

Μουσείο Μπενάκη

A Singular Antiquity: Archaeology and Hellenic Identity in Twentieth-Century Greece



Paths to modernity: Dimitrios R. Theocharis and post-war Greek prehistory

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PART II.

GREEK
ARCHAEOLOGY:
PARADIGMS
AND
IDEOLOGIES

Paths to modernity: Dimitrios R. Theocharis and post-war Greek prehistory

‘MONDAY, 22 OCTOBER. I worked at the Acropolis until sunset. I came back taking the footpath along the “Soulinari” ravine and reached Dimini. Luckily I had with me a thick staff to keep dogs away! Exhausted I reached Volos at night.’

These are the concluding words which D.R. Theocharis entered in his daybook describing his first day of excavation at Sesklo, in the year 1956, more than fifty years ago. Research justly considers these excavations a turning point in prehistoric studies in Greece,¹ since these studies are indeed marked by long interruptions and silences, while having made significant contributions to world prehistory. This becomes particularly evident in the study of the Neolithic, which essentially started at the beginning of the twentieth century with the emblematic work by Christos Tsountas *The Prehistoric Citadels of Dimini and Sesklo*,² only to retreat subsequently into unattractive provincialism for the next fifty years or so. During this time research into Greek prehistory focussed on the great Bronze Age civilizations, starting with the Mycenaean, already known since the nineteenth century with Schliemann’s stunning discoveries, which had been nevertheless amplified by the systematic work of Tsountas³ and Wace,⁴ and later of Marinatos⁵ and Mylonas;⁶ but above all, it was the fascination with Minoan civilization, discovered in Knossos by the magisterial excavations of Sir Arthur Evans,⁷ which produced some remarkable contributions, on an international scale.⁸

In some respects, this turn towards the Bronze Age was

only to be expected. Greek archaeology, having as a whole focused on civilization, found a much more appealing reference in the palatial societies of the Aegean of the Bronze Age and in their distinctive material culture. Architectural monumentality, figurative art, religious symbolism, writing, and commerce, among other things, functioned as points of ideological and epistemological contact with the great tradition of classical archaeology of the eighteenth and nineteenth century.⁹ Let us remember here the discussion about the descent of Greek cultural forms, as put forward by classicism, and its concomitant self-prescribed reference to the closed universe of the Hellenic world, a concept challenged only recently, albeit not with much flair, by the *Black Athena* controversy.¹⁰

Similarly, the frequent references to myth and legend, which since antiquity had offered a substitute for an otherwise largely imagined pre-classical past, also point to the same direction, that of unmediated contact with the classical past. This integrationist attitude was considerably strengthened when the first hypotheses on the Greek dimension of the Aegean prehistoric culture were put forward,¹¹ only to find later confirmation in the decipherment of Linear B. The archaeological evidence thus interpreted allowed Aegean prehistory to be integrated, almost seamlessly, with the constitutive ideological construct of continuity and Hellenicity.¹² Many latent essentialist concepts were supported or even produced in that process, primarily concepts central to governability, in the Foucauldian sense of the term. Race, continuity and the bounded, closed ethnic entity (in this case the Hellenic)



Fig. 1. Vladimir Milojčić and Dimitrios R. Theocharis in ancient Demetrias, Thessaly.

are among the familiar concepts related to archaeologies of identity¹³ and we need not point out their formative political role in early twentieth-century Greece.¹⁴ In that sense, the almost complete demise of Neolithic studies, following Tsountas' remarkable achievement, was to some extent the result of Neolithic studies' inability to produce similar concepts and offer usable historical links and ideological bonds with the 'Hellenic'.

