

VITYLO AND CARGESE;
AN EPISODE FROM LATER GREEK HISTORY.

‘Phocaeorum
Velut profugit exsecrata civitas
Agros atque Lares proprios.’

THE central peninsula of the three that project from the south of the Peloponnese, which since the Middle Ages has been known as the district of Maina, is one of the wildest parts of Greece owing to its rugged mountains and rocky shores, and has always been the abode of independent and intractable races. The emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus speaks of the Mainotes as having retained their primitive heathenism until the latter half of the ninth century.¹ At the present day they are notorious for their blood-feuds, which are the scourge of the country, and seriously interfere with its social life. On the western shore of this remote district, near a small harbour that runs in from the Messenian gulf, is the town of Vitylo, one of the comparatively few places in the Morea, though these are more numerous on the seaboard than in the interior, which have retained their classical name. It was formerly called Οίτυλος, and this appellation now appears in the form *Boίτυλος*, which accounts for its pronunciation as Vitylo. The modern form of the name is probably the original one, for Ptolemy calls the place *Bίτυλα*.² Rather more than two centuries ago this town was the scene of a remarkable emigration. At that time the Turks, who had made themselves masters of Crete in 1669, proceeded to attempt the subjugation

¹ Constant. Porphyr. *De Adm. Imp.* c. 50, vol. iii. 224, edit. Bonn.

² Ptolemy, iii. 16, § 22; see Leake's *Travels in the Morea*, i. p. 330.

of Maina. Spon and Wheler, who sailed round cape Matapan on their way to Constantinople in the summer of 1675, were told that the invaders had succeeded in reducing most of the country by means of forts built on the coasts—they seem to have been aided by the treachery of some of the inhabitants—and that part of the population had escaped to Apulia.¹ A few months after these travellers passed by, a number of the inhabitants of Vitylo and its neighbourhood, amounting to about 1000 souls, were persuaded by the Genoese to emigrate under their auspices to Western Europe. They were led by one of their countrymen, John Stephanopoulos, and were established by their new protectors in Corsica, which was at that time a Genoese possession; and in that island their descendants remain at the present day.

Ten years ago, when travelling in Corsica, I visited this community at the town of Cargese, on the western coast, a day's journey north of Ajaccio, where, after various vicissitudes of fortune, principally caused by the jealousy of the Corsicans, who drove them out from their original habitation, they have now been settled nearly seventy years. They number about 400 souls, and still retain many of their Greek characteristics. Though one of the stipulations made by the Genoese at the time of the migration was that they should acknowledge the supremacy of the Pope, yet their priests still wear the dress of the Greek Church, and they employ in their public worship, with some modifications, the same service-books which they brought with them from Greece. Their family names, too, are almost all Greek, and all the older inhabitants speak Romaic, and display a strong enthusiasm for everything connected with their mother-country. In this respect, however, a change is rapidly passing over the community at large. For those who use the Greek language are at least equally familiar with the Corsican, and comparatively few of the younger generation either speak Greek, or profess an interest in their nationality. The fact is, they have discovered that their isolation is an impediment in the way of their advancement, and are beginning to wish to be identified with their Corsican neighbours. It appeared to me quite evident that their extinction as a separate Greek

¹ Wheler, *Journey into Greece*, Lond. Amst. 1679, vol. i. p. 122.
1682, p. 47; Spon, *Voyage d' Italie*, &c.

colony was only a question of time. It was, therefore, with the greater satisfaction that I obtained a number of the popular Greek ballads which are sung at that place, and have been handed down by oral tradition among the people. They were collected for me by one of the priests of the place, Papa Michael Stephanopoulos, a kinsman of the original leader, and an intelligent person; and were afterwards published in the *Journal of Philology*¹ under the title of 'Modern Greek Ballads from Corsica.' They display all the usual features, in respect of metre, treatment, and expression, of those that are found in Greece.

