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The Scenery of Greece

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sees officers like Captain Noel, of whom there are hundreds in this country only too anxious to give the very kind of help these Persians need, we do hope it will be possible that we should come together, that we should give the Persians the help that they need. As Sir Charles Yate has said, it depends entirely upon themselves. If they have the wisdom to ask for that help, there it is forthcoming, and we certainly hope that the decision they make will be that they shall ask us for that help, and we shall be able to revive that wonderful country, and make it blossom forth as we have seen from the lecturer is possible. I am sure on your behalf you would like me to thank the lecturer for his most interesting account and his admirable photographs.

THE SCENERY OF GREECE

A. W. Gomme

Read at the Meeting of the Society, 4 April 1921.

YOU have probably before now listened to amateurs who, coming forward to address you, begin by apologizing for being amateurs. But there is a special reason for an apology in my case, for not only am I not a geographer, I am not even a traveller. I have been to no distant countries nor unknown shores. I have wandered a good deal about Greece (though I should hesitate to confess how much of that country I have still to visit), nothing else; and if I nevertheless venture to speak before you, it is—well, chiefly because the honour of an invitation from this Society could, obviously, not be refused. But in addition I have been encouraged by reading the address which your President gave at the anniversary meeting last year. In that address he suggested that “the characteristic of the face and features of the Earth most worth learning about, knowing, and understanding is their beauty; and that knowledge of their beauty may be legitimately included within the scope of geographical knowledge.” It is important to compare the beauty of one country with that of another; and if I cannot discover for you either “a new region which possesses special beauty or a new beauty in a region already well known,” and if I am certainly not the poet or painter which Sir Francis Younghusband rightly required, yet my words may be taken as an obligato, as it were, to the exhibition of lantern slides which you will see, many of them of quite exceptional merit, and to that still difficult task I will address myself.

I was encouraged, as I say, as I read Sir Francis' paper—until I came to the last page, where he says: “this (the description of the beauty of the Himalaya) that we want of the greatest natural feature of the Earth is only typical of what this Society should require in regard to all Earth's other features in order to make our geography complete. As men have pictured the loveliness of England, the fairness of France, the brilliance of Greece, so we want them to picture the spaciousness of Arabia, the

luxuriance of Brazil, and the sublimity of the Himalaya." Greece, then, has already been done. But, fortunately for me, I quarrel with the word "brilliance"; and I shall try to-night to explain why. The task of analyzing and describing the beauty of a country as opposed to recounting its features is, I suppose, analogous to that of the critic of literature or art who seeks to explain the æsthetic effect intended and produced by a poem or a picture, as opposed to one who gives an historical account of artists and poets and their methods. It may be equally fruitful of good in the right hands, and is certainly equally dangerous and open to facile rhapsodizing and shallow generalization.

When I speak of Greece I mean, by the way, that part of the modern kingdom which lies south of Mount Olympus, including of course the *Ægean*, but excluding Macedonia and Thrace. For this region, corresponding nearly both to modern Greece before the Balkan wars of 1912-13 and to the lands of the classical Greeks, has a common quality which marks it off and separates it from all others. But before touching on this common quality, I wish first to speak of and emphasize what I think is too often ignored in the scenery of Greece, namely its variety. Leaving on one side the smaller variety that is naturally found as you pass from one village to another, or ascend a hill slope and go down its other side, you can divide the country into four or five districts each with marked characteristics of its own. There are, for instance, the *onian Islands*, there is north-western Greece, the great inland plains, western Peloponnese, and finally eastern Peloponnese, Attica, and the islands of the *Ægean*. I will say a little about each district in turn, asking you to bear in mind that in drawing, as I hope, the characteristic outline of each I must necessarily omit the multitude of details, the inner modelling, as it were, that go to make up the rich content of the whole.