Undoubtedly, the complicated issues involved in associating archaeology with the national myth require a close scrutiny of archaeological praxis in its variable contexts, a task far more complicated than I am able to present here within the limitations of this brief paper. My main aim, therefore, will be limited to juxtaposing Neolithic archaeology, as construed in the post-war period by D.R. Theocharis, to the dominant archaeological paradigm, which had already been formed in parallel with the emergence of the Greek nation-state in the nineteenth century. In attempting this comparison, I will refer only to Greek archaeology, without touching on the issue of its privileged relationship with international scholarship, which had already recognized classical antiquity as the primary condition of identity of Europe.¹⁵ Although this relationship was extremely significant for the formation of the discipline as a whole in Greece, it was apparently not as effective for the promotion of Neolithic studies. From the point of view of international scholarship, the Neolithic of Greece was still a peripheral issue, away from the main centre of interest. For one thing, it was temporally distant from classical antiquity, and for that reason, unrelated to the massive archaeological projects undertaken by classical archaeologists

in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. At the same time it was spatially distant from the Near East, where the central myth of origin of the Neolithic was located, namely that of the Neolithic Revolution. It was thus this doubly emphasized heterotopia in Foucault's sense¹⁶ of the Greek Neolithic that decided its position in Greek scholarship.¹⁷

On the other hand, the strategy of centrality, and particularly of the centrality of meaning, which imbues modern thought¹⁸ is quite obvious in the political role of all dimensions of archaeology in Greece. Indeed, the central ideological function of archaeology in this particular historical context has been discussed critically by a number of perceptive researchers, beginning with Skopetea¹⁹ and Kalpaxis,²⁰ while the overall relation of archaeology with modernity has been analytically described by Thomas.²¹ As a national institution, archaeology has contributed, one way or another, to the question of ethnic origins, by bringing to light material evidence that was assumed to represent the essential character of the people, creating in Gourgouris' words 'a native past'.²² However, as Thomas demonstrates,²³ this was only thanks to the typically modern assumption that ethnic, linguistic and political borders should by definition coincide, and that material culture, archaeologically reconstructed and defined, should retain a central role in this coincidence. To a large degree, therefore, this was to be the only way that prehistoric archaeology could align itself to some extent with the rest of archaeological practice. As we shall see, sharing some of the categories of nationalism would be the other side of the coin of this selection.

In discussing literary modernism, Tziovas²⁴ has pointed out that Greek nationalism has its own individual characteristics, which stem from the particular historical trajectory of state formation. Mouzelis²⁵ has drawn a distinction between the nationalism developed by gradual integration through economic and administrative institutions and the nationalism developed as an ideology, before the constitution of the state, as was the case with Greece. It is no surprise, therefore, that while archaeology in Greece endorsed in general terms a political programme of modernity, the specific concepts employed were a particular mixture of historicist preferences, enmeshed with Romantic ideas of Hellenicity. Even when the spirit of modernism in the arts took Greece by storm, intellectuals continued to be strongly concerned with genealogy and continuity, expressing, in Tziovas' words, a 'national modernism', in the formative years of the inter-war period.²⁶ Ioannis Sykou-

tris, an influential nationalist intellectual, defined this attitude very clearly in 1935. He described intellectuals in Greece as preserving a distinct element of 'romantic folklore' despite their strong affinities with the cosmopolitan modernist trends produced under the dominance of 'the mentality of the big city'.²⁷ A generation before Ioannis Sykoutris, Nikolaos Politis, studying Greek folklore, had already given a clear precedent of the power of 'romantic folklore', in combining a strong evolutionist-anthropological view with the mandates of historical continuity.²⁸ This was, therefore, the intellectual context in which the contribution of D.R. Theocharis became significant.

In the intervening period since the beginning of the twentieth century and the work of Tsountas, prehistoric studies throughout the world had incorporated a definite modernist conception. The clear distinction between object and subject, expressed through the adoption of strict methodologies, particularly for excavation, but above all the emphasis on temporality, supported the central concept that changes in past societies and cultures, as in living organisms, go in one direction and are non-reversible. The evolutionary reconstructions, dominant particularly in British archaeology, as expressed by Lubbock in the nineteenth century and most notably by Childe in the twentieth²⁹ have left Greek prehistoric archaeology more or less unaffected. Spyridon Marinatos, professor at the University of Athens, a powerful figure in Greek prehistoric studies and closely connected to ultra-conservative political regimes, offers a significant example: for him the proper approach to prehistory was closely connected to philology, directly linking archaeological finds to myths and legends surviving in ancient literary sources and Homeric poems.³⁰ Incidentally, this pseudo-historical methodology, probably one of the last echoes of the pervasive influence of Paparrigopoulos on national historiography,³¹ implies a cultural unity that cuts across the distinctive traits of all periods and kinds of evidence. Stemming from a long tradition in the nineteenth century, this is an expression of the conception of the past as a unique and permanent *Volksgeist*, even though, by using something known to interpret something unknown anterior in time, the past is basically used as a retrodictive device, rather than the other way around, as would normally be the case. It is, therefore, very characteristic of the way in which generalizations about the prehistoric past were attempted in Greece during the first half of the twentieth century. These were nothing less than generalizations that supported the

