LAST OF THE MATRIARCHS:  
A STUDY IN THE INSCRIPTIONS  
OF LYCIA

BY

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Just over a century ago, a book appeared in Basel revealing to the world a stage of evolution through which all mankind had passed and of which nothing had been known until then: Das Mutterrecht, by J. J. Bachofen. Its evidence was drawn almost exclusively from classical sources, and the first of these, a passage from Herodotus about the people of Lycia, in Asia Minor, was sufficiently explicit to be set out in full.

They have one singular custom which distinguishes them from every other nation in the world: naming themselves by their mothers, not their fathers. Ask a Lycian who he is and he answers by giving his own name, that of his mother and so on in the female line. Also, if a free woman marries a slave, their children are full citizens; but if a free man marries a foreign woman, or lives with a concubine, even if he is the chief man in the State, the children forfeit all the rights of citizenship 1).

If the concept of matriarchy has undergone some retrenchment during the past hundred years, the authority of Herodotus has not substantially diminished. It is still widely asserted, by classical and Oriental scholars alike, that Lycian society was based on matrilineal descent 2); and although the singular custom was reported again, later in antiquity, it is not just Herodotus and his successors to whom the

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assertion is referred to-day. There is evidence of another kind, which cannot possibly derive from the ancient historical tradition. Hundreds of inscriptions have been found in Lycia, and the same conclusions drawn from them.

Almost all the inscriptions in question were found on tombs, but they are written in two different languages, Greek and Lycian, and these belong to two widely separated periods of time. The Greek ones, of which there are several hundreds, can almost all be dated to the first three centuries of the Roman Empire. Those written in Lycian, on the other hand, are very much older than these, and if the total is less impressive, it includes some which must be exactly contemporary with Herodotus. They number just over 150 and fall, without exception, into the fifth and fourth centuries before Christ 1).

The first Lycian inscriptions were discovered early in the nineteenth century, before Champollion had deciphered Egyptian; but although reading them was comparatively easy— the script used is a modified form of the Greek alphabet— the language is still very far from being understood, because Lycia has produced no Rosetta stone. There are, it is true, a few bilingual inscriptions, with a Greek text parallel to the Lycian one, but these are all extremely short, and what is worse they all say almost the same thing. Sepulchral inscriptions, in Lycia as elsewhere, are largely formulaic; the formulas vary, but within definite limits, and it was not in any case the longest inscriptions that were translated into Greek. Consequently there are extensive passages which remain obscure, even in the sepulchral ones; and the single text which is both sizeable and historical in content, two hundred and fifty lines of Lycian being summarised in twelve lines of poor Greek verse, is still effectively impossible to translate. Despite this, however, considerable