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Summary

**The sylphium plant and the Cyrene Perfume. The
emergence of a trade empire in the Eastern Basin of
the Mediterranean Sea (7th–3rd centuries B.C.)**

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The archaic period is one of the most important eras in the history and culture of Ancient Greece, the period during which the population of the Hellenic world on the Eastern and Western banks of the Aegean Sea took a huge leap forward in what thinking and civilization are concerned, thus marking forever both the old world and our culture.

The subject of the doctoral dissertation, for which I have conducted researches for three years, was chosen from the Ancient Greek History and is called: *The sylphium plant and the Cyrene Perfume. The emergence of a trade empire in the Eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea (7th-3rd centuries B.C.)*, and is mainly focused on the analysis of the way in which Cyrene (gr., *Κυρήνη*), founded by the Greeks on the Island of Thera, changed in time from a simple colony to an economic centre (*emporion*) where en-gross and transit trade was practiced, specialized on the trading of the *sylphium* perfume.

The scope of the thesis is quite transparent, whereby the title itself gives us indications to this end (Eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea) and also to the

relevant period of time of the events (seventh–third centuries B.C.), a special focus being laid on the Homeric Age, when the manufacturing of the *syphium* perfume and cosmetic products reaches the uppermost development. The vastness of the theme enabled not only the analysis of the perfume as historic product, but also the acquaintance with the Ancient Greece economy with a bipolar structure which proves the existence of economic politics in the true sense of the word, which is to be found again only in the early stage of the modern era.

The main goals I had in mind within the thesis were as follows:

- the development of the sea trade,
- the assessment of the economic behaviour in a coherent and systematic manner,
- the emphasis of trends within the research of the perfume history because we must admit that this complex is an integral part of the cultural entity of the Greek antiquity,
- the provision of a wide overview on the economy of Classical Greece,

- the emphasis of the way in which the ancient works, the historical sources as well as other categories of resources make reference to the history and significance of the perfume within the transformation in the Eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea, the development of the culture, of the social background,

- the way in which the use of this vast luxury product influenced the aspects of the ancient life,

- the relationship between supply and demand,

- the monitoring of the evolution of the commodities market.

The focus was laid on the Greek civilization, mainly on the sea trade, which was the crucial factor for the activation of economy during the period of time subject to study.

The thesis comprises four chapters with suggestive titles, each of them divided on several sub-chapters.

The first chapter, called *The Greek colonization in the Eastern basin of the Mediterranean Sea*, mentions the beginnings of the Greek colonization, considered in many other studies as a link of the trade.

Although the trade represented one of the main reasons for the colonization, the proofs to this end are lacking most of the time for the archaic period. The arrangement of colonies largely determined the customization of trade which could be developed either with the help of the local population, or of the Greek colonies from around the Mediterranean Sea.

Another issue debated in the first chapter refers to the main harbours in the Eastern World: Al Mina and Naukratis.

Active predecessor of Naukratis, Al Mina was revealed following the diggings executed by Sir Woolley and was considered most of the times a feudal colony by the Euboeans. A key role was assigned to this trading hub in the transmission of the Eastern influences which marked out the Greek world at the end of the dark ages¹.

Most of the times, Al Mina is overlooked by historians, but the settlement can be considered a key element for the understanding of the early role played by

¹ Graham 1986, 60.

the Greeks in East from the beginnings of the Eastern Period of the Greek cultural history².

More difficult to understand is the way in which the trade in Naukratis was organized, because the archaeological sources provide a wide range of information on sanctuaries, but not on the docks. I have to emphasize the fact that Naukratis was not an independent, self-supporting town, nor was it a regular colony or a simple trade hub as Al Mina, where, during the Ancient Period, there was in fact no organized Greek civic life. It owed its existence to the favourable interest shown on a continuous basis by the pharaohs (especially by those belonging to the Saite dynasty). The Greek states interested in developing here trading activities were keeping a good watch so that the monopoly exercised by them on the Egyptian trade was not trenched on.

