

# ON THE ORIGIN OF THE WESTERN GREEK *POLEIS*\*

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## Abstract

In the light of the debate on colonisation or so-called colonisation, the question is if by this term the process is under attack. In southern Italy, the relationship between the Greeks and local populations is the main issue. The hermeneutic path developed in Magna Graecia in the last century is summarised. There is no doubt that, at first, the point of view that assigns to the Greeks a civilising function towards an indigenous world thought as a unit has prevailed. The archaeological finds put that model in crisis, without denying the main role of the Greek *apoikoi*.

Recent literature has seen a remarkable increase in contributions and debates on the theme of Greek ‘colonisation’ in the West. While not always informed by stringent logic, they are nevertheless helping us to clarify things by doing away with certain aporias, but without throwing out the baby with the bath water, as Tsetskhladze and Hargrave have rightly observed.

First problem: nominalism. On this subject all I can do is express the deepest astonishment. We who have some familiarity with Latin, as well as Greek, know that *colonia* comes from *colère*, and that the Greek movement called *apoikismós*, which produces *apoikiai*, has nothing to do with *colère*. Thus, there is no Greek ‘colonisation’ in the etymological sense of the word and the many *nuances* of meaning it picked up along the way from the Roman period to modern times. Finley and Lepore already addressed this subject with exhaustive clarity many years ago.<sup>1</sup> I do not understand why some scholars do not just refer to these authors, rather than invoke a problem that has no *raison d’être*, being based on a wrong premise. It is thus surprising to see Etienne<sup>2</sup> enthusiastically adhere to Osborne’s criticism of studies on Greek colonialism, vitiated, the latter argues, by the influence of modern colonialism. This is entirely an Anglo-Saxon problem. We, in Italy, never thought of looking at British colonies to study Greek ones. Do we want to abolish the word ‘colonisation’? No problem: let us all call it ‘apoikism’, so everybody will be happy.

\* Translation by Federico Poole.

<sup>1</sup> Now published together in Finley and Lepore 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Etienne 2010, 6.

But ‘apoikism’, not bands of adventurers roaming the Mediterranean; which is not to deny the existence of concomitant phenomena, such as the mobility of restless *metanastes*, sometimes represented as making up the bulk of the migratory movement. Besides helping to avoid confusion between Greek and Roman, or modern (for example, British) colonisation, this terminological clarification should also suffice to avoid idle discussions about the purposes of colonisation; especially the recurrent and overworked settlement/trading colony dualism, which is totally inadequate to describe the complexity of the phenomenon of colonisation and the diversity of its manifestation through space and time.<sup>3</sup>

If it is the process itself, not just the term, that is under attack, the question calls for a different answer. But first, I need to make a premise: for quite some time now, a trend has prevailed to limit discussions to literature in the English language, with rare exceptions. Sad, but legitimate, to say, writings in English hardly account for the whole scholarly production on the terraqueous globe on this subject. Just as an example, for 50 years meetings have been held at Taranto on Magna Graecia, admittedly a destination of the Greek migratory movement (although in small measure, after all we are *only* talking of southern Italy). So far, 48 volumes of acts of these meetings have been published (nos. 49 and 50 are forthcoming), dealing with a vast range of issues and featuring contributions from scholars from all over the world in a number of different languages. However, I have been unable to find in the recent debate on Greek colonisation even a single reference to this encyclopaedic store of knowledge (about 25,000 pages, quite a mouthful, but analyses are indispensable to avoid creating abstract models such as those constructed by some of the participants in the debate). Whoever chooses to overlook this body of writings should also accept to be addressed with the celebrated motto attributed to Apelles: *ne sutor ultra crepidam!* An example of a certain ideological confusion can be found in an article by Owen,<sup>4</sup> who produces methodological reflections and formulates many questions, from which, however, one can deduce that she lacks thorough knowledge of both archaeology and literary sources on Greek colonisation. Like Osborne, she believes that studies on colonisation are vitiated by the modern colonial model, but this is only true of the literature she cites, systematically overlooking Ciaceri, Bérard, Vallet, Lepore and an immense body of writings and debate produced in Italy as well as elsewhere.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See most recently Descoëdres 2008 (but the bibliography on the subject is much richer).

