

Who We Are #9 — Hellenic Versus Pelasgian Spirit



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Artistic rendering of the Trojan War from Homer's *Iliad*

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*Indo-European Invasions Led to Aegean, Greek Civilizations
Hellenic, Pelasgian Spirits Clashed
Greek Myths Hint at Ancient Race War in Mediterranean Area*

FROM THE FAR NORTH they came, the *xanthoi*, the golden-haired ones: tall, blue-eyed and grey-eyed giants, on horseback and on foot, carrying their battleaxes and their spears, bringing their women and their wagons and their cattle. Warrior-farmers, craftsmen and traders, they worshipped the shining Sky Father and spoke an Indo-European language. They were the Greeks.

The Greeks — or Hellenes, as they later called themselves — crashed down upon the Mediterranean world in a long sequence of waves. The first wave, a relatively weak one — and more properly described merely as Indo-European rather than as specifically Greek — hit about 5,100 years ago, and it apparently took a roundabout course, passing first from the north into western Asia Minor, and thence, by way of the Cyclades and other islands of the southern Aegean, westward into Crete and Greece.

Bronze Age

That first wave introduced metal tools and weapons to the Neolithic culture existing at that time in Crete and on the Greek mainland and laid the basis for the later rise of the Bronze Age Minoan-Mycenaean civilization. It was one of the far-flung arms of the last, great wave of Indo-European migration into central and western Europe from the ancient Indo-European heartland north and east of the Black Sea.

The invaders made a decisive cultural impact on the Aegean world. The archaeological evidence from that period shows a marked break between the nearly static Neolithic tradition which had existed prior to the first Indo-European arrivals and the subsequent Bronze Age cultures.

These later cultures — called Early Cycladic, Early Minoan, and Early Helladic in the Cyclades, Crete, and the Greek mainland respectively — arose rather abruptly about 5,100 years ago and underwent rapid developments in technology, craftsmanship, and social organization.

Blue-eyed Cycladeans

In the Cyclades this first, thin wave of Indo-Europeans had a racial as well as a cultural impact. Small marble figurines from the Early Cycladic period still show traces of the pigments with which they were colored, indicating they were made by a red-headed, blue-eyed race.

On Crete and the Greek mainland, however, the Nordic newcomers soon were completely absorbed into the Mediterranean population. The Minoan art of later periods depicts brunet Mediterranean types only.

That Mediterranean population in the Aegean was related to the one which had been overrun farther north, in the Danube valley and the Balkans, by other Indo-Europeans. Shorter than the Nordic Indo-Europeans, darker and more gracile, the Mediterraneans of Crete and Greece were conservative farmers, slow to change their ways, relatively passive and unwarlike. They spoke a non-Indo-European language, the only traces of which remain today are some Greek place-names and a few inscriptions in the undeciphered “Linear A” script. For the time being, however, they kept both their language and their religion; the first Indo-European wave was too thin to change those.

The bulk of the Indo-Europeans in those early invasions from beyond the Black Sea settled in the relatively empty spaces of the far north, along the shores of the Baltic Sea and the North Sea, in Germany, the Baltic states, and Scandinavia, where they established a new Nordic heartland. A thousand years later they began boiling out of this new heartland in wave after wave, heading south. The Romans — themselves the descendants of one of these waves — would later refer to the German-Scandinavian area as *vagina gentium*, the womb of nations.

But the Greeks came first, through the Cyclades again into Crete about 4,100 years ago, and overland from the north 100-200 years later. The wave which struck Crete provided the impetus for the building of the great Minoan civilization on the basis which had been laid a thousand years earlier by the first Indo-Europeans to reach that part of the world.

Will to Order

The Minoan civilization was in its essence, however, much more a Mediterranean than a Nordic civilization. The Greeks did not bring civilization to Crete; they brought only the tendency toward civilization and the capacity for building it inherent in the higher human type which they represented.

They brought an innovative spirit and the Nordic will to order, and they imposed that will on the essentially passive and egalitarian Mediterranean society they found, reorganizing it along hierarchical lines. Thus, they established the stratified social basis necessary for the emergence of civilization, and they also provided the ruling stratum.

