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THE IMPACT OF THE SEA ON THE GREEK LANGUAGE

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The author of this paper supports the view that the natural environment plays a significant role in shaping the character of a culture or civilization. The Greek peninsula became a major crossroad between three continents – Europe, Asia and Africa – as soon as the Aegean Sea with its archipelagoes became navigable. Ever since, the role of the sea was of seminal importance in shaping the way of life and behaviour of the populations around it. Maritime trade and foreign ideas had a profound influence on the region, which became the melting pot in which what was later called Hellenic civilization was fused. Since language is one of the archives, in which information about human behaviour is recorded, it is legitimate to examine the impact of the sea on the vocabulary of the Greek language. Here an attempt is made to detect the etymology of words which seem to derive, directly or indirectly, from the most ancient word known in the Greek language for the sea: ἄλς. The numerous examples presented demonstrate the tremendous impact that the diachronic involvement of the Aegean populations in maritime affairs had on the Greek language.

From the entire animal kingdom, man is the only species which developed the ability to symbolize. It has been recognized that through this ability he not only managed to come to terms with his environment, but also to exercise control over it (Clark 1964, 431). Among the symbols that man created as soon as he was able to produce articulated sounds are words, in particular verbs, nouns and adjectives, through which he was able to express his needs and to communicate with his fellowmen. This kind of symbolic communication is known as language, in which the relationship between the sign and signified is arbitrary, only defined by convention (Davidson 1991, 39-40). And as the vocabulary of a language 'reflects most directly the social evolution and the history of a people' (Chantraine 1956, 7), its study may help in better understanding this people's culture. Trying for decades to understand the role played by the sea in shaping the Aegean culture, I thought it useful to extend my study beyond the material evidence and try to investigate if facets of this culture are reflected in the vocabulary which was developed in that area. And since the Greek language is written in this region for no less than three and a half millennia and spoken even for

more, it appears to be a good source of information for the purpose of this research. The exploitation of the Aegean Sea as a food source can be traced back to Palaeolithic times. This early contact with the watery element surely triggered the interest of the inhabitants of the coast to devise ways and means of traveling over it safely. The discovery of tuna bones in the Mesolithic strata of Franchthi Cave, in the southeastern Peloponnese, along with obsidian from the Cycladic island of Melos, suggests that sea transportation begun at least as early as the eighth millennium BC (Jacobsen 1981, 306). Obsidian and kaolin from Melos (Pantelidou Gofa 1995, 140-143), pumice stones from Thera and emery from Naxos (Evans/Renfrew 1968, 73, 99-100), mill-stones from Aegina (Runnels 1985, 34), as well as various metal objects (Runnels 1985, 34) distributed throughout the Aegean region during the Neolithic Age, bear witness to the increasing role of the sea in long-distance movements and suggest the gradual improvement of the means of navigation in the 6th, 5th, and 4th millennia BC. This increasing involvement of the Aegean peoples in maritime activities led to the permanent colonization of the islands, around the middle of the 5th millennium BC, and the subsequent shift from agriculture and stock-raising to maritime trade and seafaring. This shift seems to have influenced the language development with the emergence of a special vocabulary closely related to the sea and the maritime activities.