<sup>4</sup> Owen 2005.

<sup>5</sup> A not dissimilar attitude is displayed by Shepherd 2005, who begins from Freeman’s racism to end up with Dunbabin’s neocolonialism, but to clear the field – Anglo-Saxon readers, we do not have this problem! – of modernist misunderstandings. Tsetskhladze 2008 wisely distances himself from this position.

To say that there was no single experience in the Greek migratory movement is an unnecessary truism for those who studied on the books of Bérard, Mazzarino and Vallet, or attended Lepore's lectures at Taranto. Reading the arguments of negationists, one gets the impression that they believe that defenders of the migratory (apoikistic) movement refer to a single model.<sup>6</sup> Wrong. When one indicates alternative interpretive paths, one must avoid banality, because banality is deadlier than a lethal weapon. Likewise, there may be some utility in criticising the historiographical matrices of Dunbabin, or other protagonists of the debate (what author would be immune to this kind of criticism?), but one should not reduce the scholar to a caricature by representing him as an unwitting abettor of the British colonial empire. In any case, we have long been accustomed to distinguishing between different approaches adopted by the communities of *apoikoi* who settled in the West. And, despite our Hegelian awareness of the fact that at night all cows are black, we can still tell night from day. Recognising the existence of different models does not mean that we should attribute each to a distinct type of rationality and then relate it to a corresponding ethnic group (Euboeans, Achaeans, Corinthians or Spartans). We who have adopted a prevalently – but not exclusively – archaeological perspective to assess phenomena occurring at this chronological level<sup>7</sup> prefer to speak of a diversity of outcomes of the encounter between Greeks and natives in the various situations we have been able to learn about and investigate. According to Morris,<sup>8</sup> studies on the ancient Mediterranean have gone from the Cold War era (perceivable in the works of Braudel and Finley) to that of web connectivity, as exemplified by Horden and Purcell's book.<sup>9</sup> But when we consider the huge attention currently being devoted to the role of non-Hellenic Mediterranean populations in the construction of ancient society and, above all, in the urbanisation process – as we shall see further on – we can hardly regard it as independent of the very modern attention for the Third World. I have no objection to this, of course, on condition that it does not distort the historical interpretation of the facts.

The relationship between the incoming Greeks and the local populations is undoubtedly a central issue. I will try to briefly summarise the hermeneutic evolution we have witnessed in Magna Graecia in the second post-war period.

There is no doubt that until the 1970s the prevalent point of view assigned the Greeks the function of civilisers of an indigenous world usually perceived as a

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, we distinguish between an Archaic *apoikia* and a *klerouchia* of the Classical period or a foundation by one of Alexander the Great's successors (see Purcell 2005, 132).

<sup>7</sup> Antonaccio 2009, 319: '...archaeology is what we have to write the history of the late Iron Age and early archaic west in particular (from roughly 1000 BC)'.

<sup>8</sup> Morris 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Horden and Purcell 2000.

unitary, undifferentiated whole. Prevalent, but not exclusive: there were several dissenting voices, such as Napoli's protest at the Third Taranto Meeting (*Metropoli e colonie della Magna Grecia*)<sup>10</sup> against Mazzarino's comparison of the Italian natives to Vico's *bestioni*, or Coarelli's invitation (at the 11th meeting: *Le genti non greche della Magna Grecia*) not to regard Greek culture as a unity, because that would have been an anti-historical abstraction.<sup>11</sup> In any case, if we remain at the level of the use of archaeological evidence, an important reference for our understanding of the historiography of those years can be found in an article by de la Genière<sup>12</sup> summarising a whole previous season of studies. The coasts of southern Italy and Sicily, she argues, were inhabited by local populations distributed in a great variety of forms. The arrival of the Greeks involved (a) the physical suppression of the natives, or (b) the crushing of their ethnic and cultural identity by the superiority of the newcomers, or (c) the natives' withdrawal to inland areas where they retained their identity until Romanisation. As early as the Taranto Meeting of 1967, however, Finley and Lepore had invited scholars not to overlook Frontier History in their interpretation of some phenomena highlighted by archaeological discoveries.<sup>13</sup> The problem was eventually given full consideration in 1997 (*Confini e Frontiere*)<sup>14</sup> and 2000 (*Problemi della chora coloniale*).<sup>15</sup> Malkin<sup>16</sup> recently also introduced the concept of 'middle ground' to explain certain phenomena observed in the Great Lakes region in North America; something that is not acculturation (a one-way transfer involving an active agent and a passive recipient), but a form of cultural mediation. Others<sup>17</sup> speak of 'hybridisation'. These are useful concepts, but in my opinion this phenomenon is best approached from the perspective of 'frontier dynamics'; of cultures, that is, that arise in border areas and are something different from either of the parts that come into contact.