My visit to this Greek colony subsequently inspired me with a desire to see the spot from which they originally came, and to discover what traditions might remain there of the migration, and what points of correspondence, if any, might be traced between the inhabitants of the two places. This I succeeded in doing in the course of September 1882, in company with my friend Mr. Crowder. We reached Vitylo after seven hours riding from Marathonisi—or Gythium, as it is now called, for the title of the ancient port of Sparta, the ruins of which are close by, has now been officially adopted. Not far from this place a deep valley, forming throughout a considerable portion of its length a narrow gorge, cuts through the range of Taygetus almost from the Laconian to the Messenian gulf; but as it approaches the latter, the ground gradually rises to a pass, from the summit of which both gulfs are visible, and then falls steeply to the bay of Vitylo. The town of that name occupies a plateau on the northern side of this, from which the ground descends abruptly 700 feet to the valley at the head of the bay, being occasionally broken by terraces supported by extremely steep walls. Many of the houses stand on the edge of the precipice. Behind, about a mile off, a screen of lofty mountains shelters it towards the north-east, and the warmth of the climate is shown by the presence of the prickly-pear, which grows there abundantly. The road by which it is reached is perhaps the worst of all the breakneck paths of this rugged district, being little more than a zigzag track worn in the honeycombed limestone rocks.

¹ Vol. vi. pp. 196, foll.

The town is divided into quarters, each quarter being occupied by a certain family or clan ; and, as it happened, that in which we obtained a lodging belonged to the family of the Stephanopouli. The houses are constructed on the principle which prevails throughout Maina, and imparts a peculiar appearance to the towns and villages of that country. Owing to the prevalence of the *vendetta*, it is necessary that every precaution should be taken to prevent surprise, and consequently 'every man's house is his castle' in the strictest sense of the words. All are built separate from one another, and each possesses a tower or keep, of greater or less height, which serves as a final place of refuge. The house in which we stayed may be taken as an example. It was entered through a court or enclosure, and on the lower story were stables and other chambers; above these were several rooms, which were reached by a door at some height up in the wall, underneath which a stone projected to serve as a step for mounting. Over the central room rises the tower, to which the ascent was made in one corner through a trap-door by a flight of steep stone stairs; it contained a single chamber, the floor of which was of concrete, while in three of its four walls were three small windows, one of which commanded a view of the bay, and another of the Frankish castle of Kelepha, which stands on a similar level, separated from Vitylo by a deep ravine. This room was assigned to us as our habitation. It is said that some persons, who have been compromised by a blood-feud, have occupied such a house for twenty years together without once leaving it.

The first of the inhabitants who visited us in this apartment, though they had heard of the emigration to Corsica, knew very little about it. They treated it as a matter of history, an event which had happened very long ago, and for which they could not be expected to care. However, they undertook to communicate the fact of our arrival to those of their number who were best acquainted with the subject, and accordingly, in the course of the evening the physician of the town and another gentleman, M. Zanglès, presented themselves. The former of these was quite a man of the old school, for he wore the *fustanella* and a large belt containing pistols; but I afterwards found that, owing to the blood-feuds, the custom of wearing arms, which is now disused in most parts of Greece, is

maintained throughout Maina. His companion was dressed in the costume of Western Europe. When I had given them an account of the people of Cargese, they expressed lively satisfaction at obtaining authentic information about their countrymen and relatives in a distant land, and made various inquiries about them—amongst others, whether they had any political influence in Corsica. They were well aware of the migration having taken place, though the *larpós* was under the impression that it was at the instigation of the Venetians, on which point M. Zanglès corrected him. They had also heard something of the subsequent history of the colony—for instance, their having been forced to change their abode; but they did not seem to know the name of Cargese. They also referred to the belief—though, apparently, without any strong confidence in its truth—that Buonaparte was of Vityliote descent. This is based on the idea that Buonaparte was originally a translation of *Καλόμερος* or *Καλόμοιρος*, which is found as a family name among the Greeks, and that the family of the great Corsican came from the Greek settlement: indeed, it has been affirmed that the people of Cargese possess a genealogy by which they can prove it, though for political reasons they keep it secret. Some of this information seemed to have been derived from a pamphlet on the subject of the Corsican Greeks by M. Pappadopoulos of Athens, which one of our visitors possessed, but the leading facts had probably been handed down by tradition on the spot, for Colonel Leake, who visited Vitylo in 1805, speaks of them as being known at that time, including even the Buonaparte legend.¹