The same pattern was repeated over and over again, not just in the Mediterranean world, but wherever Nordics encountered other races, whether in Iran or India: the Nordics would conquer the non-Nordic natives of a region and establish themselves as a ruling aristocracy over the vanquished people. This freed the Nordic stratum from the necessity of manual labor and gave free rein to the Nordic creative spirit. Rapid cultural innovation followed.

Mixing and Retrogression

But inevitably racial mixing occurred, sometimes soon and sometimes later. The Nordics would disappear into the mass, and the civilization they had created would lose its vital spark, stagnating and eventually retrogressing, although it might coast for centuries on its momentum after the disappearance of the Nordic element before retrogression set in. (Racemixing and retrogression were avoided only when the Nordics exterminated the non-Nordic natives of an area instead of merely conquering them. But then there was left no large serf-class for the maintenance of a culturally innovative aristocracy.)

In some areas this process occurred more than once; a new wave of Nordic conquerors would revitalize the decayed remnant of a civilization established by an earlier wave. If this happened often enough, or if later waves were stronger numerically, there might be an appreciable cumulative effect, both racially and culturally.

As indicated above, the first two Nordic waves to hit Crete were not strong enough to change the basic character of the population there; the Minoan civilization was Mediterranean in its essence, retaining both a Mediterranean religion and language until the impact of later Nordic waves on the Greek mainland took effect and that effect had spread to Crete.

Rise of Mycenae

The Greeks who invaded the mainland around 2000-1900 B.C. took over an area strongly under Minoan influence and gave it a new character — still partly Minoan, but now also partly Greek. The strongest center of Greek influence on the mainland was Mycenae, and on this center a new civilization arose in the 16th century B.C. Despite the lack of any real literature, it reached greater cultural heights than any previously achieved by man.

In social organization, in architecture, in sculpture and metalwork and ceramics, and in the other arts of civilization the Mycenaean Greeks totally eclipsed the

Cretans. The artistic treasures unearthed from the ruins of Mycenae by German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann in the 19th century astounded the world.

Conquest of Crete and Troy

Early in the 14th century B.C. the Mycenaeans also eclipsed Crete politically, invading that island and subduing it.

A little over a century later — around 1250 B.C. — the Mycenaeans also subdued Troy, in northwestern Asia Minor. The conflict between Mycenae and Troy is the subject of Homer's great epic, the *Iliad*.

Troy itself was, at that time, also a Greek city, and had been for 700 years. An earlier city on the same site, essentially Mediterranean and Minoan in character, had been conquered and rebuilt by Greek invaders in part of the same wave that entered the Greek mainland just after 2000 B.C.

The language of the Mycenaeans was Greek — i.e., Indo-European rather than Mediterranean — as attested by inscriptions in “Linear B,” the earliest written form of Greek, found at Mycenae and other sites under Mycenaean control.

Social Structure

Their social structure was also Indo-European. Each realm was headed by a king or prince (*wanax*), sometimes with a separate military leader (*lawagetas*) and sometimes with the wanax himself fulfilling this function. Then came the landed nobility (*hequetai*), the professional military class, who were aristocrat-farmers in time of peace. Under them were the free craftsmen and farmworkers. Finally came the serfs, the conquered non-Greeks.

A portion of the produce of the land was given to the king as a tax, allowing him to build up a reserve which, in time of war, could be used to support his army. In time of peace it supported craftsmen and artists, who did much of their work directly for the king.

Greek architecture of the second millennium B.C. also reflected the northern origins of the Mycenaean Greeks. Their settlements were built around strongly fortified citadels and surrounded by defensive walls, contrasting with the unprotected villages of the unwarlike Mediterraneans.

Megaron Palaces

The typical dwelling of the Greek nobleman introduced into the area by the northern invaders had as its principal component the megaron, a large, rectangular hall with a central hearth. These halls were similar to those which had been built by Indo-Europeans elsewhere for thousands of years — and which were still being built

in northern Europe thousands of years later, in the time of Beowulf and on into the Middle Ages.