In the Homeric texts, four words are used for the sea: *ἄλς*, *θάλασσα*, *πόντος* and *πόρος*. *Ωκεανός* in Homer is the mythical river encircling the entire earth and only after the fifth century BC does the term designate the outer sea, the ocean, as opposed to the inner sea, the Mediterranean. The connotations of *πόντος* and *πόρος*, as ways of passage, suggesting a new concept of the sea, indicate a later incorporation in the Greek vocabulary, when the watery element had already been tamed and put in the service of man¹. The etymology of the word *θάλασσα*, even today the colloquial term for the sea, still remains unknown (Chantraine 1928, 2). The word *ἄλς*, for the meaning of which all dictionaries seem to agree, appears to be of great antiquity (Domas 1993, 305, figs 1, 3-4). There also seems to be a consensus of opinion that *ἄλς* is an old name-root (Frisk 1960; Chantraine 1968). According to P. Chantraine, used in the feminine, (*ἡ*) *ἄλς* in poetry, it designates the sea as a salty expanse; particularly in Homer it mainly designates the sea seen from the land (Chantraine 1968). In the masculine (*ὁ*) *ἄλς* (*ἄλεις* in plural) means salt. Both meanings of the word suggest that it was 'coined' as soon as man discovered the salinity of seawater, long before he was able to navigate in the Aegean. Taking into account that navigation in the Aegean is attested archaeologically already in Mesolithic times, I suggest that the term *ἄλς* was created before that time. Therefore, its history and evolution in the Greek language may

¹ According to Chantraine (1968) *πόντος* means "crossing by sea of a strait" (franchissement par mer d'un détroit), cf. *Ελλάσποντος*. It is also said of "the expanse of the sea considered as a passage from one land to the other" (l'étendue de la mer considérée comme un passage d'une terre à l'autre). As for *πόρος*, derivative from the verb *πείρω* (= to pierce, to traverse, to cross), it also means passage, crossing.

reflect the role of the sea in the evolution of Aegean society. Although my involvement in this research may seem an intrusion into the domain of linguistics, my intention is purely archaeological: by using the linguistic evidence, I attempt another approach to the study of the development of Aegean society and culture. I begin with some thoughts concerning the word *ἄλς*.

A noun of the third declension (*ἄλς*, gen. *ἄλός*) when first encountered in the texts, *ἄλς* also formed the basic root for a number of derivatives. Although such derivatives may have been formed at different times, they do preserve the original sense of sea or salt. In due course, these derivatives became roots for other words thus creating an ever-growing family tree of derivatives. Since it is not my purpose to present this tree here, a selection of its branches will suffice to show the immense influence of the sea upon the Greek language and consequently on Aegean society and culture².

It appears that the root *ἄλο-* in the sense of sea occurs as the second component already in the Mycenaean texts. The word *o-pi-a-ra* (= *οπί-αλα*) on tablet PY An 657.1 from Pylos means “areas by the sea”, coastal (Ventris/Chadwick 1973, 188-9; Chantraine 1968: *ἄλς*). As a person’s name *a-pi-a-ro* (*Ἀμφίαλος*, of two seas) is known from a number of Pylos tablets such as PY An 192.1, Ea 109, 270, 922, Jn 478, On 300.2 and Qa 1297 (Ventris/Chadwick 1973, 466, 532). Compound words, mainly adjectives, are known from later periods with *-αλος* as their second component, either in the sense of sea such as *ἀρχί-αλος* (near the sea), *αἰγι-αλός* (beach), *ἀναξί-αλος* (lord of the sea), *ἐφ-αλος* (on the sea), *πάρ-αλος* (by or near the sea), *ὑφ-αλος* (under the sea), *ὠκύ-αλος* (sea-swift), or in the sense of salt such as *ἄν-αλος* (without salt) or *κάθ-αλος* (over-salted).

Compound words with *ἄλο-* as first component are also known from the Mycenaean texts as the word *a-ro-u-do-pi* (*αλο-σιδότρι*) on the Pylos tablet PY Ta 642.1 demonstrates. It represents the instrumental case of the noun *ἄλο-σίδωρ* (sea-water) in plural and means “with the sea waves” (Ventris/Chadwick 1973, 339-40). Similar words, in the sense of sea, are *ἄλο-ρόα* meaning land or farming by the sea and *ἄλοσ-ἀχνη*, a term the literal meaning of which is sea-foam, but which has also been used to designate a zoophyte of the class *ἄλκόνεια* (Liddell/Scott 1996).