Of the *Ionian Islands* I shall say least. I have no good pictures; if I had, they would not give you a very satisfactory idea of the country; and these islands—excluding Ithaca, the very Greek home of Odysseus—but Corfu, Leucas, Cephalonia, and Zante—these four share less than any other part of the country in the common quality of scenery that distinguishes Greece from the rest of Europe. As in politics and in culture, in ancient times and during the Turkish ascendancy, so in the nature of their scenery these islands stand apart. In the later period, when they escaped the Turk and were ruled by Venice, they had more associations with the West than with Greece, and the Italian-looking houses of their capital towns still recall the old Venetian ascendancy. But in natural scenery they are no halfway house between Greece and Italy, but have a character of their own, an abundance, a Southern luxuriance which is not Italian, and is yet quite foreign to Greece, a quality which has made them so much liked by those unhappy men who get no pleasure from the austerity of Attica and the Argolid. Beautiful these islands are, but almost of a different world from the islands of the *Ægean*. Here it is not

the confines of the picture which delight, a wide stretch of country and the distant outline of mountains, but the manifold contents of the foreground—grass, flowers, trees, streams, rich cactus hedges; except in one view, that to the east over the sea to the opposite mountains of the mainland, high, exceptionally bare, steep-to down to the water's edge, turning from grey to orange and purple as the sun sets. There in Epirus is the true Greek land, not here in the rich isolation of Corfu.

The inland plains are but three in number, but being of great extent are an important feature in the scenery. They are Thessaly, Bœotia, and the plain of Tripolis in Arcadia. They are alike both in outward appearance and in geological formation, being the floors, I believe, of former lakes, enclosed by a mountain barrier, with no natural outlet for their waters, which in the case of the first two are of an abundance rare in Greece. To-day most but not all of the waters of Thessaly are carried off by the Peneus river through the famous Vale of Tempe; but in the eastern plain the level of the ground slopes gradually downward away from the Peneus bed, and a lake regularly forms in the south-east corner. In Bœotia the Copais lake has been artificially drained in recent years and is now cultivated; while in the plain of Tripolis the waters find a precarious and changeable outlet in natural tunnels in the limestone formation of the surrounding mountains.

As you would expect, therefore, these plains are heavy of soil, often waterlogged, as flat as the fens, and, in a country where ditches, hedges, and trees in hedges are unknown, of a great monotony, which is broken only by the trees that are to be found in the comparatively rare villages and along the banks of rivers. These plains are the chief wheat-growing districts of Greece, and consequently in winter and spring you have an expanse of green while the corn is yet young, in June an expanse of yellow ripening corn, and after that nothing but stubble or ploughland till November sees the green reappear. The monotony is not, of course, nearly so vast as that of the plains of Roumania, but it is of the same kind except for this one all-important circumstance—the line of mountains and hills which surround the plains, which are large only for Greece, so that in the centre of the flattest land you are never far from the mountains that are the frame of any picture in Greece. A plain from which you can see Mount Olympus can never be entirely dull. But, as if to declare that large and rich plains are hardly proper to a land of mountains and stony valleys, you find, especially in Thessaly, what is most foreign to Greece—a thick atmosphere, so that often in summer mountains not 15 miles away will show no inner details such as are the delight of travellers in Greece, and but a hazy outline. The geographer Philippon tells us that when he was crossing Mount Othrys, the range that bounds Thessaly on the south, his guide, who was a Peloponnesian and had never before been in northern Greece, as they suddenly found themselves, more than 3000 feet up, overlooking the whole plain of Larissa, exclaimed, like the followers of

Xenophon at the sight of the Black Sea, "Thalassa, Thalassa!" If he saw it on a day of heavy atmosphere in the plain, this is just the appearance that would present itself from above. And so rare are plains in Greece, that this inhabitant of the Peloponnese could not believe in the existence of a flat piece of land some 40 miles by 20 in extent.