It is truly surprising that Anglo-American scholars do not use the concept of 'frontier dynamics' – a lofty product of Anglo-American anthropological culture formulated by the likes of Turner and Lattimore, just to name two titans – to

<sup>10</sup> Napoli 1964, 184–85.

<sup>11</sup> Coarelli 1972, 331: 'La cultura greca "ut sic" è un'astrazione, non esiste, come non esiste d'altra parte un mondo indigeno, che a quella si opponga in un complesso sistema di influssi e relazioni, in una facile e illusoria dialettica' (Greek culture 'ut sic' is an abstraction, it does not exist, just as there exists no indigenous world on the other side opposing itself to Greek culture in a complex system of influences and relationships, in a facile and illusory dialectics).

<sup>12</sup> de la Genière 1970.

<sup>13</sup> Finley 1968, 186–88; Lepore 1968, 365–66.

<sup>14</sup> See Corcella 1998; Greco 1998.

<sup>15</sup> See Greco 2001 and discussion 159–60.

<sup>16</sup> Malkin 2002b.

<sup>17</sup> Antonaccio 2009, 320–21.

explain phenomena such as the territorial organisation of Western *apoikiai* and their relations with indigenous communities, both those integrated within the so-called colonial *chora* and those lying at its fringes or outside of it.<sup>18</sup> This kind of approach is noticeably lacking, for example, in the approach to archaeological evidence of Yntema<sup>19</sup> and Kleibrink,<sup>20</sup> both exponents of indigeno-centric revisionism. These authors, when they recommend using archaeology rather than writings to investigate colonial history, seem to imply that material testimonies have an objectivity that texts lack; as if the former were not themselves filtered by the subjectivity of the interpreter. Furthermore, they freely employ categories such as *apoikia*, *emporion*, etc., without the necessary anthropological support of a vast literature that teaches us that behind terminology are concepts and categories that need to be structurally defined to avoid confusion. It is also sad to see the rules of grammar offended when one reads *ethnai* as the plural of *ethnos*,<sup>21</sup> a neuter noun with a sigma-dropping stem whose plural is actually *ethne*. In the haste to relegate Greek culture to a *prope nihil*, one ends up mangling the Greek language as well.

What has changed in recent years? Archaeological discoveries have radically challenged the traditional model (which means that fortunately digging is not useless and our knowledge is advancing!). Attempting to draw a balance of the question ten years ago, I argued that the indigenous *milieu* was clearly perceivable as a cultural survival in the archaeological record, especially in settlements – such as Siris, Metaurus, Palinuro – where an emporic vocation probably prevailed. These sites yielded evidence of the coexistence of indigenous and Greek inhabitants in an integrated community. (To use a metaphor to describe this phenomenon, I borrowed the term ‘cohabitation’ from French political language.)<sup>22</sup> In the mid-1990s, a protagonist in this debate reasserted her traditional point of view, which had held sway in the previous decades.<sup>23</sup> Later on, especially after De Siena’s discoveries at Metapontum, it seemed evident enough to me that we needed to transcend the traditional vision in favour of a new perspective recognising that the autochthonous populations did not find themselves in an exclusively passive and losing position, but in several cases collaborated with the newcomers in the formation of the political community.<sup>24</sup> (Metapontum can be classified as an archetypical example of an agricultural settlement,

<sup>18</sup> I largely subscribe to Purcell’s environmental approach (2005) and its regard for microsystemic aspects.