Much longer is the list of words with *ἄλο-* as first component mainly in the sense of salt. These terms are much later and have developed parallel with the systematic exploitation of the sea and its products giving rise to the formation of various skills. Thus, *ἄλο-πήγιον* (*τό*) is the salt-pit, the salt-works, *ἄλο-πηγός* (*ός*) the person who prepares salt, *ἄλο-πώλης* (*ός*) and *ἄλο-πώλις* (*ή*) the dealer in salt and *ἄλο-πόλια* (*τά*) are the salt stores. The efflorescence of salt is called *ἄλο-σανθον* (*τό*) while *ἄλο-σάνθινος* (*-η, -ον*) means prepared with efflorescence of salt (e.g. *οἶνος*, wine); *ἄλο-τριβανός* or *ἄλο-τριψ* (*ός*) is the pestle used to pound salt. To feed with salt is *ἄλο-τροφέω*, while one who conveys salt is called *ἄλο-φόρος* (*ός*).

² The English translation used here for these words is the one given by the Liddell/Scott 1996 *Greek-English Lexicon*.

The art of dyeing clothes with purple was called *άλουργία* (*ή*) and its product, the purple clothing, *άλούργημα* (*τό*). The adjectives *άλουργής*, *άλουργικός*, *άλουργός*, *άλουργούς* mean wrought in or by the sea, hence purple wrought, i.e. dyed with sea-purple, of a genuine purple. Purple robes were called *άλουργή* (*τά*), while the dealer of purple was called *άλουργοπώλης* (*ός*) and his trade *άλουργοπωλική* (*ή*).

One of the early and direct derivatives of *άλς* is the adjective *άλλιος* (*-α, -ον*), as one can judge from its presence in the Mycenaean vocabulary. Taking into consideration that adjectives ending in *-ιος, (-ια, -ιον)* designate possession of – or origin from – what the original root signifies, *άλλιος* means of the sea, from the sea. And the adjective *a-ki-a-ri-jo, a-ki-a-ri-ja* (*αἰγιαλίος, αἰγιαλία*, from the noun *αἰγιαλός*) occurring on the tablets PY Fn 50.4 from Pylos and TH Of 25, 35 from Thebes respectively, means by the beach, coastal (Baumbach 1986, 292).

The arrow that missed its target and went astray by falling into the sea (*άλιον βέλος*), gave rise to the metaphoric meaning as fruitless, idle; hence the verb *άλιό-ω* meaning to make fruitless, to disappoint. Not only Nereus but also Proteus is often mentioned in the Homeric texts as *άλλιος γέρον* (the old man of the sea) and the Nereids are called *άλλαι κόραι* (maidens of the sea). In Greek mythology *Άλία* is the name of a nymph with whom Poseidon fell in love and who bore him six sons and one daughter, Rhode, who, united with Helios, gave birth to seven sons and one daughter.

In all dictionaries of the Greek language the substantive *άλλιος* is explained as a Doric form of *ήλιος*, the sun, the noun used already from Antiquity. In Plato's *Kratylos* (409A), Socrates, talking about the sun, says that “*άλιον καλοῦσιν οἱ Δωριεῖς*”, while Pindar invokes the sun's mother as “*Άλίον μάτερ*”. Modern linguists, starting from this ancient remark, have used the method usually applied when the etymology of a word is unknown or uncertain: considering the word *ήλιος* *a priori* as Indo-European, they have proposed a putative root “sawel”. By adding the endings *-iyo, -iya*, the word **sawelios* has been created, which, as the asterisk indicates, never occurs in the Greek texts; from this non-existent word linguists coined the words *σαφέλιος* and *αφέλιος*, in order to conform with the words *άέλιος, ήέλιος* and *ήλιος* of the ancient texts. But there may be another explanation. The importance of the sun as a life sustaining force has been appreciated throughout the world in all periods of man's history, hence its universal worship even though myths concerning its origin differ. For example, in Egyptian theology the Sun-God emerged from the primeval waters of the ocean, Nun, at the same time creating a piece of land to stand on, in order to begin the work of creation. Known as the ‘Island of the Flames’, this piece of land formed the ‘Primeval Hill’, above which the sun rose for the first time and continued to rise ever since. Although in Egyptian theology the birth of the sun is related to waters, these waters are not of the sea. They are those trapped by the earth in her entrails and which she sometimes allows to well up, but then absorbs them again (Frankfort 1978, 154).

