Early Greek Attitudes toward Environment As Indicated in the Place-Names[1]

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NATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS reveal themselves in a wide variety of obvious as well as subtle ways. One such factor is the names by which a people designates its towns and rivers, its mountains and islands and districts. We are accustomed to think of the ancient Greeks as a curious, inventive and perceptive people; and we therefore take it for granted that their place-names would reflect these qualities. Yet an eminent authority in the field of toponymy recently challenged this assumption rather persuasively.

Professor George R. Stewart, in his 1957 presidential address[2] before the American Name Society, imputes to the Greeks a lack

[1] This is a revised draft of a paper read at the December 1957 meetings of the American Philological Association. The chief differences are: (1) all evidence drawn from the newly-deciphered "Mycenean" clay tablets has been eliminated or relegated to footnotes 6 and 17; and (2) somewhat fuller statistics and examples for the "archaic" names have been added. The reason for change (1) is that the present status of Mycenean epigraphy is extremely fluid. There is not even agreement yet as to the corractness of the identifications of many of the so-called place-names, let alone their proper transcription. It is therefore wiser to withold from print even tentative conclusions in a context as general as ours.

[2] "And Adam Gave Names – A Consideration of Name-Lore in Antiquity," *Names* VI (1958) 1–10. This paper should not be construed as a critique of Professor Stewart's interesting general comparisons between Greek and Hebrew attitudes. I have made no attempt to study the Jewish material. Nor have I yet worked over in any detail the whole volume of Greek evidence. What I have attempted is to see whether Professor Stewart's inferences, drawn mainly from relatively late literary sources, are applicable to the earliest Greek place-names. And, to anticipate the argument, it appears that the conventional sources do not yield a fair picture for the early period, either in terms of "practice" or of "imagination" (to use Professor Stewart's terms, *loc. cit.* p. 10). Although one can detect seeds of the later method and attitude in an author as early as Hesiod, it was probably in the Alexandrian period that the great impetus occurred in the directions characterized by Professor Stewart.

of variety and creativity in giving names, as well as a dearth of curiosity about the origin and true explanation of names already in use. He finds the Greek place-names distinctly inferior to the Hebrew as reflections of the physical environment and of a sense of history. One is justified, according to Professor Stewart, in the generalization that the characteristic Greek approach to place-names was "to assume that a place had, in some way, always had a name, that it had borne two or more names, and that these names were from persons, and most frequently from an incident involving those persons."

There can be no doubt that the more obvious sources tend to confirm Dr. Stewart's thesis. The faults he enumerates are clear enough in the only surviving Greek treatise on toponymy. In the treatise "Concerning the Naming of Rivers and Mountains," nearly every river-name is derived from a human or hero who in madness or shame drowned himself in its waters; and a mountain regularly assumes the name of someone who killed himself or was killed on its leafy slopes.[3] Explanations which might at least seem imaginative and romantic if sparingly used become dulled through constant repetition, not to mention their obvious fictitiousness.

We may as well admit also that other late writers like Pausanias and Apollodorus apply much the same kind of mythological strait-jacket to place-names. But the case in general is not so extreme. By and large, the Greeks seem to have been genuinely curious about names and they did not uncritically accept silly or unlikely explanations.[4] Yet it is true that in the millenium or so from Aeschylus to Stephanus Byzantius dependable information on the real origin of names diminished while stereotypes involving reckless etymologizing and allegorizing increased.

But to test Professor Stewart's verdict with any rigor we must find a method superior to the "hunt-and-peck" variety. I have made

[3] The full title, Περὶ Ποταμῶν καὶ Ὀρῶν Ἐπωνυμίας is sometimes shortened to *De Fluviis*. This document is included in the mss. of Plutarch's *Moralia* (cf. *Plutarchi Chaeronensis Moralia* vol. VII, ed. G. N. Bernardakis, Leipzig [Teubner] 1896). It was certainly not written by Plutarch, although that writer is capable of perpetrating similar inanities in his genuine works. Another feature of the essay, exhibiting comparable etymological nonsense, is the ascription of magical properties to plants and stones.

