The Colonization of “Great Greece”

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The colonization of Magna Græcia or “Great Greece” (second half of the eighth century to the middle of the fifth century BCE) was one of the milestones in Greek history. For the first time, large numbers of Greek settlements were created on a wide scale on the Mediterranean and Black Sea coasts. These settlements, founded by Greeks from the mainland, the Aegean Islands and Asia Minor, ranged from small trading posts to cities built according to an orthogonal plan. As they settled in these new spaces, the Greeks came into contact with various local populations who were then strongly influenced by Greek thinking and customs. They, in turn, to varying degrees, influenced the daily life, relations and customs not only of Greek immigrants but also of those who remained on the mainland, in Asia Minor and in the Aegean. This colonization cannot be seen in isolation from the developments taking place in mainland Greece, where the Mycenaean palatial civilization, with its centralized economic model, collapsed in the seventh century BCE.

Sources from Ancient Egypt tell us that, during the same period, the Near East was invaded by the Peoples from the Sea and the Hittite kingdom disappeared in Asia Minor. Knowledge of writing disappeared. Researchers have good reason to think that there was also a significant decline in the population and a decentralization of dwellings and settlements. After the disappearance of the Mycenaean palatial civilization, this era was nevertheless marked by very different forms of occupation of territories in Greece, depending on the region. In some regions such as Attica, evidence points to continuities between the late Bronze Age and the early Iron Age, beyond the end of the second and the beginning of the first millennium BCE, whereas considerable discontinuity is seen in Messenia and in other regions. This also applies to sacred
places. In this respect, recent research has clearly shown real religious continuity between the end of the Bronze Age and the beginning of the Iron Age in sanctuaries situated at Kalapodi. This contrasts with other places of worship in Olympia, where cultural activities began only after the end of the second and beginning of the first century BCE. All of this reflects a locally highly differentiated evolution which nevertheless provided the foundations for the birth of the polis. The term polis refers to the city states, which developed in widely scattered places, due to the high mountain ranges cutting across the region, and which supplanted the last Mycenaean palatial civilisation of the Bronze Age.

3 After the first lecture on the beginnings of Greek colonization, the second lecture addressed the way in which this historical process altered the perception of space, and, with the Greeks, led to the invention of cartography and geography. First, with the Greeks, the representation of space was empirical and hodological. Then, with the great Greek colonization movement, the vision of space changed rapidly. This evolution subsequently served as a foundation for the development of two-dimensional cartographic representations. This vision of space is immediately apparent with respect to the colonies and their surroundings. It subsequently led to the development of mapping and to a geometrical mathematical representation of the world as a whole. Now, these two ways of perceiving space co-existed; it was the movement of wider Greek colonization that made the two sides of the coin possible. Finally, it is not only to the founding of the colonies and cities in the Mediterranean and Black Sea region that we owe the abstract representation of the world as a whole, but also to the journeys of exploration.

4 Another question concerns the development of the identity of the inhabitants of a new polis. A sense of community was born from the outset with social practices, that is, celebrations and rites, with which the inhabitants were associated. These practices reinforced the legitimacy of the foundations of the new social order, including that of the different social groups, domains and steps of life, and of territoriality. This does not mean that such rituals were not considered to play any role on the mainland; on the contrary. But I wish to stress that their role was not as fundamental there. Our analyses of the new colonies in the western Mediterranean and the Black Sea nevertheless enable us to understand at least partially how these rites and celebrations were reflected in a sacred topography that changed rapidly but that appeared from the beginning of the colonies. The veneration of oikistès to which the foundation of the polis was attributed was immediately part of these practices. In the framework of these rites and festivities, the myths and divinities that had existed since time immemorial served as a general framework outlining the first norms of community life. The emphasis on ancientness and its representation could thus explain the architecture of buildings and monuments as well as the noteworthy use of certain votive practices. Myths also enabled the Greeks to situate themselves in relation to people living outside the poleis, thus helping them to position themselves as specific groups.

5 Finally, one also wonders to what extent, beyond the analysis of particular cities, we can witness the appearance of a pan-Hellenic identity following the great movement of Greek colonization, and what role the great pan-Hellenic sanctuaries such as Delphi and Olympus might have played therein. The history of these sanctuaries is closely intertwined with the history of the birth of the polis and of Greek colonization.
The source that truly bound all Greeks together is a passage from Herodotus’ Book VIII, 144. In a speech in which the inhabitants of Athens had called for Greek unity, under the Persian threat in the winter of 480/478 BCE, Herodotus commented that they should not become traitors of the common cause of all Greeks (tò Hellenikón). Thereafter, a more precise definition of tò Hellenikón was proposed. Apart from shared blood and a common language (hómainón te kai homóglosson), the sanctuaries and the common sacrifices (theôn hidrúmata tè koinà thysíai) are defined as characteristic of all Greeks. It is noteworthy that this definition contains no reference to a spatial dimension. Unlike the polis – which includes a spatial dimension that was without doubt a determining factor in the identity of every citizen – the community of citizens was not related to an actual spatial dimension. This point is particularly important. It was through the common sanctuaries and sacrifices that the Greeks communicated. These sanctuaries were part – as the German historian Peter Funke put it – of a pan-Hellenic sacred landscape. Moreover, they were part of the religious idea that the Greeks had of themselves, and they existed in their imagination in the form of a mental map. Thus, like a network, they covered the entire Greek world, and they were closely linked by worshipping, rites, celebrations, and mythical narratives. Thus, without physically existing in the territorial reality, the sanctuaries were nevertheless landmarks. They existed above all in the imaginary, and constituted a utopian fatherland whose importance, for the solidarity of the Greeks between themselves and for their self-confidence, cannot be over-estimated. This signification, that is, the formation of a mental map, is closely linked to the process and genesis of the polis and to great Greek colonization. It was only when the Greeks, in separate groups, went abroad that this system started to emerge. At the same time, it was through this system that they realized that they had more in common with one another than with the populations with which they were actually living. Yet, given that these journeys lasted for days, if not weeks, they probably favoured solidarity between Greeks. Moreover, the athletes who participated in the Olympic games spent a month at Elis to train and, divided into teams, to undergo a test for their admission to the competition. Finally, they met one another on the occasion of rituals and festivities that lasted several days. These pan-Hellenic cults – including the oracles and mystery cults, such as Zeus’ sanctuary at Dodone, or that of Demeter at Eleusis – were more important for the pan-Hellenic identity than were political alliances or federations, some of which were highly fragile.

Ortwin Dally, from the German Archaeological Institute, Berlin, was invited by the Faculty, on the proposition of Prof. John Scheid.

NOTES
1. In English in the text.
2. In English in the text.
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