A third district, with a character the very opposite of that of the plains, is north-west Greece, comprising practically the province of Ætolia and the whole range of Pindus. This is a land generally of high and bold limestone mountains, well watered with many streams and some considerable rivers, which run through remarkable gorges, well wooded, and with fewer patches of cultivable ground than any other part of Greece. It is not arid, bare, and stony like the eastern districts, but, except about the lake of Agrinion, it has hardly any level land. Its characteristic tree is not the pine, but the fir; and more to the north, the oak and beech. The cherry, the plum, and the apple are grown, not olive-trees. No carriage road runs across it from west to east, nor has ever done. It is an untamed and most beautiful land, whose inhabitants, mostly shepherds and woodsmen, lead an independent life apart from the rest of the country, just as did the Ætolians of old, down in the villages in the narrow valleys in winter, up on the tops of the mountains with their flocks in summer. There is much variety of scenery, and the paths take you now steeply up a wooded mountain-side, now in a small cultivated valley, now along a narrow ledge cut out of the shaly hill-side or through a narrow gorge with high overhanging cliffs, with many streams and springs and an ever-changing view, and very rare villages. One path goes for a whole day's journey above the 5000-foot level; once I was surprised, after much climbing up and down, by a level stretch for about 3 miles (we were 3000 feet up), and with sandy soil, covered with grass, bracken, an occasional wheatfield, and copses of fir trees; except for the distant peaks and the blue sky it might have been a northern land. At the end of July, when the harvest elsewhere has all been gathered in, even in Thessaly where the winters are cold, the corn is still green; and when you stop for a rest at noon, though there is no cloud in the sky, you are glad to sit in the sun. The proper qualities of Ætolia and the Pindus are boldness and splendour; the boldness of cliffs and high mountain land and deep valleys, and great views from high and commanding points; while everything is fresh in a well-watered land.

Western Peloponnese, the fourth of the five districts into which I have very roughly divided Greece, is also a well-watered country, but of a very different aspect. Here the dominating lines are horizontal, not vertical. It is hilly country, very hilly; but you need climb but a short way, some 200 or 300 feet only, and you have a broad sweep of country before you. The lower valley of the Alpheus, after it has left the gorges of its upper course, is typical, and Olympia is its centre—the most beautiful spot in all Greece, Dionysius of Halicarnassus called it, where Greeks from all over

the Mediterranean collected every four years for the festival, as a mark of union and brotherhood, the one place and time at which they did not quarrel with each other. From hills behind the sanctuary you can see up the wide river valley as far as the distant mountains of Arcadia. The nearer hills are covered with a peculiar, very light-coloured soil—remember that it is remarkable in Greece to find hills covered by soil, except the very thin soil that will support the pine or prickly oak—and on them grow a dense abundance of shrubs, bay and myrtle, and pine trees; below are the vineyards, and everywhere the ground is carpeted, in spring, with flowers, hyacinth, orchid, and anemone; a paradise among lands. What distinguishes western Peloponnese from eastern is, roughly, its greater rainfall and abundance of water, a depth of soil unknown elsewhere in Greece, and the great distance of the high limestone mountains from the seashore, so that there is a long stretch of what the Germans call *Schollenland* between the mountains and the sea, a rolling country of hills, often steep hills, but, as I said, all covered with soil, hence with gentle outlines, and the whole having a horizontal, wide-spreading appearance. It is the country of the currant. As you know, this particular form of grape, just as it is only eaten by English-speaking peoples, so it only grows in Greece (or practically so; it is now cultivated to some extent in Australia). But it also only grows in certain well-defined parts of Greece, namely along the southern shore of the Corinthian Gulf, all down western Peloponnese as far as Messenia, and in the island of Zante; nowhere else, not in inland or eastern valleys where the common vine and the olive flourish. This southern shore of the Gulf of Corinth belongs then culturally, as also I believe geologically, to western Peloponnese; but it is so narrow a strip of cultivable land, and the mountains slope down so steeply and so close to the shore-line, that in its scenery it is quite different, and belongs to a particular district with a character all its own, the Gulf of Corinth and its shores. On the north, except in a few places, such as the small and delightful bay of Vitrinitsa and Itea, backed by the olive-covered plain of Amphissa which retreats up into the mountains and the great pass by which goes the road to Bralo and the north—except in such places, the mountains come down bare and forbidding to the sea. On the southern shore is this rich strip of flat land, very green, with white villages and towns; behind are steep but cultivated hills, marked everywhere with slender dark lines of cypress trees; the whole backed by the mountains of the Peloponnese, broken here and there by romantic gorges down which rivers pour their destructive waters and spread themselves into a broad waste of stones as they cross the narrow belt of flat land between the mountains and the sea.

