Book Review

Colvin, Stephen

This relatively slim but highly readable and informative volume, despite being just 219 pages from start to finish, not counting the five-page “Preface and Acknowledgments”, covers a lot of territory, from “The Indo-European Beginnings” of the Greek language in Chapter 1 to the modern era in Chapter 10, “Greek to Romaic and Back”. In between, there is Chapter 2, entitled “An Aegean Co-Production” and covering Greece before the arrival of the Greeks, followed by more transparently titled chapters covering “Mycenaean Greek”, “The Dark Ages”, “The Alphabet”, “The Greek Dialects”, “Homer and the Epic Tradition”, “The Language of Greek Poetry”, and “Bare Words: The Start of a Common Language”. Author Colvin thus focuses his attention mainly on Ancient Greek, as the book’s title suggests, but treats various developments in chapters 9 and 10 that take the reader through the Hellenistic period and the Koine and into the present day.

This last is, in my view, a good decision. For one thing, parallels to its coverage can be found in similar sorts of books that cover the whole scope of the history of Greek in a somewhat discursive, prosy way (as opposed to a more technical, handbook-style mode of presentation1), such as Meillet 1920, Palmer 1980, Adrados 1999/2005, even if they too have a particular focus on Ancient Greek but are less concise, and thus more expansive in coverage, than Colvin. Second, it simply makes good sense for those interested in the Classical language to have an idea of what Greek turned into; while there is legitimate debate as to how much continuity there is between Ancient Greek and Modern Greek and as to the extent to which they constitute “one

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1 For a full-blown handbook-style presentation of the history of Ancient Greek, see Schwyzler 1939, and, in a more compact way, Rix 1976.
language”, there can be no debate about the value of seeing the modern embodiment of the ancient language and thus being able to pay attention both to similarities and to differences between them.

There are other books of comparable scope in English—I have in mind Jannaris 1897 and Horrocks 1997/2010—that are much more technical and full, rather like handbooks in how the material is presented than the more stylized approach taken by Colvin. And, there are a few of somewhat comparable size that have a similar broad scope but different emphases from Colvin; here I am thinking of Browning 1969/1983 and Moleas 1989/2004, where the former is focused mostly, as its title indicates, on Greek in the Medieval and Modern periods, and the latter is much sketchier on linguistic detail and also has a focus on the modern form of the language, arguing that Modern Greek can be approached from across any of the different time periods.

I mention all these other books by way of demonstrating that even though there are a good many book-length treatments of the history of Greek focusing on some stage(s) or other(s), and even though Colvin, necessarily of course, covers a lot of familiar ground, there is nonetheless room in the scholarly literature for his book with its particular take on the presentation of the historical origins and development of ancient Greek.

And, even though covering the “usual suspects” in the history of ancient Greek, such as Mycenaean Greek, or the fate of the Proto-Indo-European labio-velars, or the dialect differentiation in ancient times, or the literary uses of dialect, or the origins and varieties of the Greek alphabet, and so on, author Colvin does not shy away from topics that are somewhat controversial, yet often of high interest. For instance, there is more discussion of Linear A (“Minoan”) than is found in the other books (pp. 23–26, 35–36), and this is a topic of considerable interest, even if the script is not writing Greek per se, given that it has resisted decipherment and has a historical connection to the deciphered (and Greek-writing) Linear B. Colvin also presents (pp. 27–29) Martin Bernal’s ideas (e.g., Bernal 1987, inter alia) about “a far greater degree of influence on Greece and on Greek from the ancient Near East and Egypt” (p. 27) than is traditionally accorded, giving a fairly even-handed treatment of the controversial views.

And, Colvin treats matters of the relation of language to ethnicity in ancient times (pp. 21–24, 53–55), arguing from the very modern perspective that “ethnicity is not a given, but a constructed quality” (p. 54) and showing how that

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view has an impact on how one interprets ancient testimony about different peoples.

All readers will surely find it useful and refreshing that Colvin takes on the matter of social dialects in ancient times (pp. 109–111), drawing on reasonable estimates of the demographics of classical Attica ("a total population approaching 300,000, of which the male citizens formed around 10% or slightly higher") to plausibly suggest some sociolinguistic stratification, bolstered by the evidence of "informal written sources such as graffiti ... ostraka, and curse tablets" (p. 110) and of occasional "references in Greek comedy to different social dialects in Attica" (p. 111).

Even with as much detail as Colvin presents, the book is highly readable, a tribute to his prose style. And, I could find relatively little to take issue with: the statement (p. 10) that "All I[nḍo]-E[uropean] languages have relative clauses introduced by a relativizing pronoun ... i-e *yos gave the Greek relative "who" (Gk. hos, Skt. yah)" overlooks the fact that the syntax of relativization is nonetheless different in the different languages (correlative structure in Sanskrit versus subordinate structure in Greek); and, he juxtaposes (p. 19) "substrate language" and "language contact" as "the likeliest sources of influence" on "prehistoric Greek", even though substrate influence is actually a type of language contact effect. But such lapses are few and far between for the most part, and do not detract from the overall effect at all.

It should be clear that I am impressed with this book. It covers the essentials in a highly competent way and treats the reader to numerous interesting forays into areas that are not generally covered, as noted above. For readers with no background in linguistics, the level of detail might get a bit heavy, but to ignore the detail would be to ignore a key aspect of the study of Greek in its dialectal and historical totality; moreover, Colvin does attempt to explain the basic methodology and, via an explanatory list of symbols and a glossary, to demystify terms and symbols that might otherwise be obfuscat ing. Overall, then, this is a most satisfying book that I wholeheartedly recommend to neophytes and specialists alike.

Brian D. Joseph
The Ohio State University
joseph.1@osu.edu
References