The mention of the sun rising from the sea is rare in Hittite texts and in a prayer of King Muwatallis, who reigned between 1295 and 1271 BC, the following phrase is included: “*Sun, god of heaven, my Lord, shepherd of mankind! Thou ris-*

est, O Sun-god of heaven, from the sea and goest up to heaven" (Gurney 1990, 181). Since the Hittites were living far from the sea, this phrase sounds strange and scholars try to interpret it as a remnant of their experience before they came to Asia Minor, when they were still living in areas west of the Caspian Sea (Mellaart 1958, 15). However, taken its late date into account, it is possible that the above phrase was due to a foreign, western, influence, perhaps from the Aegean world with which the Hittites had already established contacts (Page 1959, 7ff.).

Undoubtedly the idea that the sun rises from the sea is a concept of people living by the sea, at least if they live on the northern hemisphere and have a sea on the east. Such people were the inhabitants of the Aegean islands and the east coast of the Greek Mainland, and this explains why the concept that the sun rises from the sea is not only implied in Homer (*Od.* 3.1-3) but also it dominates in Greek mythology.

The inhabitants of the Aegean, who, as we have seen, started navigating at least as early as the eighth millennium BC, were experiencing for millennia, every morning, the sunrise from the sea. Thus, when, like all peoples on earth, they formulated their myth of creation, this celestial body became the fruit of the union between two Titans: *Υπερίων* (Hyperion) and *Θεία* (Theia). In the Homeric *Hymn to Helios*, Theia is also called *Εύρυφάεσσα* (Euryphaessa). Although the word *Εύρυφάεσσα* occurs only once and only as the name of the mother of Helios, it is not difficult to realize that it constitutes the feminine of the adjective *εύρυφάεις* (-εσσα, -εν) that has not survived. Adjectives with such endings abound in Homer and mean 'plenty', 'abundance', of the kind that the root designates. For example: *αίματόεις* (full of blood), *βαθυδινήεις* (full of deep whirls), *δινύεις* (full of whirls), *ήμαθόεις* (full of sand), *ήχηεις* (full of sounds), *ιχθύεις* (full of fish), *νιφόεις* (full of snow), and so on. Consequently *εύρυφάεις* means full of light, and quite rightly both philologists and mythologists translate the name *Εύρυφάεσσα* as the 'far shining', the one whose light is widely diffused in the sky.

Very often adjectives become nouns as soon as the substantive they qualify is dropped as obviously implied. Examples from both ancient and modern Greek abound: *ἀριθμητική* (arithmetic), *μηχανική* (mechanics), *μουσική* (music), *τεκτονική* (carpentry) became nouns as soon as the substantive *τέχνη* (art) was dropped as obvious; similarly, by dropping the substantive *σχῆμα* (shape) the adjectives *τρίγωνον* (triangle), *τετράγωνον* (quadrangle), *πεντάγραμμον* (staff), became nouns as did the words *ὀρίζων* (defining, horizon), and *πλατεῖα* (broad, square) after the respective substantives *κύκλος* (circle) and *ὁδός* (street), were dropped as obvious. It is proposed, therefore, that the noun qualified by the feminine form of the adjective, *εύρυφάεσσα*, and which was understood as implied, was *ἄλς* (the sea).

