THE HELLENIZATION OF THE WEST; A GRECIAN PARADOX

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INTRODUCTION

From childhood I have heard and read of the Greco-Roman origins of our culture, with emphasis on Greece. The evidence that Western Civilization has its cultural roots in Greece is all around us and we take it for granted. We are told that our literary heritage springs from Homer and the (Greek) Bible; our philosophies, mathematics, science and music are deeply rooted in Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Euclid, Pythagoras and others in ancient Greece. Our public buildings and churches have been adorned in early and modern times with the Greek orders, from the austere Doric dignity of Federal Hall through the more exuberant Ionic and Corinthian Greek Revival that has prevailed since. In reading and writing we continually use Greek words for physical and mental conditions and the Greek \textit{rhetoric} introduces us to the numerous forms and devices of speech.

It is a great wonder that this happened. Greece, ancietly as now, was a small country with much the same fleet of islands, and also then Ionia, the Aegean coastal region of Asia Minor. What I call Western Civilization is all of Continental Europe and the British Isles, the Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, North and South America, Australia, New Zealand and appurtenant lands and islands. It is astonishing to consider how this vast influence could have happened, considering the instability and apparent incompetence in self-government of modern Greece, and looking back more than two millenniums at the creation of this culture and the parlous and intermittent existence the Greek polity has since had.

This development in world history, on which we may congratulate ourselves, comprises a forest of historical events interesting and often entertaining in themselves. All these are of interest to the historian but most cannot sensibly be viewed as determinants of the great cultural movement. Stepping out of the forest, we may recognize a few critical events, actors and conditions that can be said to have sustained or advanced the movement. I quote freely from others for the enjoyment of better words than my own.

ANCIENT GREECE AS NATION AND PEOPLE

With their tribal origins and movements I am not concerned, but with them as an inchoate nation of people occupying the mainland they still do, with colonies in Ionia, the Aegean islands and all around the Aegean and
Black Sea, sharing language, gods and culture, and bound in city-states only by these and by expedient temporary alliances and rival dominances among them. By far the most influential of these has been Athens, in Attica, a naval power and principal colonizer. The 27-year Peloponnesian War, arising from Sparta’s concern at the growing power of Athens, and involving other states in shifting patterns of alliance, rivalry, treachery and pretention, encapsulates the incapacity of Greece herself as a nation for centuries. This was the condition of Greece in the sixth through the third centuries, the era of its most famous thinkers and scientists, the Classical Period of philosophy, drama and architecture on which, together with Homer, its cultural fame would rest. To the north was the kingdom of Macedon, also populated with Greeks and speaking their language, not a font of the high Greek culture but a propagator of it in time.

DEFEAT OF THE PERSIANS: A NATIONAL EVENT

This vital corpus was preserved in what I may call the first great event. In the early fourth century, Darius and later Xerxes made several attacks by land and sea to conquer at least Athens and her colonies, and were successful for a time after Thermopylae. But Athens and Sparta uncharacteristically made and kept a compact to defeat the efforts of Persia, and defeated the Persian fleet at Salamis in 479 and then the army at Plataea in 480 and so finally repelled the invasion. Had the Persians won and ruled Greece, it seems likely that the Classic Age would have been strangled or obscured.

[...] hose of Aristides are the noblest, most splendid and distinguished actions the Grecians ever did, the battles at Marathon, Salamis and Plataea. Nor indeed is Antiochus, nor the destruction of the walls of the Spanish towns, to be compared with Xerxes, and the destruction by sea and land of so many myriads of enemies; in all of which noble exploits Aristides yielded to none ... PLUTARCH, LIVES (95-120 A.D. Dryden tr. 1653-56) Comparison of Aristides with Marcus Cato.

ALEXANDER’S CONQUESTS

King Philip of Macedonia admired the culture of Athens and engaged Aristotle as tutor to his son Alexander, who succeeded him. The empire that Alexander conquered from 324 to 323 embraced those about the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean, much of Asia Minor and as far as India, and wherever he ruled he sowed the seeds of Hellenism. On his death the empire was divided among his generals as Hellenic kingdoms (of which the most lasting and familiar was that of Ptolemaic Egypt). Thus did a vast region fall under Hellenic influence, including Palestine, where the Hebraic survived a long cultural struggle, leaving many Hellenic Jews, however, of whom one,
Paul of Tarsus, became a great agent of Hellenism abroad. One of the rhetorical devices in which Aristotle probably encouraged Alexander was irony:

> Alexander to Aristotle greeting. You have not done well to publish your books of oral doctrine; for what is there now that we excel others in, if those things which we have been particularly instructed in be laid open to all? For my part, I assure you, I had rather excel others in the knowledge of what is excellent, than in the extent of my power and dominion. Farewell. Letter quoted in Plutarch, Alexander.

