CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSION TO PART II: THE ORIGINS OF THE OIKIST CULT

It remains for us to discuss the origins of the oikist-cult. Considering the poor state of our knowledge about 8th century Greece, such a discussion must be speculative. While our literary sources are silent on this question, the circumstantial evidence – particularly from new excavations – is being enriched continuously. It is possible at this stage only to define the problems and to present some hypotheses about the answers.

It seems clear that oikist cults, which focus on the founder of the new polis (polissouchos), could not have begun before the beginning of the colonization movement in the mid 8th century. Is it, however, possible that the oikist cults were developed much later, perhaps by later generations? Considering the evidence we have discussed so far, this seems highly improbable: Zankle and Gela, the herōn at Megara Hyblaia, Battos' cult and tomb, the general practice of worship at a tomb (not a cenotaph) which necessitated the actual remains, the annual commemorations, the very memories of the names of oikists – all seem to indicate an early date going back to the first generations of founders, namely about 750–680 B.C. Moreover, we have an excellent context for this cult in the novel burial practices of the 8th century aristocracy – to which the oikists also belonged. Hesiod sings of the magnificent funeral and agones for Amphidamas of Chalkis, which indicate a taste for the public and the heroic.¹ “Princely,” or “heroic” burials and tombs dating to the late 8th and early 7th centuries have been discovered at Eretria, Kyme, Pithekoussai, Cypriote Salamis, Athens, etc.² At Eretria’s West Gate were discovered burials and a herōn with dedications dating to 720 and later (see more below). It would seem, therefore, that this new fashion in aristocratic burials developed about the same time when aristocrats, as oikists, were leading people to colonize. Considering all this, we may be reasonably certain as to when the custom of honouring oikists as heroes began (see also below on hero cults). It began at the time of the first waves of the colonization movement of the 8th century.

But the significant novelty of the oikist cults was less in its heroic aspect than in terms of its political significance. The cult was not dedicated to a merely prominent member of the society – like Amphidamas at Chalkis or Glaukos

at Thasos. It was accorded, rather, to the founder and guardian of the *polis* itself.

Therefore, we now arrive at the question: was the *polis*-cult for the oikist a colonial innovation or was it modelled on precedents of "cults for founders of *poleis*" in the mother-cities? This question is closely connected with two of the major developments of the Greek *renaissance*: the rise of the *polis* itself and the significant new characteristics of hero cults in general.

(a) The rise of the *polis*:

By suggesting that colonial oikist cults were modelled on precedents found in the mother-cities we would be presupposing that the "*polis*" existed before the beginning of the colonization movement. But this is not at all certain, since the most accurate statement which can be made as to "when did the Greek *polis* rise?" is: "the 8th century." In fact, the very term "rise" which is rather ambiguous, was used by Ehrenberg (1938) precisely in order to circumvent any pinpointing. Our knowledge concerning the rise of the *polis* is simply insufficient and too open to speculation. Interpretations of relevant passages in Greek authors, especially Homer and Hesiod, depend in the final analysis on our decision as to what period or circumstances these passages reflect. Material evidence is also open to various interpretations. The case of Old Smyrna is indicative: its 9th century wall, which was first taken to signify an earlier date for the *polis*-community, clearly allows for different explanations. On the other hand, evidence for Old Smyrna's urban planning, which should have been able to offer more explicit dating confirmation for the *polis*, is, as we have seen, evidently at least one generation later (ca. 700) than the colony Megara Hyblaia (ca. 730). Elsewhere, even when we take into consideration finds from Lefkandi and Eretria, we are still left with 8th century dates for the "*polis*."

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3 ML 3. Glaukos probably played an important role in the life of Thasos (perhaps even in its foundation) but he was not an oikist. See also Pouilloux (1955).

4 We find it curious that most of the recent writers on the rise of the *polis* (we have not seen Luce, 1978), although well aware that it is extremely difficult to establish any order of "*beginnings*" in the 8th century, still insist that colonies followed the rise of the *polis*. Austin and Vidal-Naquet, for example, while rightly stating that "*any search for 'origins' is in fact a forecast of the future. Any argument can be made to stand on its head.*" (1977: 51) — confidently state a page earlier that since colonies "*reproduced institutions*" (which? when? *nomima*) of the mother-cities this is a "*clear proof of the existence of the *polis* from the start of the colonization movement.*" Cf. Starr (1957); Thomas (1966). Hammond prudently concentrates on Sparta (1982: 738–744). We are much closer in our views to the doubts raised by Snodgrass (1977: 33). We intend to return to the question of "colonization and the rise of the *polis*" in a separate study.


6 See above, p. 164n.143.