<sup>19</sup> Yntema 2000.

<sup>20</sup> Kleibrink 2001; 2004.

<sup>21</sup> Kleibrink 2001, 42

<sup>22</sup> Niemayer 1990 had already employed the term *enoikismós* (‘cohabitation’).

<sup>23</sup> de la Genière 1992; 1995.

<sup>24</sup> On De Siena’s excavations at Metaponto, see Nava 1999, 700; and my reply at p. 803.

although this category, again, should be used with caution, without granting it an absolute value, and especially without assuming that it somehow reflects the perception of first-generation *apoikoi*: as I have repeatedly stressed in the past, population colonies are a modern abstraction.) It goes without saying, in any case, that the *polis* was an expression of Greek culture.<sup>25</sup> There has also been a lot of discussion about ethnicity, especially following the publication of an article by Morgan and Hall.<sup>26</sup> We organised a meeting on the ethnic identity of the Achaeans in the West,<sup>27</sup> striving to make sense of the apparent contradiction between an advanced Achaean Western world and a motherland that was practically non-existent before the end of the 6th century BC; a full two centuries, that is, after the Achaean *poleis* of Sybaris and Croton were established, with all that followed, namely, the foundation of Metapontum and, 30 years later, Poseidonia. The Achaean world actually displays remarkable cultural unity, for example in its vast shared pantheon, not to mention an extraordinary similarity in the organisation of the urban space. Today, the progress of archaeological research in Achaea has finally freed this region from its isolation of the Late Geometric period, revealing a very different world from what it appeared to be only 15 years ago.<sup>28</sup>

Much attention has been devoted in our debate to the figure of the *oikist*.<sup>29</sup> Malkin, and especially Moggi, have written interesting things on this subject, and I refer the reader to their essays.<sup>30</sup> As an archaeologist, however, rather than dwell on the tradition on the *oikists* of Naxos, Syracuse, Leontini, Catania, Megara, Selinus, Gela, Agrigentum, Zancle, Himera and Camarina, called to banquet every year in Callimachus' well-known fragment (*Aitia* F 43, 30 ff. Pf.), I would like to focus on the archaeological finds concerning the *oikist* of Gela and the mention of the *oikist* of Sybaris on the incuse coins of Poseidonia, datable to the third quarter of the 6th century, so little more than half a century after the foundation of the city. Little needs to be added to what has already been said about the *oikist* of Gela, Antiphe-mos. I only wish to emphasise that Orsi, who found the fragment mentioning the

<sup>25</sup> Greco 2006; Mele 2007. From the progress of research we expect to learn what the status of natives in the city was, if eminent positions can be detected, or if the surviving indigenous evidence rather points to the existence of subjugated communities. In the meantime, a certain progress has been made with respect to traditional visions. We can now state that after the *ktisis* the indigenous *milieu* that existed before the arrival of the *apoikoi* did not totally disappear, as was argued until recently.

<sup>26</sup> Morgan and Hall 1996.

<sup>27</sup> Greco 2002, with Mele 2002's reply to the reconstruction proposed by Morgan and Hall 1996.

<sup>28</sup> Interesting new evidence in this regard can be found in M. Petropoulos's and A. Gadoulou's papers presented at the 50th Taranto Meeting (October 2010), forthcoming.

<sup>29</sup> For a broad overview on the historicity of the figure of the *oikist* and on some cases where the role of the metropolis is apparent, see Mele 2007, 51–56.

<sup>30</sup> Malkin 2002a; Moggi 2003.