central national argument and built an ethnocentric archaeology, not only because they were related to a particular geography, but also, because they attempted to draw meaning from an assumed primordial essence of Greek culture.

Certainly, evolutionary concepts were not commonplace in some European schools of thought either. Among foreign archaeologists working on the Neolithic of Greece similar examples abound.³² All these proponents of European prehistoric archaeology built a past totally occupied by interrelated 'cultures', defined archaeologically with typological classifications. In a colonial context, these scholars would arguably have no intention of dealing directly with the national identity of contemporary Greeks, yet they indirectly supported a well-defined and inalienable cultural entity, recognizable as the constant parameter of any comparison with similar surrounding entities-cultures. As was the case with the Greek prehistorians, no reference to evolutionary concepts was detected in these contributions, despite the fact that neo-evolutionist ideas were already emerging in international archaeology, especially in American archaeology of that time.³³

In fact, the conceptions of the past with which Greek prehistory attempted to set up a discourse compatible with the dominant hellenocentric paradigm represented a version of cultural history that followed the trends of central European archaeology of that time. These trends descended from the old idea of Herderian Romanticism, in which the world consisted of discrete, bounded entities, each with their own exclusive, distinctive traits. Central European geographers of the nineteenth century had called these entities 'cultures' or 'culture groups',³⁴ and they sought to find common ground not in a universal and obligatory trajectory (such as evolution or progress), but in a network of relations and contacts that was developed among them. It is no wonder therefore that culture-historical archaeology gave so much emphasis to the movement of peoples and the contacts between cultures, expressed by the prominence of diffusionist and migrationist models employed as explanatory devices. During the nineteenth century this central European reading of the past supported anti-Enlightenment feelings, occasionally expressing the dark concept of race.³⁵ The typical archaeological analysis in that school of thought, classifying objects into types and categories (incidentally, a distinctly Enlightenment approach),³⁶ was considered to reconstruct the cultural identity of the peoples of the past, bearers of

discrete cultures, and sometimes, as in the case of the Aryans or the *Indogermanen*, even of races. In Greek archaeology, the last instance of a clearly marked culture-historical approach was identified in the archaeological arguments put forward in relation to the 'Macedonian' issue. Aspects of material culture, especially of 'high art' were presented as evidence of the Greek ethnic identity of ancient Macedonians. It was one of the rare occasions when classical archaeology set aside the Winckelmannian absoluteness of high classicism, and attempted to prove something that may have been taken for granted in the classical lands but was definitely challenged politically in the margins of Macedonia, namely the definition of a specific cultural identity.³⁷ Still, it was somewhat ironic that this last modern 'war' was again fought with nineteenth-century weapons.

Despite the persistence in culture history, Greek archaeology did not stay totally unrelated to the directions of prehistoric archaeology outside central Europe. Strangely, it was a professor of Byzantine history, Spyridon Lambros, who was responsible for one of the most interesting early theoretical texts of the nineteenth century. His paper published in *Istorika Meletemata* in 1884 entitled 'The results of prehistoric archaeology and the first inhabitants of Greece' sets out all the ideas current in Europe at the time on the evolution and content of culture. The introductory lines of the paper are very characteristic:

'Five thousand and eight years before the arrival of God's son on earth is the accepted date, based on the Bible, for the creation of the world. For many centuries science did not challenge this chronology, based on the immovable faith of the Church. But when the really gigantic leap took place, as a result of which research was separated from faith [...] new events, new chronologies appeared as a necessary consequence' (my translation).³⁸