[4] Cf. *Etymologizing in Greek Literature from Homer to Philo Judaeus* by W. D. Woodhead (Univ. of Toronto Press, 1928).

a start by reviewing all of the place-names which are proved to have been in use before *ca.* 600 B.C. because of their occurrence in documents written in Greek.[5] Before outlining the tentative results of this study, however, let me cite a few general references from this early literature.

King Alcinous says in the *Odyssey* (8.552–4) that no human is nameless, since parents assign a name to every child. But it does not follow that the Greeks naively assumed that *places* are similarly named by god or nature before human habitation. True, we do run across such statements as this one from the Homeric *Hymn to Apollo*: "For not yet did any mortal dwell in sacred Thebes. Nor were there yet roads or paths along the wheat-bearing plain of Thebes. All was forest." (*ll.*226–8) But surely the poet no more assumes that the name "Thebes" existed before it was bestowed by man than he imagines that wheat fields covered the plain before there were humans to plough and sow.

Although Hesiod was firmly in the mythopoeic tradition, he seems to be aware of the direct connection between humans and their place-names. After citing a long list of river names, he adds, "It would be difficult to tell the names of all the other rivers, the sons of Ocean, but each individual who dwells around knows them." (*Theogony*, 367–370).

The early Greeks also realized that names may aptly describe the bearer in straight-forward human terms. Homer refers to a group of small islands in the Ionian Sea as Echinae (ἐχῖναι – "hedge-hog" [islands]) in the *Iliad* (2.625) and as Thoai (θοαί – "pointed," "sharp") in the *Odyssey* (15.299). And in the *Hymn to Apollo* (ll.64–5) the personified island of Delos welcomes the opportunity to win honor by sheltering Leto, because her name, clearly connected by the poet with the root *dēl* (δηλ – "harm," "damage") has been responsible for her bad reputation among men.

[5]) Sources are: Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the earlier *Homeric Hymns* (those to Apollo, Demeter, Aphrodite), Hesiod's *Theogony*, and the earlier elegiac and lyric poets, notably Archilochus, Tyrtaeus, Mimnermus and Alcman. I have accepted the readings of editors of standard texts, although there are many cases of variants, emendations and possible interpolations in connection with the place-names. We must rely entirely on literary sources. Evidence from inscriptions (other than the Mycenean tablets) before this time is negligible. And while hundreds of place-names from before 600 B.C. certainly survive in later documents, I know of no way to isolate them with confidence.

In the latter reference we have a good example of the animistic concept which identifies a place with its indwelling "spirit." Thus, in the *Hymn to Apollo*, there is no hint of incongruity when Leto strikes a bargain with Delos or when Apollo threatens and argues with Telphusa (a Boeotian spring). We are here in the same context as the Homeric battle or love affair with a river. But such identification is a far cry from Pseudo-Plutarch's brittle connection of a river name with that of a human or hero who drowned in its waters. In the genuine context, one can hardley say wether the name originally designatet the place orits "genius". In the later accounts, however, conscious aetiological intent can be proved in many cases.

There are very few examples in the early literature where the process of naming places after humans or heroes or gods is explicitly assumed. In the *Iliad* (20.215) we read: "Zeus the cloud-gatherer begat Dardanus, and Dardanus founded Dardania, for not yet was holy Ilios built upon the plain." But one can also point in the *Iliad* (4.474) to an instance of the reverse transfer, i.e. a personal name derived from a place-name. Homer tells of a young man whose mother gave birth to him "beside the banks of the [river] Simöeis; therefore they called him Simöeisios."