*oikist*, immediately recognised its importance, commenting: 'So far it was not really known that Antiphemos had a cult at Gela, although as a general rule the cult of heroised *oikists* is something normal and unsurprising in Greek cities.'<sup>31</sup>

The fragment with the dedication to the *oikist* of Gela is datable to the early 5th century BC. According to the negationists, here we are at the beginning of the great manipulation: the invention of the *oikist*, of ethnicity, of everything. But there is another item of evidence to which attention has already been drawn in the past and which I would like to bring up again here. It is the mention of the name Fiis on incuse coins from Poseidonia, which corresponds to the name handed down in written sources for the *oikist* of Sybaris.<sup>32</sup> This is not a minor consideration: a second-phase *apoikia* (one of what Lombardo called 'colonies of colonies', which was also the title of the fine meeting he organised on the subject<sup>33</sup>) keeps alive the name of the *oikist* of its mother city, thus confirming his historicity. This is all the more significant when we consider that in the 5th century double-relief coins carry another name, that of a Megyllos, certainly to be identified as the *oikist* of Poseidonia, clearly brought back to prominence at the conclusion of a historical period that witnessed a political conflict between the early aristocracies, loyal to the memory of the founder of Sybaris, and a new ruling class that had shaken off this loyalty. It is frankly difficult, in the light of this evidence, to dismiss all tradition about *oikists* as later manipulation, or, worse, brand archaeology as slave to texts.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, I would like to dwell on a debate that has some connections with the one I have been reviewing and critiquing so far. I am referring to the debate on urbanisation. Etienne<sup>35</sup> rightly points out that here there is a need for terminological clarification. Let us start from some apodictic statements. According to Kleibrink, the true colonists of southern Italy were its natives: 'The native inhabitants are the true colonists of S. Italy if we mean by colonization the effort to change the landscape into production unit.'<sup>36</sup> According to van Dommelen,<sup>37</sup> a comparison between Greek, Punic and indigenous settlements proves that the urban phenomenon is not a colonial invention, but a regional and indigenous process. As I have remarked before, these authors continue to treat the urban phenomenon as if it was a technological invention. It would almost seem that somebody could imagine that

<sup>31</sup> P. Orsi in *NSc* 1900, 273–75; *MonAnt* 17 (1906), col. 558.

<sup>32</sup> Mele 2007; Greco 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Lombardo and Frisone 2009.

<sup>34</sup> Purcell 1997. See also Purcell 2005, where the author uses 'colonization' between quotes and makes an acceptable premise (although obvious, in my opinion): 'Ancient "colonization" is more like agrarian power structures than political hegemony' (p. 117).

<sup>35</sup> Etienne 2010, 8–9.

<sup>36</sup> Kleibrink 2004, 87.

<sup>37</sup> van Dommelen 2005.

the urban form is transmitted as if it was not the result of a dynamic process arising from the interaction between various elements, such as the separation between the city and the countryside, the development of production, and social stratification. Almost as if phenomenonic aspects were sufficient evidence for a judgment to be expressed, and reality did not manifest itself in an infinite variety of forms. Besides, it is depressing to see Megara Hyblaea's status as a city denied because it lacks monumentality, using the same naive approach of Pausanias (in his famous passage about Panopeus in 10. 4. 4), and especially to see scholars turn into involuntary defenders of a trite teleological vision of history picturing the city as a point of arrival and reducing its archaic precursors to the level of an indefinite rural agglomerate. Etienne<sup>38</sup> criticises de Polignac<sup>39</sup> for not defining *a priori* what a city is before going into a critique of various picturesque arguments set forth by other scholars. My answer to Etienne would be that from a material point of view nothing is less definable *a priori* than urban status from an archaeological standpoint, because if he did not have literary sources but only archaeological evidence, he would end up having to deny that Sparta was a city; something that Thucydides (1. 10) warned us against many centuries ago. The same reasoning applies, in my opinion, to Pithekoussai, like Megara Hyblaea an extraordinary example of a *polis*, but with a degree of development corresponding to that of a *polis* of the 8th century BC, and hence not comparable in monumentality with later cities. Let us then go back to the Greeks, without presumption and without arrogance, and make them act again, along with the Others and without cultural genocides, to be sure, but respecting that part of the tradition that is firmly holding its ground against arbitrary and groundless criticism.

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### Abbreviation

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