It seems that the colony had played an important role in the Greek economic development at the beginning of the sixth century BC and it deserves in full the attention of historians preoccupied with the study of the

² White 1961, 446.

ancient economy for several reasons: it was a settlement dedicated to trading activities, a trade harbour founded to channel the goods outside and inside Egypt, but its main feature remains the way in which life was subordinated to the economic activities, anticipating and preparing the political blooming and the Greek artistic culture in the fifth–fourth centuries B.C.

When studying the economy of a certain period, we also look into its time, the manufacturing nature and method, the organization of property, the agricultural exploitation, the industrial labour, the development and its main directions, the transport means, the procedures and features of exchange as well as the importance of consumption³.

The second chapter, *The history of the city Cyrene during the seventh-third centuries B.C.*, points out the geographical framework of the colony, the founding and royalty of the town, the political life between the Republican Regime and the Ptolemaic occupation (460-250 B.C.), the cultural and scientific life at that time in Cyrene.

³ Toutain 1927, 1.

Along its existence, Cyrene was ruled by several kings: Battos I (*round 631-round 599 B.C.*), Arkesilaos I (*round 600/599-round 583 B.C.*), Battos II (*round 583-round 560 B.C.*), Arkesilaos II (*round 560-round 550 B.C.*), Battos III (*550-round 530 B.C.*), Arkesilaos III (*round 530-round 515 B.C.*), Battos IV (*round 515-round 470 B.C.*), Arkesilaos IV (*round 470–440 B.C.*).

During the reign of the first kings, the population of the colony was made up only from early emigrants. Subsequently, the Pythian Oracle encourages all Greeks without any racial distinction to sail to Libya to join the people in Cyrene, promising them fertile lands, phenomenon which took place under the lead of King Battos II. The short reign of Arkesilaos II is marked by the founding of the towns Taucheira and Euhesperide.

During the reign of Battos III, the Cyrenian monarchy, the political class and the society will undergo major transformations which will change the course of events along the history. In this case, the political activity performed by Demonax from Mantinea must not be neglected, as he set up a new constitution for the town,

bringing back the harmony within the civic organization system by dividing it into three tribes.

Arkesilaos III tried a restoration of the monarchy, of despotism, after the numerous changes implemented by Demonax inside the royalty and within the society, targeting even the establishment of tyranny together with his mother, Pheretima, which finally proved to be a failure leading to the defeat, exile and death of the king in Samos⁴.

Therefore, Battos IV was no longer the ruler of an independent kingdom, but a marionette⁵. The information referring to the last king of the Battiad dynasty, Arkesilaos IV, are numerous due to the fact that the king was chanted in the victory songs of Pindar, in two odes, the fourth and the fifth.

With the end of the reign of the eight and last king, Cyrene turns from a hereditary monarchy into a republic around 460 B.C. During this form of government, the town reached the highest level of

⁴ Chamoux 1956, 120-121.

⁵ Mitchell 1966, 107.

prosperity, visible from the abundant issuance of gold and silver coins⁶.

After the reign of the Battiad dynasty, the power in Cyrene is taken over by Ptolemy Lagos (founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty) and by the descendants thereof: Ophellas, Magas and Ptolemy II. During their time, the colony goes through numerous political changes, among them independence.

Finally, Cyrene became integral part of the Ptolemaic Empire controlled from Alexandria and later on Roman territory as of 96 B.C., when Ptolemy Apion generously leaves the Greek colony as inheritance to Rome, whereby subsequently the territory was officially transformed into a Roman province as of 74 B.C.⁷.

The splendour of richness in the political and economical life of the colony was also reflected in the intellectual life, strongly influenced by scholars who gradually turned the town into an important culture centre, renown for its academic activities. Among the

⁶ MØrkholm 1980, 147.

⁷ Andrew 1941, 233.

cultural personalities who came to the fore we mention Eratosthenes, Aristippus, Carneades and Theodorus.