If you go from Olympia across Arcadia to the Argolid, you realize quickly the difference between western and eastern Greece. As you ascend the valley of the Alpheus you are for some time in the rolling glebe-land of Elis; then when you get among the limestone mountains you climb up

and down—mostly up—dry and rocky paths, very fatiguing, the slopes on either side covered with prickly oak only, and many herds of goats feeding on them. This suggests the drier lands of eastern Greece. But Arcadia has to be crossed first—quite different country again, with high mountain ranges and great fir forests, and upland plains that more than any other part of Greece recall the upland plains of Switzerland. Greece is not very like Switzerland; its mountains, its valleys, its atmosphere have a different quality. But this part is least unlike, especially if from Demetsana, that fantastically situated town in western Arcadia, you take the high-road that goes across to Tripolis in the east. Just beyond Demetsana you come to a plain where the straight road, the river almost as straight running beside it, the fields, the fruit trees, and the grazing land on the lower slopes of the surrounding fir-covered mountains—the plain is so high that the vegetation has a northern character—call to mind the upper valley of the Rhone. Arcadia differs from the Pindus district in being altogether an upland country—these plains are 3000 feet and more above the sea—and you have not those remarkable deep gorges that so break up the mountainous country of Ætolia; and being already so high up, you do not get the same impression of steep grey mountains above you. The road I have mentioned, after going through all northern Arcadia, ascends through fir woods the slopes of Mount Messapius to the top of a pass, some 4000 feet up, then descends in many winding curves, traverses a pleasant rolling country, then climbs again a barer, severer range, and descends rapidly to the plain of Tripolis, and we are in eastern Greece: still 2000 feet up, and it is a long descent before the Argive plain is reached, but the boundary is crossed.

The Greeks have a story that when God was making this world He passed the earth through a sieve, and put down soil here for France, there for England, and so on everywhere; and at the end He had a great pile of stones left in His sieve, which He just threw over His shoulder and they became Greece. This would be especially eastern Greece, by which I mean roughly the whole eastern coast-line, the Argive peninsula, the Isthmus, Attica, the mountainous part of Bœotia and Phocis, including Delphi, Eubœa, and all the islands of the Ægean. I have left this to the last, to lay most stress on it. It is, in one sense, the most characteristic part of Greece. I do not mean that the rest is not characteristic; but it is so in a different sense of that rather vague word. I mean that there is a quality common to all Greece which makes it different from any other country, and of that quality eastern Greece has a larger share than any other part; whereas of those qualities which Greece has in common with other countries, other Mediterranean countries anyhow, the rest of Greece has a larger share than have Attica and Argolis. This special quality is easily recognized when one is in Greece, but is not easy to describe with accuracy.

It is due largely to the dryness of the atmosphere. As to the rainfall,

nowhere in Greece is it considerable compared with that of the north-west of Europe, but it rains much more in western than in eastern Greece, more than twice as much in fact. In Athens, the driest, as it is also the sunniest, place in Greece, the rainfall is only a little more than a third of what it is in Zante; only a fourth of that of Corfu. The dryness and consequent clarity of the atmosphere is therefore astonishing, because so much greater than that of ordinarily clear atmospheres, as in South France, Italy, or Macedonia. Then the mountains are in general not so high as in Arcadia and Ætolia; they range from 3000 to 5000 feet, as against 6000 to 8000. The greater number are bare of trees, growing only scrub and bush. Where there are trees they are mostly pines; and these with their light green colouring, their twisted trunks, and umbrella-like shapes contrast markedly with dark green and upright stems of fir trees. The plains are small in extent and slope down gradually and spread out to the seashore. The soil is light, too light for wheat, though barley is grown; light in colour too; for the most part you find vineyards and olive groves; occasionally vegetable and tobacco fields. Other trees are the plane and the white poplar; oleanders grow profusely on river-banks or in the dry beds of streams. Hardly any rivers run continuously to the sea.

This greatly affects the colour of the country as seen from a height overlooking a plain. In spring you can see growing barley, the grey-green of the olive, the most delicate silver-green of the poplar, and the brown of plough-land. But the barley is harvested by the end of May, and after that the light brown of the soil is only varied by the never-failing olive and the dark green patches of vines or tobacco. Behind are hills purple with thyme, or the blue Ægean Sea.