The graves and tombs found at Mycenae and other Greek sites contained bronze swords, daggers, and battleaxes, and gold jewelry and utensils, all of exceptionally high craftsmanship and all testifying to the wealth and the martial lifestyle of the Greek upper classes.

Burial itself, however, was a Mediterranean characteristic. The adoption of burial in the place of the original Greek practice of cremation was only one of many ways in which the invading Greeks of that early era were influenced by the Mediterranean natives.

One of the profoundest cultural interactions between northern invaders and southern natives, and one which shows with special clarity the racial differences in outlook and psychology between Hellenes and Pelasgians (as the Hellenes called the native Mediterraneans), involved religion. By the beginning of the historical period in Greece (around 650 B.C.), when we have our first extensive written references to religious matters (the “Linear B” inscriptions, dating back to 1300 B.C., were far too scanty to yield much insight in this regard), “Greek” religion was already a nearly inseparable blend of Hellenic and Pelasgian elements. Even Homer’s tales of a period six centuries earlier contain references to Greek gods who were no longer purely or exclusively Indo-European.

Olympian Pantheon

Nevertheless, it is still possible to analyze the religion of the Greeks of the historical period into Hellenic and non-Hellenic components. When the Hellenes first came to Greece, they brought with them an Olympian pantheon created in their own image, both physically and psychically. Their gods, with one notable exception (Poseidon, the black-haired sea god), were described by Homer as golden-haired and ivory-skinned.

In behavior, the gods were as human as their creators: sometimes bold and sometimes hesitant, sometimes forthright and sometimes devious, sometimes generous and forgiving, and sometimes stingy and vindictive — but never mysterious.

Altogether, the Olympian religion was a remarkably sharp reflection of the Hellenic spirit and Hellenic life. Even the legendary home assigned to their gods by the Greeks of the historical period, Mt. Olympus, lay far to the north of the centers of Greek civilization, reflecting their own northern origins.

Sky Father

At the head of the Olympian pantheon was Zeus, the Sky Father. His name was derived from an Indo-European root which means “the Shining One.” His

counterparts existed in the religions of all the other Indo-European peoples, whose characteristic spiritual orientation is upward and outward. The inherent Indo-European religious tendency has always been, in a sense, solar, even when the sun was not explicitly regarded as a deity.

And Zeus, in his relations with his family of gods and goddesses, perfectly reflected the essentially masculine spirit and the patriarchal structure of all natural and healthy Indo-European societies.

Pelasgian religion was, on the contrary, chthonic (embedded in the earth) in its orientation, feminine in its spirit, matriarchal in its structure. The gods and goddesses of the Pelasgians were mysterious, subterranean creatures, headed by the Earth Mother, who has homologues in the religions of most other Mediterranean peoples.

The Pelasgian tendency, in contrast to the universality of Zeus and his fellow Olympians, was to localize their deities. Thus, while the concept of an Earth Mother was widespread among the Mediterranean peoples, she tended to be given various attributes in various areas, much as the various Virgin Mary cults of the Christian era, with their localized Our Lady of this or that.

The Pelasgians' deities were concerned, above all else, with sexual reproduction, and they were worshipped in orgiastic rites and with much sexual symbolism. Snakes and bulls, for example, the former both phallic and chthonic, the latter a symbol of reproductive potency, played a major role in Minoan religion.

Religious Interaction

From the first contact between Hellenes and Pelasgians, there was an interaction between their religions, with each race over the course of time adopting and adapting elements from the religion of the other. Thus, for example, the Cretans adopted Zeus and adapted him as a youthful fertility god, portraying him sometimes as a bull, whose role was to fertilize the Earth Mother. They even claimed Crete as the birthplace of Zeus, thus provoking the indignation of the Hellenes, who already regarded the Cretan Pelasgians as an especially deceitful and untrustworthy people. More interesting to us is the influence of Pelasgian religion on that of the Hellenes. Some Mediterranean deities were adopted into the Olympian family and modified to suit their new relatives, while some Olympians acquired certain Mediterranean attributes. Black-haired Poseidon has already been mentioned.

