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The Orientalizing Period: Influence of Near Eastern on the Greek World

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Abstract: The 'Orientalizing' period, which occurred from around the mid-8th to mid-7th centuries B. C. E. , was characterised by the obvious influence of Eastern culture on different aspects of ancient Greek material culture. This includes the spread of ideas, motifs, and techniques from the Near East to Greece and the wider Mediterranean region. The content of this paper is organised into three sections. The initial section will present the distinctive historical context of the Orientalizing period and its fundamental factors. The subsequent section will determine the specific geographic origins of this influence from the east and examine the processes through which it spread to the Greek realm. The third part will explore the significant cultural exchanges between the Greeks and the Near Eastern regions, especially between Phoenicians, Egyptians, and Syrians. These interactions had a significant impact on Greek society, influencing the development of arts and technology, as well as the broad social dynamics in the ancient Greek world.

Keywords: Historical background; Geographical origin; Cultural exchange

Before delving into the Orientalizing period, it is essential to analyse the historical context that preceded it, namely the Dark Ages of ancient Greece. This period, estimated to have occurred from approximately 1125 to 700 BC, was characterised by widespread warfare and political instability. Hardship and shaky connections to the outside world were a part of life during this time. (Desborough 1972, 339). However, the situation experienced an apparent transformation in the eighth century B. C. The first factor to consider is population. Despite the challenges encountered during the Dark Ages, the Greek population demonstrated resilience and continued to grow. The archaeological evidence supports the idea that Greece experienced a substantial population increase during the 8th century BC, potentially resulting in a doubling of its size. The growth rate in Athens and Argos was estimated to be 3–4 percent per year based on grave counts. (Snodgrass 1977, 18–24). This suggests that the population doubled every twenty years. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that Morris has argued that relying on graves to estimate population levels may be imprecise, as alterations in rituals during the eighth century could have artificially inflated the number of graves compared to those from the Dark Age. (Morris 2004, 709–742). Archaeological excavations and surveys confirm that Greece underwent a significant decrease in population during the twelfth century BCE, followed by a remarkable increase from 800 to 300 BCE. (Scheidel 2004, 743–747). The most populous communities, such as Athens and Knossos, had approximately 1, 500 inhabitants during the period around 1000. (Burkert 1992, 11). This political manipulation, along with Assyria's requirement for metals, encouraged the expansion of Phoenician trade networks and settlements. In response to both political dominance and economic demand, the Phoenicians began to focus their attention towards the west in order to acquire metals, specifically gold, silver, and tin. (Cook 2004, 45). By the late eighth century BCE, Phoenician settlements had spread extensively throughout Cyprus, Carthage, Sardinia, Sicily, Malta, North Africa, and Spain. (Winter 1976, 18). During this period, interactions between Greece and the Near East intensified. The Phoenicians played an essential part in facilitating this exchange, being the first Near Eastern people to engage in maritime trade with the Greek world. (Woolley 1964, 179). In the 9th century BCE, Phoenician craftsmen migrated to Greek cities, introducing their skills and influencing Greek artistic practices. (Burkert 1992, 21). By the 7th century BCE, consistent contact and trade with the Near East had been established, resulting in the steady flow of Eastern merchandise into Greece, such as metal ware, ivory carvings, trinkets of one sort or another, and probably textiles, which made up most of the imports. (Biers 1996, 132). We will further discuss the profound impact of this influx on the Greek arts. What the most significant contribution of the Phoenicians to the Greeks during the orientalizing period was the adoption of the Phoenician script, which enabled the Greeks to relearn how to write. This marked the end of their centuries-long era of literary darkness since the abandonment of Linear B.

Arts: diverse influences from the Near East

During the Greek Dark Ages, following the fall of the Mycenaean civilisation, Greek pottery decoration had been based around increas-

ingly elaborate geometrical patterns. characterised by abstract geometric motifs such as circles, triangles, and zigzags. These motifs were commonly found on pottery, particularly on large storage vessels known as amphorae and kraters. However, the orientalizing period saw a shift in the decoration of Greek pottery from abstract to figurative styles. (Boardman 1978, 451). The transition is evident in the pottery depictions found in the Dorian city of Corinth, where a distinct ceramic style, termed Early Protocorinthian, emerges with notable innovations, including the representation of figures, animals, and floral motifs. Figure 1 illustrates an example of this trend through the depiction of an aryballos. The aryballos exhibit adjacent decorative elements, encompassing a realistically depicted deer, floral, and geometric motifs, all within a single frieze. (Tanner 2013, 28). Archaeological evidence of this movement towards naturalism is seen on the contemporary engraved Phoenician silver bowls found in Etruria, thus providing support that the Phoenicians were the main influence in the movement towards realistic depictions (Markoe 1996, 53).