For those in the Aegean who have seen the sun rising from the sea it is very plausible that his mother is the *εύρυφάεσσα ἄλς*, the far shining sea. It is also possible that her son, *ἄλιος*, was originally the *ἄλιος ἀστήρ* (the sea star). Following the rule, after the substantive *ἀστήρ* was understood as implied, it was dropped. If so, then the original name of the sun in the Greek language was *ἄλιος*, not *ἥλιος*; and

this seems to agree with the idea that ‘the ancestor of the Doric dialect must have existed at the time when the Mycenaean texts were written’ (Chadwick 2001, 297). Although the literary Doric dialect may be a ‘standardized language not corresponding to any spoken idiom’ (Mendez Dosuna 2001, 328), the fact that it is often used in the chorus of the ancient tragedies may be of significance: the poet, by putting in the mouth of the chorus of country folk this ‘rustic’ idiom, acknowledges its primitiveness as opposed to the parlance of the ‘sophisticated’ city-dwellers. It is also possible that the worship of the sun in Rhodes as *Ἄλιος*, and the related festival of the *Ἀλεια*, constitutes a survival of a very ancient folk festival (Morelli 1959, 95ff).

The word *ἄλιος*, the sun, appears later in various forms either aspirated or with soft breathing depending on the dialect in which it was used. Thus, in Homer it occurs as *ἠέλιος*, with soft breathing, which in lyric poetry and in particular the chorus passages in the tragedies appears in its ‘dorianized’ form as *ἄέλιος*. Its form in the Ionic dialect is *ἦλιος*. In many derivatives the root *έλ-* often alternates with *εἰλ-* (aspirate) or *ειλ-* (with soft breathing), like the root *ἄλ-* alternates with *ἦλ-* (both aspirate) depending on the dialect.

Derivatives from *ἦλιος* are abundant such as *ἠλιάδης* (child of the sun), *ἠλιάς* or *ἠλιακή* (the sun’s ray), *ἠλιαστήριον* (the place for sunning oneself), *ἠλιόω* and *ἠλιόομαι* (to live in, exposed to, the sun), *ἠλίωσις* (exposure to the sun), *ἠλιωτέος* (who needs exposure to the sun) and so on. To these one can add numerous compound words such as *ἠλιόβατος* (sun-trodden), *ἠλιοδύσιον* (sunset), *ἠλιοκαής* (sun-burnt), *ἠλιομανής* (sun-mad), *ἠλιόπωνς* (sun-dial), *ἠλιοστασία* (solstice) etc. The chief law-court at Athens was held in the open air, under the sun (*ἦλιος*), which explains its name *Ἡλιαία*. The verb *ἠλιάζω* means to bake in the sun. However, in its passive form, *ἠλιάζομαι* means to sit in the *Ἡλιαία* and this sitting was called *ἠλίασις* or *ἠλίωσις*. The member of the *Ἡλιαία* was called *ἠλιασστής* (heliast) and he who looked like a heliast was called *ἠλιαστικός*.

The circle of light surrounding the sun, and by extension every luminous body, is called *ἄλωσ*. Adopted in Latin as *halos* it survives in many languages as *halo* designating the nimbus of Christ, the Virgin as well as the saints and martyrs in Christian iconography. Due to its circular shape, *ἄλωσ* acquired other meanings in Greek such as the coil of a serpent, the circle round the nipple of the breast, the bird’s nest, the ciliary body of the eye, the threshing floor. In its latter meaning the word was introduced to an important economic activity, which led to its further development. Occurring also as *ἄλων* (-ωνος, ἦ), *ἄλών* (-ῶνος, ἦ), *ἄλωνία* (ἦ), *ἄλώνιον* (τό), it gave birth to words such as the verbs *ἄλωνεύομαι*, *ἄλωνίζω*, *ἄλωνοτριβέω* (to work, to beat on a threshing-floor), the adjectives *ἄλωνικός* (for a threshing-floor) or *ἄλωνοειδής* (shaped like a threshing-floor) and the substantives *ἄλωνοφυλακία* (office of guard of a threshing-floor) and *ἄλωνοφύλαξ* (guard of a threshing-floor).