Finally, we should mention the puzzling doublets, e.g. the "deep-eddying river which the gods call Xanthus, but men Scamandrus" (*Iliad* 20.74). It is possible that this is evidence for one eponym ousting another. Professor Stewart emphasizes this phenomenon in the Greek consciousness, but there seems to be no more specific reference to it in the early literature. The Greeks certainly adopted many previously existing place-names, but we will see that they also replaced many others with names meaningful in their own language. For a while both would be in use. But, if this is the process reflected in the doublets, it is far from clear whether the man-made name is replacing the god-qiven, or vice-versa.

We may perhaps infer from such hints in the literature that, although it is true that existing place-names were largely taken for granted, the *early* Greeks were not guilty of the rigid and unrealistic pattern in naming which Professor Stewart deplores in Pseudo-Plutarch's pages.

Let us turn now to the names themselves. The label "archaic" is used to designate places referred to before *ca.* 600 B.C., i.e., written down in the 8th and 7th centuries. My total is 404 different names.[6] This is, of course, a microscopic percentage of the names that were actually in use, but it is a dependable and manageable sample. Yet certain reservations must be made before any conclusions can be based on this material.

For instance, how many of our total should be included under the rather vague rubric of "pre-Greek" or "Aegean"? This is an important distinction in terms of semantic analysis because, with few exceptions, the meaning of pre-Greek words so far escapes us. Back in 1928 Professor J. B. Haley published a list of 210 place-names which he believed are either entirely pre-Greek or contain pre-Greek elements.[7] A cross-check indicates that about 25% of our names recur in Haley's list.[8] We might expect, then, that about

[6] My own present total of place-names (most of them simply syllabic transcriptions as yet) in the Mycenean tablets from Pylos and Knossos is 326. Some contrasts between the Mycenean and archaic names may already be in order. The Mycenean names are largely if not entirely localized in Crete and s.w. Peloponnese, whereas the archaic names are scattered from the Asia Minor coast through the Aegean and Ionian islands and the whole of continental Greece, with notable concentration in east central Greece. All of the Mycenean examples are names of towns (or possibly of administrative districts in some cases); while the archaic list includes a relatively large number of bodies of water (60 – mostly rivers), islands (47), mountains (43) and districts (22). At least one-third of the Mycenean names can already be equated with place-names known from later literary and epigraphical sources (though not necessarily in the same area). Approximately one-sixth of the Mycenean names recur in our archaic group.

[7] Haley J. B. and Blegen C. W., "The Coming of the Greeks," *AJA* 32 (1928) 141–154. Haley equated names "occurring in Asia Minor" with "pre-Greek." This was a natural assumption when it was confidently believed that the neolithic and early bronze inhabitants of Greece came from Asia Minor, and that the middle bronze invaders (presumably Greek-speaking) entered the peninsula from the north. Recent evidence, however, points to the latter having reached central Greece across the Aegean from northern Asia Minor, and to the early bronze people's having reached both Asia Minor and Greece from north of the Aegean (cf. Hencken H., "Indo-European Languages and Archaeology," *American Anthropological Association*, Memoir no. 84 (1955) 34–37; and especially Mellaart J., "The End of the Early Bronze Age in Anatolia and the Aegean," *AJA*, 62 (1958) 9–33.

[8] Another calculation tends to bear out this proportion. It shows that, out of about half of the archaic names carefully checked, 23% are applied to places in Asia Minor.

3 out of 4 items in our basic list of 404 are Greek, and so are – theoretically – subject to semantic analysis.[9]

We are left with a group of about 300 names. But there is a further limitation. If a supposedly Greek word has no known etymology it is not of much use for our immediate purpose. A moderately intensive check of plausible etymologies yields a total of 169, which is about 42% of the total sample.[10] I have divided these 169 place-names into six main categories: flora (A); fauna (B); physical description (C); euphemisms (D); historical referents (E); personal names (F). Roughly 15% fall in Category A, i.e., they refer to trees, plants, crops, and so on.[11] Nine percent belong in category B, being named for animals, birds, and reptiles.[12] Then comes a

[9] This paper is concerned with etymology alone. These early names also must be treated from the complementary and equally important aspect of morphological analysis. A preliminary check of such features as gender, number, and types of compounds indicates the importance of isolating such evidence for the early period.

