INTRODUCTION

GREEK tragedy was one of the distinctive functions of Athenian democracy. In its form and its content, in its growth and its decay, it was conditioned by the evolution of the social organism to which it belonged.

In the Ægean basin, split up into innumerable islands and valleys, the centralisation of political power was difficult, and the political units tended to remain autonomous. External expansion being thus restricted, their internal development was proportionately intense. In the democratic city-state, ancient society rose, on a scale necessarily minute, to its highest point. These states had advanced so rapidly that they carried with them copious traditions of the past, and their autonomy favoured the persistence of alternative versions of the same events, which provided abundant material for comparison and analysis. Moreover, surrounded as they were by primitive peoples, thoughtful citizens did not fail to perceive that their own ancestors had once lived as these barbarians lived now.\(^1\) And, finally, the success of the democratic movement predisposed its exponents towards enquiry into its origins, while the strenuous opposition which it had encountered taught them to regard conflict, whether between man and man or man and nature, as the driving-force of human progress. The result was a view of evolution at once rational and dynamic.

Æschylus was a democrat who fought as well as wrote. The triumph of democracy over the internal and external enemies allied against it was the inspiration of his art. He was a leading citizen of the most advanced community in Greece; he was also, as a member of the old Attic nobility, the heir to local traditions which had their roots far back in the society of the primitive tribe.\(^2\) The fundamental question which engrossed him all his life was this—how had the tribal society enshrined in those traditions evolved into the democratic city-state which he had helped to establish? It is a question that must
concern us, too, if we wish to understand his art, and it is at the same time so vital to the understanding of European civilisation as to invest his art with a permanent historical importance.

The Greek view of life was not, as sometimes represented, the expression of qualities inherent in the Greeks as such; it was the rich and varied response of a heterogeneous people to the complex and continuous growth of Greek society itself as determined by the special conditions of its material and historical environment. The use that men make of their leisure, their ideas of the physical world, of right and wrong, their art, philosophy and religion, vary and develop in accordance with variations and developments in their social relations which in turn are ultimately determined by their mode of securing their material subsistence. This is not to deny that there exists an objective reality, or that some men have formed a truer idea of it than others; but every idea of it is relative in so far as it starts from conscious or unconscious assumptions determined by the position of the man himself in the world he contemplates.

To that extent, therefore, not only was the Greek view of life relative, but so is our view of the Greek view. Our view cannot be wholly objective, and the professed impartiality of some modern scholars is an illusion; but it will be more or less objective in proportion as we recognise and analyse our own preconceptions. We must become conscious of our prejudices in order to correct them. The historian of the past is a citizen of the present. Those who as citizens are averse or indifferent to contemporary social changes will seek in the civilisation of ancient Greece something stable and absolutely valuable, which will both reflect and fortify their attitude of acquiescence. Others, who cannot acquiesce, will study the history of Greece as a process of continuous change, which, if it can be made to reveal its underlying laws, will help them to understand, and so direct, the forces making for change in the society of to-day. To such as these, the study of Æschylus, who was a revolutionary poet, will be especially congenial, and the preconceptions with which they approach him, being akin to his own, will be a positive advantage.
It is known that, in common with other civilised peoples, the Greeks had once been organised in tribes. The precise nature of their tribal institutions is a question which the internal evidence is in itself too fragmentary to solve. Yet for a proper understanding of the city-state it is imperative to ascertain, not only what it was and what it was becoming, but also what it had ceased to be. The internal evidence must therefore be studied in the light of what is known of tribal institutions in general. This principle was applied to early Greek history with important results by Morgan in the nineteenth century, and by some of his predecessors, such as Millar and Ferguson, in the eighteenth, but, despite all the material that has accumulated since then, it has been so far neglected by recent historians, especially in this country, that most of them are not even acquainted with the results already obtained.

By classifying the surviving tribes of modern times according to their predominant mode of food production, some valuable correlations have been established between material culture and social institutions, and, with certain reservations, these results can be applied to the problems of archaeology. In some departments of Greek archaeology, important work along these lines has already been done by Harrison, Ridgeway, Cook and others, but, owing largely to their neglect of Morgan, their use of the anthropological evidence was insufficiently systematic. This explains, though without justifying, recent scepticism as to the validity of their method. Thus, writing of the origins of tragedy, which is one of the problems to be investigated in this book, Pickard-Cambridge remarks: "All the arguments that can be drawn from the Australian bush, Central Africa, and other remote regions can prove nothing about Greek tragedy in default of all evidence from Greece itself."

This provincialism goes far to explain why the problem of the origin of Greek tragedy remains unsolved. There is plenty of evidence in Greece itself for eyes that have been trained to recognise it.

The comparative study of social evolution is complicated by two factors, both making for uneven development. In the first place, the growth of many primitive communities has been retarded by economic difficulties of their habitat. The
lower hunting tribes of contemporary Australia have failed to advance beyond the mode of production left behind in Europe at the close of the palæolithic epoch; but, though their economic development has been arrested, their social institutions have not remained stationary—they have continued to develop, but only in directions determined by that mode of production. It would, consequently, be premature to argue without further analysis from the social organisation of contemporary Australia to that of palæolithic Europe; but it would be equally mistaken to deny the possibility of co-ordinating the two sets of data.