But even as Hellenic a deity as Athena, the gray-eyed goddess of wisdom, daughter of Zeus, was adapted from a variant of the Pelasgian fertility goddess already localized in Attica when the Hellenes arrived, a sort of Our Lady of Athens. Even after she was adopted by the Olympians and universalized, she retained some of the essence of a local goddess.

Dionysus is an example of a god who came to be worshipped by both Hellenes and Pelasgians, but whose cult was much more Pelasgian than Hellenic in character, involving orgiastic rites.

Hera, the wife of Zeus, is clearly an adopted and modified variant of the Mediterranean Earth Mother.

Greek mythology accounts for this dual nature and dual origin of the gods in a way remarkably reminiscent of the Scandinavian religious tradition of a war between Indo-European gods (Aesir) and Mediterranean gods (Vanir), after which hostages were exchanged. The hostages from among the Vanir went to live in Asgard with Odin and the other Scandinavian gods and eventually came to be accepted on equal terms with the Aesir.

Poseidon and Njord

These adopted Vanir included Frey and Freya, the personifications respectively of the male and female sexual principles, and Njord, a masculinized version of Nerthus, which was one of the names of the Earth Mother. It is interesting to note that Njord also doubled as the Scandinavian version of Poseidon.

In Greek tradition Zeus overthrew an older group of gods, the children of Gaia, the Earth Mother, before securing his own role as Sky Father and supreme deity. Just as in the case of the Scandinavians it is very tempting to see in this tradition a mythologized reference to the ancient conflict between invading Indo-Europeans and conquered Mediterraneans.

Because the Mediterraneans were only conquered and not exterminated; because they formed the bulk of the economic base on which Greek society rested; because the lifestyle of Hellenes themselves changed, becoming more dependent on agriculture than before; and because race mixture inevitably followed conquest, it is not surprising that the religion of the conquerors underwent a change and assimilated many elements from the religion of the conquered natives.

Clouded Mirror

A people's religion generally reflects the essential elements of the race-soul of that people, but it is only under completely natural conditions, free from extraneous cultural and racial intrusions, that the reflection is perfect. Whenever a mixing of diverse peoples occurs, the mirror of the soul is clouded; likewise, when a religion of alien origin is imposed on a people, even without racial mixture.

In the latter case the genetic spiritual predispositions remain unchanged and will eventually reassert themselves. Often this reassertion may take many centuries, because the magnet of the soul's compass is not as strong as we might wish; a long period is required for it to settle down and find its true direction again after it is jarred.

Protestants and Catholics

When Christianity came to Europe from the Middle East, it was imposed on a racially diverse population, largely Nordic in the north, Mediterranean in the south, Alpine between. Although the religion was modified in an attempt to adapt it to the European psyche, tensions inevitably developed, because this psyche was not everywhere the same.

It should be no surprise that when the rupture came, it divided Europe largely into Protestant North and Catholic South, although a number of political quirks marred the neatness of the geographical division. And in the South the Earth Mother reigned again, in a new guise. (The foregoing should not be read as a slight upon the Indo-European pedigree of any individual with a Catholic background. For 500 years, in the Middle Ages, all Europeans, north and south, were Catholics. Christianity was, in many instances, propagated by fire and sword, and the confessional division of Europe following the Reformation was determined by similar means. As mentioned, there were many quirks and vagaries in this division, especially those which left Catholic enclaves in the North; Ireland and Poland are only two examples. Nevertheless, the phenomenon of reversion to inherently determined forms is quite real, and it is reflected in the generally stronger tendency to Catholicism and Mariolatry in the areas of Europe with a predominantly Mediterranean population.)

In the next installment we will look at the last waves of Greek-speaking Indo-Europeans to invade the Mediterranean world; we will see the rise of Classical Greece; and we will then move on to the Italian peninsula and the beginnings of Rome.