[10] I have not invariably followed the established authorities who, in fact, are sometimes far from a consensus on individual items. The following works, however, have been of particular help: Boisacq E., *Dictionnaire étymologique de la Langue grecque* (Heidelberg 1938); Curtius E., *Beiträge zur griechischen Onomatologie* (Göttingen 1861); Curtius G., *Grundzüge der griechischen Etymologie* (Leipzig 1873); Eijkman J. C. B., *Bijdrage tot de Kennis der grieksche Toponymie* (Amsterdam 1929); Grasberger L., *Studien zu den griechischen Ortsnamen* (Würzburg 1888); Pape W. and Benseler G. E., *Wörterbuch der griechischen Eigennamen* (Braunschweig 1863–70).

[11] In the examples of category A cited here, and in the following footnotes, I have tried to select items which illustrate the criteria for assignment to a particular group, rather than those exhibiting the most certain etymologies. I am quite aware, however, that some of the examples may raise doubts on one or both counts. An asterisk indicates that the root from which the particular derivation is assumed does not occur in extant Greek literature before 600 B.C. ᵛΑνθεια – *Antheia* – (cf. ἄνθος – *anthos* –, "flower"); Ἐρινεός – *Erineos* – ("wild fig"); Θρυόεσσα – *Thryoessa* – (cf. θρύον – *thryon* –, "reed," "rush"); ᵛΙδη – *Ida* – (ἴδη* – *idē* –, "timber tree"); ᵛΙτων – *Itōn* – (cf. ἰτέα – *itea* –, "willow"); Μηκώνη – *Mēkonē* – (cf. μήκων – *mēkōn* –, "poppy"); Μυρσίνη – *Myrsinē* (= μυρρίνη – *myrrinē* –, "myrtle"); Νυσήιος – *Nysēios* – (νῦσα – *nysa* – = κισσός* – *kissos* –, "ivy"); Πιτύα – *Pitya* – (cf. πίτυς – *pitys* –, "pine"); Πτελεόν – *Pteleon* – (cf. πτελέα – *ptelea* –, "elm"); Πύρασος – *Pyrasos* – (cf. πυρός – *pyros* –, "wheat").

[12] Αἰγαί – *Aigai* – (cf. αἰγ-ός – *aig-os* –, "goat"); ᵛΑρνη – *Arnē* – (cf. ἄρνον – *arnon* –, "lamb"); Βοάγριος – *Boägrios* – (cf. βο-ός – *bo-os* –, "cattle;" ἄγριος – *agrios* –, "wild"); Κήρινθος – *Kērinthos* – (cf. κηρός – *kēros* –, "bees-wax"); Κόρακος πέτρη – *Korakos petra* – ("Crow's stone"); Ὄρνεαί – *Orneai* – (cf. ὄρνις – *ornis* –, "bird"); Ὀρτυγία – *Ortygia* – ("quail"); ᶜΡηνεία – *Rhēneia* – (cf. ῥήν* – *rhēn* –, "sheep"); Φωκαία – *Phōkaia* – (cf. φώκη – *phōkē* –, "seal").

whopping 50 % in category C, signifying some noticeable physical feature such as shape, color, topography, situation, water supply.[13] It could be argued that categories A and B might be subsumed in C, in which case about 75 % of the total can be accounted for in terms of physical description. Category D, 10 % of the total, includes names which are not necessarily a realistic description but are calculated to enhance the attractiveness of a site.[14]

With categories E and F, we come for the first time to names directly relating a certain place with incidents in human history and legend or with divine intervention in human affairs. The first of these groups (E) has about 7 % of the total. These names seem to commemorate an event or situation which in the broadest sense may be termed "historical."[15] The second group (F) is made up of

