of merging of diversity into larger political groupings – poleis, ethne, federations – the key units of mature Ancient Greece, conceals from us a great variety of sub-populations with their own history of settlement and perhaps migration, and maybe also physical contrasts.

Let me now illustrate these new insights with the help of some recent case-studies, beginning with Dark Age Knossos. Nicholas Coldstream (1998) and Mieke Prent (pers.com.) have recently argued that although Post-Palatial sanctuaries near the Knossos palace reflect continuity of Minoan culture by local people living around the abandoned palace, the North Cemetery established in the C11th BC reflects incoming Dorian peoples from the Mainland. If the latter's initial culture is clearly alien, by Geometric times these new arrivals are actively establishing roots of local identity through recycling Minoan coffins and copying Minoan designs onto their cremation urns – is this a claim to an heroic past by an elite warrior caste with mythological aspirations? A new Rhea sanctuary on the Minoan palace is also suggested to represent a tangible claim to heroic connections.
My next case-study is from Southern Italy. DOUWE YNTEMA (in press) has recently shown that indigenous elite people in the Messapian region showed their distinctive ethnic identity in Roman times by recycling Classical and Hellenistic pottery in their tombs, and constructing their tombs in a deliberately archaic tradition. But in fact the placing of old native pots in graves does not reflect ancient Italian styles, nor slavish emulation of colonial Greek culture – the old pots are local imitations of Greek wares or real imports, and are tied to newly-coined legends that the native Messapians tell, claiming that their ancestors were in fact Greeks, but immigrants from the Heroic Age.

It is a pleasure in the context of this Colloquium to make a direct link to the German Landeskunde tradition, of which ERNST KIRSTEN was such a leading representative, and recall the case-study of 1939 by LEHMANN in East Crete: long-term occupance of natural Siedlungskamer was a kind of game, in which each period of human settlement shifted the main nucleated sites around microlocational possibilities inside settlement districts of small scale, as a result of changing sociopolitical, economic and strategic factors. By implication, the longue durée in the landscape could override changing or stable population composition in a biological sense. We already saw this with the convergence of Dorian immigrants and indigenous Minoan people at Knossos, both eventually identifying with Bronze Age traditions at the site.

The Dutch Aetolia Project, led by SEBASTIAAN BOMMELJÉ and PETER DOORN, has given a powerful analysis (BOMMELJÉ and DOORN, 1984), to show that the formation of local tribal groups or subethne within the Aetolian ethnos was also centrally-conditioned by geographic factors shaping regional senses of identity: however varied the ethnic origins of the Aetolians in prehistoric and Dark Age times, in the longer-term their group identities converged into districts defined by natural communications and physically-conditioned land-use regions (modes de vie).

I would like to end this series of case-studies by turning back to my own study-region of Boeotia, where I wondered if Herakleides Kritikos really did see different ethnic communities hidden beneath the surface of the Boeotian ethnos. A case-study from more recent times in this province offers better-documented insights into the possible complexities of community origins and identity.

Our intensive archaeological survey in Boeotia has found numerous Siedlungskamer such as the Valley of the Muses, where, as in the Landeskunde model, since later prehistory a single farming village has migrated around a small landscape, always over limited distances (BINTLIFF, 1996). The modern village of Askra, for example, could thus be traceable via its Ottoman era and later Medieval predecessor at site VM4, to an earlier Greco-Roman village – where for sure the poet Hesiod must have lived around 700 BC. In reality though, as I have discussed in detail in a recent paper (BINTLIFF et al., 2000), although I think it reasonable to argue for some population continuity between Hesiod’s Askra and the Medieval and then Modern village, the change of name from Askra to Zaratova in Byzantine times should indicate a significant-enough addition of Slav settlers in the C6th-7th AD to cause a complete renaming of the Greco-Slav peasant settlement. With the reincorporation of the Boeotian countryside into the Byzantine Empire in the C8th AD, the Slav language, names of villages and persons all were increasingly Hellenized – so that by the C15th AD the incoming Ottoman Turkish administrators classify this village (now with a new but Orthodox name of Panayia) as ‘Greek’. Were it not for rare archive references to Zaratova, the archaeology, settlement history and earlier and later records of the village would have been read as prime evidence for the ethnic continuity of ancient Greeks into the presentday in this micro-landscape.

More dramatic is the situation in the rest of Boeotia. Today all the villages are Greek-speaking, Orthodox Christian, typical in all cultural forms for the homogenized world of Modern Greece: only social anthropologists, medieval historians and the linguistically sharp-eared know differently!