During its historical existence, Cyrene knew a rapid development targeting richness and splendour, whereby the Greeks became mediators between the native population inside Libya and the world outside its borders.

The third chapter, *The local production and trade*, represents the most important part of the thesis relating directly to the trading of the *sylphium* perfume, to literary and iconographic sources, to the main trade routes and distribution of the perfume in the colonial and barbarian world.

Due to the countless benefits it offered, the *sylphium* plant became the most important item for export and, at the same time, a symbol of the richness, a proof to this end being the illustration on numerous Cyrenian coins. In a little while, it became a panacea so expensive that, at a certain point, the monopoly on the *sylphium* was requested during the Battiad monarchy, which highly contributed to the prosperity of Cyrene.

Subsequently, being exploited at large, the plant, which was then the main source of economic power, gradually disappeared, probably ever since the Hellenistic Era, period for which there is no documentation.

The perfumes and cosmetic products used by the Greeks vanished a long time ago, leaving behind only writings recalling their significance, as well as the bottles in which they were formerly kept.

The last chapter, called *Cyrene on the background of the trade relationships in the Eastern Basin of the Mediterranean Sea*, follows the development of the town from colony to *emporium*, the relationships with other Mediterranean states and the integration thereof into the Mediterranean trade.

Currently, the Romanian historiography does not provide a critical and objective analysis of the past of this subject, of the importance of ancient economy studies, directly related to the Greek or Hellenistic one. Thus, the research scope is based on the papers belonging to the universal historiography related to the economy of Ancient Greece, as well as on those belonging to Finley,

M. Neville, A. Bonnard, J. Boardman and Rostovtseff, the numismatic, papirological or archaeological sources being also emphasized.

The main written literary source remains *The Histories* of Herodotus, who, in Book IV, relates in detail on the founding and importance of Cyrene; also, Strabo in *Geography* and Pliny the Elder in *Naturalis Historia* (V, 1-8), important writings of the era, recall the foundation and traditional ruling thereof by Battus I as of 630 B.C., but also the famous plant with miraculous properties.

The Bible can also be recalled as source of the period, which indicates it in its pages from *Isaiah* 49:12 and *II Macabei* as the place from where the Jews must return to the country of Israel.

The numismatology illustrates the richness of the town of Cyrene following the exploitation of *sylphium* and the export of the perfume to the entire basin of the Mediterranean Sea. The plant appears on the coins from Cyrene as a badge of the town during the last decade of the sixth century B.C., which proves that not only a production of which Cyrene was proud was in

place, but, usually, that it dominated the entire region where the Libyans collected ἰόπος κυρηναϊκός.

As representative element of the iconographic sources we have the cup of King Arkesilaos manufactured by a potter in Cyrene which illustrates the importance of the plant as the supervision, weighting and packing of the *sylphium* quantity (colony monopoly) were performed by the colony king himself.

Sylphium is also recalled in a series of medical or gastronomic recipes such as *De Re Coquinaria* (*The art of cooking*) which remains the main source of classical recipes from the Roman Era, representing at the same time one of the oldest collections of recipes attributed to Marcus Gavius Apicius. It comprises approximately 500 recipes based mainly on sauces, in the composition of which *sylphium* is also included. In *Hippocratic Corpus* another interesting note is found which indicates the use of the plant for contraception by women in Greece ever since the seventh century B.C., later on appreciated also by the Roman women. Due to its importance, the kings of Cyrene issued a regulation by which they casted down and even forbade practices

leading to the cutting of roots, in case such were cut more than actually used. Despite this fact, the precaution measures taken against the exploitation of *sylphium* were not successful, and therefore, it gradually disappeared, probably during the Hellenistic Era.

Because the plant belonged, par excellence, to Cyrene, there is nothing which enables the assumption it did not exist in the rest of the Mediterranean basin, whose Western part was almost unknown in Greece. This uncertainty is sufficient to justify the continuation of researches in view of rediscovery thereof.

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