You will have noticed that, except in a digression on the Gulf of Corinth, I have so far hardly mentioned the sea; and the omission may seem strange in speaking of country like Greece. Yet it is true that in western Greece, always with the exception of Ithaca and the coast-lands of Epirus, the sea is not the important feature of the landscape that it is in the east; just as the Greeks of the west, especially in western Peloponnese, have not taken to the sea as have the men of the east and the islands. For in eastern Greece it is not as a blue background with level horizon that the sea plays its most important part in determining the character of the scenery. It is where it meets the land—it is the actual line of the shore that is important, that is so fascinating to look at, so magical in its beauty. As I said, the plains here spread down to the sea; the plains of any extent, such as those of Argolis, Attica, and Chalcis, are few, but at the head of almost every bay of this so-much-indented coast there is a tiny plain. So that if you sail along the shore, close in, you have an ever-repeating and ever-varying alternation of irregular and rocky coast-line and the smooth curve of a strip of sandy shore. Fortunately photography can well represent this, especially photography in the hands of artists like Boissonnas

and Baud-Bovy, and their pictures will explain my point better than I can. These are mostly of the islands of the Ægean, each one of which has its own special character and individual beauty. But I would direct especial attention to one, namely Delos. This tiny island has not that advantage which is common to almost all the islands of the Ægean, a bold or harmonious outline when seen from the sea. It is not lofty, its highest point being but 500 feet above sea-level. It has no steep cliffs; and it has no specially attractive colour, for no tree grows there, nor anything green. It is a bare, rocky islet, quite dominated by its neighbours Rheneia and Myconos. But climb the hot and wearying path that leads to the top of that hill, and look down at the coast-line below, and you will be rewarded for your pains: the clearest possible line of sea and coast.

Such a view is to be had at almost any point near the sea in eastern Greece south of Volo (the coast of Thessaly is different), whether sailing by the shore or walking on land. Some headlands are high and steep—all are rocky—some bare, some covered with pine-trees to the water's edge; some, most delightful of all, are crowned with the ruins of ancient temples; some bays are wider and with flatter curve than others; while occasionally you pass a plain of exceptional richness, like that of Trœzen opposite Poros, which is covered with lemon and orange groves; but always this well-defined and sunny coast-line.

That, however, is for the nearer view. The distant landscape is bounded by the gracious and harmonious outline of the hills. Here you see most clearly the different quality of eastern Greece. In Ætolia or Arcadia the mountains are higher, nearer, more immediately above you, and dark and rich in colour, where fir trees clothe their slopes. If the trees cover all the mountain up to the summit, the outline is confused and the inner markings, the modelling of ridge and valley, are lost. I don't mean, of course, that the Arcadian mountains have the soft and rounded contours of northern hills; but they are not so clearly defined and, above all, not so light as those of Attica or Argolis or the islands. The outline and the light are the essentials, the points to be emphasized. The colours are the most delicate possible; green, the light grey of limestone, the blue of distant hills—not the blue of distant trees and hedges that you get in England—the purple shadows in the early morning and the orange and rose that suffuse all the hills in the evening; all are light and cool colours; not pale or washed out—the very opposite—nor confused one with another, but each clear in itself, and bathed in light; luminous colours. The best word I can think of to describe the general effect in Greece is translucence. It would be an exaggeration, but only an exaggeration, not a distortion of the truth, to say that the effect is like that of light shining through thin marble or alabaster. In other countries, of more generous soil, the colour of the sky may be luminous, but the colours of the earth are of a different quality, richer and more opaque;

in Greece the quality of the colours of the earth is the same as that of the sky, equally luminous and cool. You will see now why I think that "brilliance" is not the right word to describe Greece; at least it suggests to me rather a variety of rich and hot colours, or a sparkling hardness, not the delicacy of Greek colour and outline. It may surprise you as much as it did and does me; but the country which seems to me likeliest Greece in the delicate colouring and luminous atmosphere of a distant view, is the country of the Campsie and Kilpatrick hills near Glasgow, on a rare fine day in winter. It is remarkable how clear the air can become on a sudden in that rain-soaked land.