In the C14th AD, most of the Greek, or maybe Slavo-Greek villages of Boeotia, were abandoned due to the Black Death and warfare. The Frankish Dukes of Athens and later the Ottomans encouraged Albanian immigrants – clans of ‘Arvanites’ – to recolonize the deserted village locations – most modern settlements are thus in origin entirely exotic to Greece (Figure 3: Ethnic composition of Boeotian villages in the first preserved Ottoman tax records, of 1466). The same can be shown...
for Attica. Today in private many Arvanites speak a mix of Greek and Albanian to each other. The longer survival of this tradition, compared to the fate of the Slav colonization, especially as regards the language, is due to the tolerant multiculturalism of the Ottoman Empire, in contrast to the Hellenocentric policy of Byzantium and then the Modern Greek state. It is not too fanciful to see still some strong physical resemblances amongst many of the contemporary villagers to modern-day Albanians, but there are also many other physical types just as clearly represented – just as we might expect from our earlier discussions.

Officially the Arvanitic component is suppressed in local and national education, and hardly any visitors to Greece, and many Athenians, are unaware of the long-settled distinct ethnic group in their midst – not only in Attica and Central Greece but also many parts of the Peloponese. In Siedlungskammer terms, the new C14th – 15th AD colonizing villages are close to deserted ‘Greek’ sites, have the same house types and material culture as the surviving Greek villages, and there is almost no written record of or by these people. In the C20th AD especially their villages have been renamed after local Classical toponyms, to elide the presence of ‘The Other’ – for example, modern Leonardion was till recently Zogra Kohili! Without rare historical indications, how easy it would be to have missed the very different story lying behind the apparent continuity and cultural uniformity shown by the archaeological and settlement history of Boeotia, and by inference of the rest of Greece?

Finally some critical caution might be introduced into wholesale endorsement of the Social Constructivist paradigm for historical claims to ethnicity, despite the very strong support we have given its general principles. What this approach leaves unexplored is the degree to which there could be any, or significant, justification through historical realities for origin legends. A case in point is the Ionian migration (cf. the paper by MICHAEL KERSCHNER at this Colloquium). The fact that people using Greek culture arrived at Ephesos and later the population here claimed Ionian ethnicity, does not prove largescale movement of an Ionian ‘people’ in the Dark Ages. It perhaps does show that, as DR. KERSCHNER argued, some people moved, with connections to Athens, into this region, but how this event became incorporated into the later creation myth of an Ionian identity probably involves several later layers of transformation of original events. Arguably all such later ethnic and linguistic groups developed out of innumerable more heterogeneous groups, each with divergent and discrete histories and locational displacements, together with the absorption of other peoples into homogenizing narratives, producing many inconsistencies, as Herodotus already pointed out.

Bibliography

Fig. 1: Portrayals on Classical Red-Figured vases
### Hecataeus

1. **?Leleges and Pelasgians?**

2. **Barbarian Aones, Temmikes and Hyantes from Attica**

3. **Cadmus subdues above and founds Thebes, walling the Cadmea**

4. **Amphion and Zethus found Eutresis. Possibly here a Thracian incursion**

5. **Usual stemma Cadmus-Oedipus**

6. **Oedipus**

7. **Seven and Epigoni**

8. **Expulsion of Cadmeans to Thessaly and Encheleis under Laodamas; returnees under Thersander**

9. **Trojan War**

10. **Phlegyians expel Thebans and Minyans**

11. **Cadmeans return**

### Hellanicus

1. **Ogygus autochthonous**

2. **Founding of Thebes by Ogygus and Ektones**

3. **Native Aones and Hyantes from elsewhere in Boeotia to Thebes. They attack Athens.**

4. **Cadmus subdues above; founds Cadmea**

5. **Amphion and Zethus as usurpers in reign of Laius**

6. **Oedipus and Jocasta**

7. **Seven and Epigoni**

8. **Expulsion of Cadmeans to Histiaea or Thessaly; Laodamas killed**

9. **Trojan War and friendly Phlegyians**

10. **Thracians expel Minyans**

11. **Cadmeans return**

### Pherecydes

*Ogygus, s. of Boeotus, king of Boeotia*

**Founding of Thebes by Amphion and Zethus**

**Phlegyians destroy Thebes**

**Cadmus refounds Thebes**

**Cadmus-Oedipus**

**Oedipus and three wives**

**Seven and Epigoni**

**Expulsion to Doris; return to Thebes under Creon**

**Trojan War; Pelasgi expel Thebans**

*Ogygus, s. of Boeotus in Corinna.

**Cadmus as son of Ogygus in Mythographer Phot. App. Nov. 5, 42.*

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Fig. 2: Comparison of ethnic and city origins
Fig. 3: Ethnic composition of Boeotian villages in the first preserved Ottoman tax records, of 1466