> Centuries elapsed before men understood that Alexander had not merely erected an ephemeral kingdom in the East, but had carried Hellenism to Asia ... Theodor Mommsen, A History of Rome (1854-56)

**GREEK CITIES UNDER ROME**

The Greek cities posed no threat to Rome and besides were respected as culturally advanced. From 328, by the defeat of Athens and Thebes, they fell under the domination of Macedon. In Rome’s Second Macedonian War, the army of Flaminius, a Roman consul, general, and Hellenist, drove the Macedonians back to Macedon for good. And in 194, still in Greece, he proclaimed the Greeks free, making Greece effectively (much later officially) a protectorate of Rome.

> Such as Agesilaus, Lysander, Nicias and Alcibiades knew how to play the general’s part, how to manage a war, how to bring off men victorious by land and sea; but how to employ that success to generous and honest purposes, they had not known. For should a man except .... Marathon,.... Salamis,.... Plataea and Thermopylae,.... Eurymedon,.... Greece fought all her battles against, and to enslave, herself; she erected all her trophies to her own shame and misery; and was brought to ruin and desolation almost wholly by the guilt and ambition of her great men. [195 B.C.] Plutarch, Flaminius

**THE SECOND PUNIC WAR**

Starting from a base in Spain in 218 B.C., Hannibal led his army across the Alps and into Italy through Cisalpine Gaul, not to be driven out for 15 years, during which they battled, skirmished and maneuvered to besiege Rome herself. His defeat was largely due to the patient strategy of Fabius Maximus, Consul and sometimes Dictator, whose name has given us the adjective and proper name Fabian. In the same period hostilities went on in Spain, ending with the expulsion of the Carthaginian army, and at its end
Scipio invaded Africa and defeated Carthage, leading to a treaty of peace. Although there would be another Punic War before the destruction of Carthage, her power as a threat to Rome herself was broken.

_Carthago delenda est._ Cato the Censor, Speeches in the Senate.

**ROME HELLENIZED**

Rome had not escaped the Hellenization around her. There were Greek colonies in Italy. The fortes of the Roman leaders were war and government, but the more thoughtful of them recognized the intellectual superiority of Greek culture and its value in the future of their own. In the third century it began to permeate Roman education and influence Roman literature. It was forcibly carried into Roman colonies and conquests, most notably Iberia. Many upper-class Romans studied in Greece and Rhodes and had Greek tutors at home. Generals and proconsuls such as Lucullus and Caesar promoted it abroad.

_The advent of Roman Peace (Pax Romana) marked a new period in the history of the world, broke down the barriers of internecine hatred, gave a real meaning to the conception of civilized mankind, made possible an era of prosperity and economic progress._

*Sir Paul Vinogradoff, 1 Collected Papers, The Work of Rome* (1928)

**VENI VIDI VICI: EUROPE BEYOND THE MEDITERRANEAN**

In 58 B.C. Julius Caesar was sent as proconsul to Gaul, where the Cisalpine tribes and some of the Transalpine tribes had long been under Roman control, and the latter were becoming rebellious. In the next few years he conquered the tribes of all Gaul, the Celts in the west, the Belgae to the north and German tribes across the Rhine, and established bases in Britain. With the defeat of an uprising of a large army under Vercingetorix in 52, Gaul was pacified. Julius was an avid Hellenist and is credited with believing that the spread of Hellenic Roman culture in Gaul and its neighbors was the means of securing Roman peace and dominance. In the next few years others pacified more of Germany and began the colonization of Britain.

_He gained for the Hellenic-Italian culture the interval necessary to civilise the West just as it had already civilised the East. Ordinary men see the fruits of their action; the seed sown by men of genius_*
germinate slowly ..., centuries again elapsed before men understood that Caesar had not merely conquered a new province for the Romans, but had laid the foundation for the Romanising of the regions of the West.... This enlargement of the historical horizon by the expeditions of Caesar beyond the Alps was as much an event in the world's history as the exploring of America by European bands. 