According to Hesychios’ *Lexicon*, *ἄλωσ* or *ἄλωή* also meant a vineyard, a garden. In this case, if *ἄλωσ* meant a fenced garden, then there may be an etymological association with the verb *ἄλλομαι*, meaning to spring, to leap over, jump over a

fence. If this connection is correct, one can etymologically associate words such as *άλμα* (leap), *άλσις* (leaping), *άλτῆρες* (weights held in the hands to give an impetus in leaping), *άλτηρία* or *άλτηροβολία* (the use of *άλτῆρες*), *άλτικός* (good at leaping), *άλισκομαι* (to be taken, conquered, to fall in enemy's hands), *άλωσις* (a taking, capture, conquest).

The verb *έλίσσω*, or *έλίττω* and *είλίσσω* (to roll or wind round) seem to derive from *έλιζ* or *έλιζ*, which originally might mean the orbit of the sun (*έλιος*); hence the broader meaning of twisted, curved, anything which assumes a spiral shape (hence its modern meaning, propeller). Its derivatives, both primary and secondary, abound in the Greek language. For example, *έλ(είλ)ίσσομαι* (to turn oneself around or about), *είλέω* (also *είλω*, *είλλω* and *ίλλω*, to roll or twist tight up, to be rolled up together), *είλύω* (to wrap round), *έλιγματώδης* (twisted), *έλικων* (thread span from the distaff to the spindle), *είλεός* or *ίλεός* (intestinal obstruction) *είλημα* (veil, covering, wrapper) *είησις* (eddy, vortex of wind), *είητός* (wound, rolled), *είητάριον* (wrapper, roll). The sun's heat or warmth was called *είη* or *είησις*, hence *είημιον* (warmed in the sun). The list of derivatives becomes almost endless if one includes compound words such *έλικοβλέφαρος* (with ever-moving eyes), *έλικοβόστρυχος* (with curling hair) etc.

Ἡλιζ appears to be the Ionic form of *έλιζ* and means 'of the same age' (i.e. of the same number of sun's orbits), fellow, comrade, hence *ήλικία*, or *άλικία* (time of life, age), *ήλικιάζομαι* (assume of this or that quality), *ήλικιώτης* (equal in age, comrade), *ήλικος* (as old as), *ήλικοσοῦν* (however so great).

Besides the above examples, which have been taken mostly from ancient Greek, there is an abundance of compound words with one of the aforementioned roots as their second or third component, such as *άναλος* (without salt), *άνήλιος* (sunless), *άνελίσσω* (to unroll), *άνειλέω* (to wind up), *άφηλιζ* (beyond youth, elderly), *παράλιος* (by the sea), *παρηλιζ* (past one's prime), *ύφαλος* (under the sea) etc.

Perhaps it is worth noting that the process of creating words from these roots is still going on, fulfilling the requirements of developing science and technology. Thus in chemistry we have terms such as *άμλόλοιπον* (mother liquor), *άλογονίδιον* (haloid), *άλογόνον* (halogen), *άλογόνωσις* (halogenation); *άμόμετρον* is the brine measuring tank and *άμυρόμετρον* is the salinometer. Examples from the terminology in modern technology are *έλιζ* (propeller), hence *έλικοκίνητος* (propeller-driven), *έλικόπτερο* (helicopter), *έλικοστρόφιγξ* (wrench), *έλικοτόμος* (die), *έλικωτήρ* (screw plate). In Modern Greek words such as *ύφήλιος* (under the sun) designating the globe, or *άλεξήλιον* meaning the sunshade, the parasol, have been coined, while the term elixir is derived from *έλιζήριον* of modern Greek.

If culture in general is the sum total of man's responses to the challenges of the environment, both natural and manmade, then the sea, the prevailing and pervasive element in the Aegean environment, has undoubtedly influenced the vocabulary of the people living in this area. As an instrument of communication, the vocabulary of which only a small sample has been given here, indeed seems to confirm Chantraine's aforementioned remark that it reflects the 'social evolution and history' of the Aegean people.

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