[13] Αἶπεια – *Aipeia* – (cf. αἰπύς – *aipys* –, "steep"); , Ἀλφεῖος – *Alpheios* – (cf. ἀλφός – *alphos* –, "dull-white [leprosy]"); Ἄντρων – *Antrōn* – (cf. ἄντρον – *antron* –, "cave"); Ἀραιθυρέα – *Araithyrea* – (cf. ἀραιός – *araios* –, "narrow;" θύρα – *thyra* –, "entrance"); Βῆσσα – *Bēssa* – ("wooded glen"); Βρυσειαί – *Bryseiai* – (cf. βρύω – *bryō* –, "swell," "be full;" cf. mod. Gk. βρύσι – *vrysi* –, "spring [of water]"); Δουλίχιος – *Doulichios* – (δουλιχός – *doulichos* – = δολιχός – *dolichos* –, "long"); Ἑλίκη – *Helikē* – (ἕλιξ – *helix* –, "twisting," "winding"); Ἑπτάπορος – *Heptaporos* – (cf. ἑπτά – *hepta* –, "seven;" πόρος – *poros* –, "ford," "[river] crossing"); Ἐρύθεια – *Erytheia* – (cf. ἐρυθαίνω* – *erythainō* – and ἐρυθραίνω* – *erythrainō* –; ἐρυθρός – *erythros* –, "red"); Εὔριπος – *Euripos* – (cf. εὖ – *eu* –, "good" and ῥιπή – *rhipē* –, "force," "thrust"); Κρανάη – *Kranaē* – (cf. κραναός – *kranaos* –, "rocky," "rugged"); Κρουνοί – *Krounoi* – (cf. κρουνός – *krounos* –, "spring [of water]"); Λάας – *Laas* – ("stone"); Ὀρθη – *Orthē* – (ὀρθός – *orthos* –, "straight"); Πελλήνη – *Pellēnē* – (cf. πελλός* – *pellos* –, "dusky," "grey"); Πέντε Λόφοι – *Pente Lophoi* – ("five hills").

[14] Ἀσίνη – *Asinē* – (cf. ἀ- [negative prefix] and σίνομαι – *sinomai* –, "hurt" "harm"); Αὐγειαί – *Augeiai* – (cf. αὐγή – *augē* –, "sunlight"); Γονόεσσα – *Gonoessa* – (cf. γονόεις* – *gonoeis* –, "fertile"); Θαυμακίη – *Thaumakiē* – (cf. θαυμάζω – *thaumazō* –, "admire"); Καλλίχορος – *Kallichoros* – (cf. καλός – *kalos* –, "beautiful", and χορός – *choros* –, "dance," "dancing place"); Καλλικολώνη – *Kallikolōnē* – (cf. καλός – *kalos* –, "beautiful" and κολώνη – *kolōnē* –, "[burial] mound"); Κλεωναί – *Kleōnai* – (cf. κλέος – *kleos* –, "renown;" κλεινός – *kleinos* –, "famous"); Λίλαια – *Lilaia* – (cf. λιλαίομαι – *lilaiomai* –, "desire").

[15] Αὖλις – *Aulis* – ("tent," "place for passing the night"); Ἐνίσπη – *Enispē* – (cf. ἐνέπω – *enepō* –, "tell," "relate"); Θεράπνη – *Therapnē* – ("handmaid"); Θέσπεια – *Thespeia* – (cf. θέσπις – *thespis* –, "divinely inspired"); Ἰρή – *Ira* – ἴρη – *ira* – and εἰρη – *eira* – = ἀγορά – *agora* –, "gathering place"); Ἵππου Κρηνή – *Hippou Krēnē* – ("Spring of the Horse [Pegasus]"); Μεδεών – *Medeōn* – (cf. μεδέων – *medeōn* –, "ruler," "guardian"); Ὄσσα – *Ossa* – ("rumor," "voice [of divine origin]").