At last I produced my ballads from Corsica, the mention of which excited great interest. My object was to discover whether these would be recognised at Vitylo, so as to justify the belief that the same songs which were transplanted to Corsica continue to exist on their native soil. By this time my audience had increased, for the heads of several persons, men of a lower class, who were standing on the staircase, appeared through the aperture of the trap-door; and their presence rendered it easier to test the local knowledge. The result of the recitation was this. They seemed to be acquainted, though not familiar, with

¹ Leake, *Travels in the Morea*, i. p. 314.

all, or almost all, the ballads ; that is to say, one or other of them could take up the recitation from time to time, and add half a line, and sometimes two or three lines. One of the ballads, which is called ‘The Cruel Mother’ (*Η κακὴ μάνα*), and describes a son being driven from his home by unkindness, they said was sung by the women of the place. And when I came to the distich which runs—

*κρέμασε τὰς πλεξίδες σου δέξου στὸ παναθύρι,
νὰ κάμω σκάλα ν' ἀνεβῶ νὰ σὲ φιλῶ στὰ χεῖλη—*

(Hang down your braids outside the window, for a ladder
for me to climb by, that I may kiss your lips)—

one of them exclaimed, ‘Why ! that is what the little boys and girls here sing to one another in the streets.’ Occasionally, as might be expected, their version of a line differed by a few words from mine. Thus in the song which commences—

*κάτω στὴν ἄμμο σὲ ρήμονῆσι
ἀετὸς ἐβγῆκε νὰ κυνηγήσῃ·
δὲν κυνηγάει λαγώς καὶ ἀλάφια,
μὸν κυνηγάει τὰ μαῦρα μάτια—*

(Down by the shore of the desert island—an eagle went
out to the chase ;—he does not hunt hares or stags ;—
the object of his chase is dark eyes)—

the Vityliote version of the second line was, *Τοῦρκος ἐβγῆκε νὰ κυνηγήσῃ*. On the whole, there is sufficient reason for thinking that these songs survive on the spot, and by a further inquiry one might have discovered persons among the natives who could recite them throughout. There is a grain of scientific interest in the inquiry, because it goes some way towards determining the age of the Romaic ballads generally. As I have already pointed out in the *Journal of Philology*, most of the poems from Corsica have their counterpart in the collections of ballads that have been made in Greece, the correspondences and differences being such as to show that there has been no borrowing of one from the other : and as the Corsican colony seems, ever since its departure from the mother-country, to have been cut off, at all events until quite lately, from communication with Greece, these songs must be at least two

centuries old. The evidence for their being primitive Greek poems is strengthened by our discovering that a traditional acquaintance with them exists in the place from which the colony started, though, like the rest of the Romaic ballads, they have been orally transmitted. As an additional point of similarity between the two places, I may mention that both at Cargese and Vitylo I found that the letter κ had a soft pronunciation. Thus, $\acute{\epsilon}\kappa\acute{\epsilon}\iota$ was pronounced *etche*, Κέλεφα (the name of the fortress), *Tchelefa*; and the same was the case with other words. I noticed this peculiarity also at Gythium, but, as far as my observation goes, it is not found in the Peloponnesian except in Maina, though it is common enough in Crete, and also in some of the islands of the Aegean.

The migration, of which an account has now been given, though it is an event of small importance in history, is interesting in itself, and bears a curious resemblance to that of the Phocaeans to Massilia, both in the circumstances which caused it and the direction which it took. It may have been worth while to give some account of the state of the two communities, at a time when there appears to be a prospect of their being forgotten, and forgetting one another.

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