In the second place, the more backward peoples have been continuously subjected to the cultural influence of the more advanced, with the result that their development has been accelerated, deflected, or obstructed. In extreme cases the peoples themselves have been destroyed. The complications arising from the operation of this factor cannot be fully resolved until we have worked out a theory of cultural diffusion, but meanwhile it may be observed that their significance can easily be exaggerated. Since the function of all social institutions, alien or indigenous, is to satisfy some need, the origin of this or that custom is not explained by saying that it was borrowed from abroad. As Ferguson remarked, "nations borrow only what they are nearly in a condition to have invented themselves."

The successive phases of evolution through which the ancient Greeks had passed are stratified, not only in their material remains, but in their language. The comparative study of the Indo-European languages has already reached a point at which it is possible to draw certain general conclusions concerning the culture of the people that spoke the parent-speech. When this study has been co-ordinated with that of other groups of languages, the science of historical linguistics will be raised to a new level of efficiency. Even now, in so limited a field as Greek, the concerted application of historical linguistics and social anthropology can yield new and important results.

It has sometimes been said, especially in recent years, that the possibilities of further research in classical studies are limited. I believe that they are as limitless in this as in any
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other branch of science, historical or physical; but, if we are to exploit them, we must emancipate ourselves from traditional methods, which served well in their time but are now exhausted. The art of Æschylus, like all art, must be studied as a product of social evolution, and for that purpose the departmentalism of classical research, and the barriers between classical research and other branches of the historical sciences, must be broken down. This is a task of some difficulty for those who have been brought up in the old convention, but it must be undertaken. We live in a period of disintegration, cultural and social, but out of this is already emerging the prospect of a new integration. By directing our study of Æschylus to this end, we can hope to achieve, as he achieved, a true harmony between theory and practice, between poetry and life.

Lastly, a few words about the plan of this book. The four parts into which it is divided correspond to the main stages of the argument, which, despite ramifications, is continuous. Part One begins with an analysis of the economic and social structure of the primitive tribe, and the conclusions reached are applied to the interpretation of tribal survivals in early Greece. Part Two covers the transition from tribal society to the city-state, and relates the development of poetry and science to the early history of the class struggle. Part Three resumes from Part One the history of primitive initiation, which is then applied to the growth of mystical religion and the origin of tragedy. In Part Four these various threads—political, ideological, artistic—are drawn together for the interpretation of Æschylus and, after dealing more briefly with the subsequent history of Greek tragedy, the book ends with a discussion of the function of the arts in relation to the psychological effects of the class struggle.

There are times when the reader may feel that the detail devoted to particular problems is disproportionate. In general, technical matter has been confined to the notes, but some of my conclusions, being new and at the same time vital, demanded full investigation in the text. It will be as well to indicate at the outset which these are and what value I place upon them.

In Chapter I an attempt is made to discover the origin of totemism, but I wish it to be understood that this part of my
argument is provisional. The only points on which I am prepared at the present stage to insist are two—that totemism is, an integral feature of the tribal system and that the true theory of its origin must include a solution of the contradiction between the present practice of Australian tribes and their ancestral traditions.

In Chapter II it is contended that the Indo-European terminology of kinship was originally classificatory. The evidence is set out in Appendix II. Apart from its bearing on the history of Indo-European culture, this conclusion affords, in my opinion, a striking confirmation of Morgan's general theory of the classificatory system.

In Chapter III the mythical concept of the Moirai, the Greek goddesses of Fate, is interpreted as a symbol of primitive communism. This conclusion has been reached by applying the principle that what ultimately determines man's consciousness is his social being. The same principle is applied in Chapters IX and XII to Orphism and Pythagoreanism, and in Chapter XVIII to the Aristotelian doctrine of peripeteia.

In Chapters X and XI Aristotle's account of the origin of tragedy is vindicated by a comparative study of the primitive secret society, followed by a dialectical analysis of the internal evidence. One reason why his account of the matter has been called in question by modern scholars is that they have been confronted by a contradiction which their empirical method is powerless to resolve. If tragedy and dithyramb were originally the same, how is it that they are actually so different? The answer is that they became different precisely because they had once been the same.

The interpretation of Æschylus in Chapters XV–XVII, parts of which have been already published, is my own, although it has its roots in the work of Headlam and Sheppard. In Chapter XVII I have illustrated by the myth of Prometheus the principle that myths retain their vitality in proportion as they readapt themselves to changes in the structure of society. This is an important principle of mythological analysis, which requires to be more fully worked out. In the myth of Prometheus it is relatively easy to strip the primitive kernel of its accretions, because it bears so directly on the class struggle,
but in others it is more difficult. In Chapter VIII I have assumed that the Dionysiac myths persisted with little modification of their primitive form. I believe that this assumption is correct, the explanation being that they drew their vitality from Orphism, which was itself a revival of the primitive cults of Dionysus, but I am aware that it requires further argument.

The book suffers from one fundamental weakness—the lack of a systematic investigation into the economic structure of early Greek society. Heichelheim’s *Wirtschaftsgeschichte des Altertums*, which contains much valuable material, appeared too late for me to absorb it as fully as it deserves. Perhaps, even here, I shall have achieved something if I have convinced specialists in economics of the urgency of the task that awaits them. Indeed, throughout the book my main object has been to inspire my readers, especially those who are alive to the need for new methods in the study of ancient society, with a sense of the wide and fertile country that lies ready for them to cultivate.