MOMMSEN, A HISTORY OF ROME.

THE CONVERSION OF CONSTANTINE

In 313 A.D. the Emperor Constantine and his rival and intermittent colleague Licinius ruled, the former in Rome and the latter in the eastern provinces. In that year they became brothers-in-law and jointly issued the Edict of Milan. It had the explicit purpose of granting freedom of worship to Christians, evidently an event closer to Constantine’s heart, as only his conversion is clear. This grant to a vigorous proselytizing church effectively made Christianity the state church of the Empire, including of course Spain, Gaul and Britain. The religion and culture so spread were Hellenic Roman Christianity.

It seems as if humanity is bound to follow one creed at a time, until its vivifying force gets as it were exhausted, and another force is substituted for it. As the ancient idea of republican virtue had to give way before an ideal of civilized peace, so the Pax Romana was replaced by the leadership of the Church. VINOGRADEFF, The Work of Rome.

CHARLEMAGNE AND HIS EMPIRE

Voltaire’s oft-quoted mot, that the Holy Roman Empire was “neither holy, Roman nor an empire” was true when he said it, but not 10 centuries earlier in the reign of Pepin’s son, the King of the Franks, and ultimately first Emperor, which cannot be ignored from the standpoint of cultural spread. He did not become great by his skill in subduing the outliers of the Kingdom, or indeed within his own lifetime, but only afterward in tribute to his wisdom and skill in consolidating and ruling an empire of many peoples and stretching from the Mediterranean to the Baltic, and from the Pyrenees to the Balkans. In a reign richly documented, he appointed and sternly supervised his hundreds of counts, magistrates and bishops (as unofficial vicar to the pope), suppressing corruption, demanding charity of the elite, and, to unify his diverse realm, teaching Latin universally, to provide a lingua franca, creating a simple, national script, Carolingian Minuscule, from which ours descends, and even the system of punctuation we use. When his empire
fell apart into the nations of Europe they carried with them much of his influence. He has been said to have created Europe.

[To the bishops and abbots of the Empire in annual assembly] Tell us what it means to renounce the worldly life, and how you can recognize those who have renounced from those who still live in the world. Is it perhaps just that they cannot bear arms and are not legally married? Explain to us whether someone has really abandoned worldly things, when every day he attempts to increase his riches by every means and strips the ignorant of their possessions to the ruin of their heirs, by enticing them with heavenly bliss and threatening them with eternal suffering in hell? CAPITULARIA REGUM FRANCTORUM 72, quoted in ALESSANDRO BARBERO, CHARLEMAGNE (tr. Allan Cameron), 229 (Univ. Cal. Press 2004, Folio Society London 2006).

“Father of Europe” was just one of the names given to Charles I, or Karl der Grosse or—as he is perhaps best known--Charlemagne. After centuries of chaos and fragmentation following the collapse of the western Roman empire, the King of the Franks is credited with establishing political unity, restoring stability and presiding over an intellectual and cultural renaissance. Frederick Studemann, Karl v Charles, THE ECONOMIST, The World in 2014, 88 (2013).

WESTWARD HO! EXPLORATIONS AND EMPIRES

The modern history of the explorations and conquests of the Americas by Spain, France and Britain, and to a lesser extent Nordic countries, and the subjection and conversion of their indigenous peoples and settlement and rule by European Christians is well-known among us. It obviously brought with it the prevailing European Hellenic Judeo-Christian culture established in the foregoing events. And while adulterated by counter-cultural influences, it is far from being dismantled, but thrives in our literary and technical languages, architecture, and ethical doctrines and philosophical dialogues. From the Fourth Century onward it was spread, In its religious aspect, as a Judeo-Christian culture, transmitted in the Holy Bible in the original Greek of the New Testament, the translation of the Hebrew into Greek, of the whole into Latin by St. Jerome and of all into the various vulgar tongues, with particular distinction in the King James Version for the widespread English speakers.

Westward the course of empire takes its way;  
The first four Acts already past,  
A fifth shall close the Drama with the day;  
Time’s noblest offspring is the last.
Bishop Berkeley, *Verses on the Prospect of Planting Arts and Learning in America* (1726)

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