You know the story—very typical of Greek artists—of the two painters Apelles and Protogenes. Apelles went to call on Protogenes, but found him out; and when the servant asked who should she say had called, he took a brush and drew a fine line on a canvas, saying that Protogenes would know who it was. The latter came in afterwards, recognized the master's hand, took another brush and in another colour drew a finer line over that of Apelles, and told his servant to show it him when he called again. Apelles did call again, and drew a third and yet finer line on the other two; and Protogenes then confessed himself beaten. Well, that gives one an idea of the lines of Greek scenery, whether the inner markings that divide light and shade or the outline of hills against the sky; they are quite definite, but as far from heaviness as from confusion. It seems to me that one is helped to a perception of this by a sentence in Mr. Bertrand Russell's 'Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy,' in a passage where he has been defining mathematical continuity. I hope I am not quoting words which I don't understand—a thing one is always afraid of in quoting from a mathematician; but at least it requires no apology to take a simile from mathematics when speaking of Greece. "The general idea," he says, "vaguely indicated by the word 'continuity' when employed by many philosophers (which is a kind of fog), is one which is certainly quite different from that which we have been defining. Take, for example, the series of real numbers. Each is what it is, quite definitely and uncompromisingly; it does not pass over by imperceptible degrees into another; it is a hard, separate unit, and its distance from every other unit is finite, though it can be made less than any given finite amount assigned in advance." So it is in a Greek landscape; there are no foggy outlines, and one colour does not pass over imperceptibly into another; the difference between two neighbouring colours may be almost infinitely small; but the lines remain quite definite. You can use of Greek scenery the phrase often used by the ancient critics of Greek art, "the accuracy of its beauty."

Argolis has this distinctively Greek characteristic of delicacy and definiteness of colour and outline more purely perhaps than any other part of Greece; just as the ancient Argive school of sculpture possessed that quality which is so distinctively European when compared with Asiatic

art, and yet is so particularly Greek that it has never reappeared in Europe in so pure a form. Attic art had a wider range and more variety than Argive; so is Attica more varied than the Argolid. There are walks there in shady glens, where the orchid and narcissus grow among the streams of the Cephissus river, of which Sophocles sang; Attica has almost all that Argolis has, and more besides. But Argolis is, as it were, the test. If you are content there, say on the citadel of Mycenæ looking over the plain towards Argos and Nauplia and westwards to the mountains that border Arcadia, then you have penetrated, at least I think so, into the austere spirit of Greek landscape.

I wish my words were anything like so clear and definite as the country I have been trying to describe. I have, of course, left out much—not detail only, but I have said nothing of the mountain country of Olympus and Ossa and Pelion, very different from the rest of Greece, nor of the rich plains of Messenia and Sparta, nor of Mitylene or Chios; nothing, above all, of Crete, which has a variety ranging from the bare mountains of the east to wooded slopes and copses where foxgloves reach above the bracken amid the roots of oaks and beeches. But time, and I am afraid your patience, forbid. But I hope what I have said means something, and describes in some measure that quality in Greece which makes you feel you are in a different land when you cross over into it, not only from Italy and the west, but even from its immediate neighbours on the north, Macedonia and Thrace, Serbia and Bulgaria, all of which despite their nearness to or contact with the Ægean belong in the character of their scenery to Central Europe and not to Greece.

Before the paper the PRESIDENT said: The lecture this evening on the Scenery of Greece by Mr. Gomme, who has been for many years out in Greece, is in the nature of a new departure. We in this Society are accustomed to take a perhaps rather limited view of Geography, but in this lecture we hope to hear of the beauty of Greece, and not merely of its physical measurements. We consider that a description of the beauty of the country is just as important as its accurate physical measurement. Geography is the description of the Earth, and the part of the Earth which Mr. Gomme will describe this evening is Greece, and he will describe, not the height of the mountains, the length of the rivers, and the contour of the coast-line, but the beauty of its scenery. Personally I look forward to the time when Mr. Reeves will have a colleague in our Society. Mr. Reeves, very efficiently and with very great success, teaches intending travellers the way to map a country and the way to take accurate measurements of the mountains, rivers, and so on, but I hope the time will come when he will have a colleague who will teach intending travellers the way to observe, and the way to describe the beauty of a country. This lecture is, as I say, the first step in that direction. We have a traveller who is more especially concerned with observing and with describing to us the natural beauty of a country he knows. Mr. Gomme was a student in the British School at Athens, and has for many years past spent a few months travelling in Greece. He is thus very intimately acquainted with it. I ask Mr. Gomme to give us his lecture.