Protocorinthian pottery introduced two significant technical advancements to Greek ceramics. One method employed was the utilisation of coloured slips. Iron Age pottery was predominantly black and buff in colour. It was challenging to achieve adhesion of other colours to the clay vessel's surface. The Corinthians, on the other hand, were pioneers in their field. They skilfully combined white, purple, and yellow pigments, along with a diluted glaze of a honey-coloured hue. Another technique involves using a pointed instrument to etch intricate designs onto the glaze. This technique enhanced the silhouette stick figures from the Geometric period by incorporating features such as eyes, noses, feathers, and whiskers. The current amalgamation of outline figures, engraved intricacies, and various hues is presently recognised as black-figure, with Protocorinthian representing its initial style.

Another artefact witnessing the influence from the Near East is the Griffin Bronze Protome, a mythological beast with apotropaic properties featuring a lion's body, snake's neck and tongue, eagle's head, and hare's ears, which enjoyed prolonged popularity after its introduction to the Greeks during the Orientalizing period. The iconography of griffins is notably oriental, as seen in the combination of a lion jaw and an eagle beak, derived from Neo-Hittite reliefs from North Syria in Ankara and Sakçegözü. (Aurigny 2017, 38) Moreover, the griffin protome, initially part of a set of four or six adorning the shoulder of a hammered bronze cauldron, is a hollow cast. (Mitten 1967, 73). Greece introduced the technique of hammered bronze to its creation during the 8th century B. C. , at the conclusion of the Geometric period, through trade connections with the Levant and Asia Minor. Within the hammered protome, a dark mass maintains the object's form, a necessity given the fragility of the hammered sheet. (Mitten 1967, 73). Analysis of this dark mass within the griffin head and neck reveals the presence of bitumen alongside the clay—a compelling indication of oriental production. (Aurigny 2017, 38).

The influence of Phoenician metalwork significantly impacted the depiction of scenes on Greek vessels, marking a notable shift in artistic expression. Moreover, the portrayal of human and divine figures underwent substantial transformation under the influence of ivory carvings. Originating in the Near East, ivory carving quickly gained popularity among the Greeks, prized for its lustrous appearance and luxurious appeal. (Burkert 1992, 15). The Phoenicians, renowned for their mastery of this craft, disseminated ivory throughout the Mediterranean following the extinction of the Syrian elephant in the eighth century BCE. (Winter 1976, 17). As purveyors of ivory, they exerted considerable influence on Greek artistic conventions, shaping the representation of figures carved from this precious material. Characterised by distinctive features such as oval faces, high foreheads, and exaggerated facial features, ivory carvings from the Near East introduced novel designs and motifs that swiftly became intrinsic to the fabric of Greek art. (Winter 1976, 3).

Influences from the East are also visible in sculpture. The end of the Geometric period marked the beginning of life-sized stone sculptures in Greece, inspired in part by ancient Egyptian stone sculpture (Boardman 1978, 13), notably evident in the emergence of the Daedalic style. This style, characterised by strict frontality and distinctive hairstyles and clothing, flourished between 675 and 600 BCE. (Boardman 1978, 13). The origins of the Daedalic style in Greek sculpture can be traced back to Near Eastern prototypes, particularly evident in Syrian sculptures characterised by figures with arms pressed against the body and wearing the distinctive polos headdress. These elements evolved into the Daedalic style, which dominated Greek sculpture until the mid-seventh century BCE. (Akurgal 1966, 173–176). The Greeks assimilated this Near Eastern influence, resulting in distinct stylistic features such as triangular hair shapes, lower foreheads, flatter faces, and larger eyes in their sculptures. (Jenkins 1933, 69).

The significant transformation of ancient Greek architecture in the 7th century witnessed the introduction of the Doric and Ionic orders. (Biers 1996, 133). Characterised by slightly tapered columns, the Doric order is the squatest among all styles, measuring in height, including the capital, only about four to eight lower diameters. Additionally, Greek architectural designs during this period also incorporated Near Eastern patterns, such as animals, geometric motifs, and mythical symbols, as seen in examples like the Temple A at Prinias (c. 650–600 BCE) on the island of Crete, with its winged female sculptures atop the columns resembling the Assyrian and Babylonian lamassu. The exchange of ideas and techniques between the Greek and Near Eastern worlds in the 7th century profoundly influenced the architectural landscape of ancient Greece, laying the foundation for later architectural legacies.

Greek artists and craftspeople in the 7th century BC were history-driven in their assimilation and development of a rich repertoire of realistic and natural depictions. Greek art was radically transformed by the wealth of imagery, motifs, themes, and artistic techniques that flowed from the Near East. This paper provides background on the Orientalizing period, discussing its historical importance and the factors that contributed to it. It then delves into the geographical origins of this Eastern influence, explaining how it spread throughout Greek society.

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