places[which were clearly named for gods, demi-gods, heroes or humans. It will interest Professor Stewart to learn that only 7% of our total fits here.[16]

Perhaps a more thorough analysis will show the 7% to be somewhat too low. But another calculation indicates that our very modest figure points in the right direction. A careful check on about half of the archaic names establishes the fact that only $^1/_3$ can be connected with *any* personal names of *any* period. And many of the connections admitted in the count were of the most dubious kind, including a good many cases where the personal names are pretty clearly derived from the place-names, rather than vice-versa.[17]

To sum up, early Greek place-names mirror most of the varied naming patterns which Professor Stewart in his book *Names on the Land* so ably describes for the early American scene. It is clear that the physical environment was uppermost in the Hellenic mind too, as earlier settlers cast about for suitable toponyms.[18] They utilized words denoting interesting land configurations and striking natural features of their new site. They sometimes emphasized its fertile soil or abundant water supply or other desirable features. Nor did the Greeks entirely neglect actual historical events and legends connected with famous personalities, although a name given for

[16] Ἀθῆναι – *Athēnai* – (cf. Ἀθήνη – *Athēnē* –); Αἰπύτιος τύμβος – *Aipytios tymbos* – ("grave of Aipytos"); Ἀλισίου κολώνη – *Alisiou kolōnē* – ("burial mound of Alisios"); Ἀλόπη – *Alopē* – (wife of Hippothöos and beloved of Poseidon); Γυγαίη – *Gygaiē* – (cf. Γυγής – *Gygēs* –); Δίη – *Dia* – (cf. Ζεῦς – *Zeus* –, Δι-ός – *Di-os* –); Ἱστιαῖα – *Histiaia* – (cf. Ἑστία – *Hestia* –); Παρθένιος ποταμός – *Parthenios potamos* – ("river of the Maiden" [i.e. Persephone]); Ῥάριον πεδίον – *Rharion pedion* – ("plain of Rharius").

[17] It appears that, although the dependable material is as yet severely limited in quantity, much the same inductions apply to the Mycenean names alone. For instance, of the names which are analyzable semantically and which do not recur in the archaic list, just over 50% belong in the category of physical description. Our criteria for the archaic names should therefore be helpful as new Mycenean place-name equations are worked out. But it can be predicted that the results of the morphological analysis of the archaic names will be even more important in their bearing on the reconstruction and better understanding of the Mycenean names.

[18] The frequent descriptive epithets which came to be attached to the place-names strengthen one's impression of realism and awareness of natural surroundings. Adequate treatment of the epithets from this point of view would, however, require a separate paper.

some other reason was more likely to acquire historical significance at a later date.

Finally, the early Greeks certainly did not invariably, or even usually, name their places for gods or heroes; and above all they did not use the names of mere humans. If we are skeptical on this point, we need only enumerate the names of a score of outstanding Greek leaders (historical or legendary) and then ask ourselves if we know place-names commemorating them. We will soon realize that such instances are few indeed before Hellenistic times. It is possible that we have here an instinct approximating a taboo.[19] If so, it had certainly spent its force by the early Christian centuries. For it would appear that during the Roman occupation one of the favorite occupations of certain scholars was the invention of persons in order to explain the origin of place-names which were already hoary with age a thousand years before[20].

[19] Cf. Beeler, M. S., "On Etymologizing Indian Names," *Names* V (1957) 239.

[20] I wish to express thanks to various colleagues – Prof. D. C. Swanson, U. of Minnesota, for unstinting and sound advice on many linguistic points; Prof. Demetrius Georgacas, U. of N. Dakota, for encouragement in daring to trespass on "toponymical" ground; and Prof. Stewart for the stimulating paper and subsequent personal discussion which motivated the above paragraphs.

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