Undoubtedly, such a view heralded a clear move away from culture history. In the ensuing text, following the vision of the Enlightenment almost to the letter, Lambros places Greek culture in the context of a worldwide movement, a universal evolutionary trajectory towards perfection, based on reason and documented by scientific inquiry. References to fundamental texts, such as those by Tylor and Evans, support the arguments put forward. It was only to be expected that the dominant historicism of that period would not find much use for a reading of

prehistory which essentially abolished the presumed privileged position of Greek culture and civilization by turning it into an individual case, not important by default, merely an instance of the universal progress of humankind. No wonder, therefore, that the concepts discussed by Lambros remained beyond the mainstream Greek prehistoric archaeology, at least until the times of D.R. Theocharis.

What are those elements, therefore, which mark the turn that D.R. Theocharis attempted to bring about in Greek prehistory? First of all, his subject, namely the Neolithic of Greece, a subject which, for reasons discussed above, did not play a part (and still, to a great extent, does not, as we shall see towards the end of this paper) into the national official discourse on antiquity. Still, the object of research by itself is not enough; Vladimir Miložčić, also excavating Neolithic sites in Thessaly in parallel with Theocharis, presents a good counterexample. In the introduction to the first comprehensive report on German investigations in Thessaly, he described the aim of the project as the definition of population movement between cultural groups from the Near East to the Balkans, placing Thessaly at the centre of that movement.³⁹ For Miložčić, the significance of Thessaly to prehistoric research was closely connected to the surrounding presence of definable cultural groups. This approach was amply demonstrated in the subsequent series of volumes, produced under his direction, in which that network of connections was meticulously established through an exhaustively detailed typological examination of particular aspects of Thessalian material culture. In that way, Miložčić's archaeological approach brought his research much closer to the mainstream archaeological discourse, which, following a well-established tradition, perceived the past as consisting not of processes and evolutionary movements, but of stable and well-defined cultures. This was, unquestionably, pure culture history, nevertheless, it would be a mistake to consider its relevance limited simply to archaeology, and to its purposes. In reality, the definition of stable entities (cultural, ethnic or even political) was a very effective contact point with primordialism, the core concept of the national argument; prehistory offered nothing less than evidence that bounded entities had existed since the earliest settled life in Greece. It offered, therefore, valuable legitimization, if not of the primordialism of the nation itself, at least of the entities the nation consists of. In this sense, the subject of the research itself was the least significant indicator of change in

prehistoric studies. It was the way this subject was treated that was of primary importance.

In contrast to Milošević, who placed the culture group concept at the centre of his discourse, Theocharis chose the concept of cultural process as the main axis of his approach. In his very important book *The Dawn of Thesalian Prehistory* (an obvious homage to Childe and to his famous book *The Dawn of European Civilization*, and to the Childean concept of the Neolithic Revolution)⁴⁰ the Greek Neolithic is perceived as part of a wider and unified phenomenon of human evolution, well known from the rest of the world and especially from the Near East. Subsuming the specific, i.e. the Greek Neolithic, to the general, i.e. global history, produces an understanding of the phenomenon, and in this respect, the Neolithic of Greece represents more of an evolutionary process, than an autonomous cultural reality. This goal was constantly pursued by Theocharis by defining and describing the traits of this internal process towards neolithization.

Although there is no evidence that Theocharis knew the 1884 paper, he somehow reconnected Greek prehistoric archaeology with the Cartesian thread left by Lambros and which had not hitherto found the response it merited. We need not assume, however, that this was the result of his bibliographic diligence. Both Theocharis and Lambros expressed, in their own time and context, the same great stream of thought that we generally think stems from modernity.⁴¹ The obvious difference, of course, lies in the internal developments of the discipline, which allowed Theocharis to move to a deeper and more precise level. The perception of the landscape serves as a good example: as an aesthetic dimension of Hellenicity, the transcendent qualities of the Greek landscape were identified by the early Greek Romantic vision, but equally, if not more strongly, by the purity of modernism.⁴² In the construction of this vision archaeology had always played a significant and obvious part. For the first time, however, in Theocharis' writings, the Greek landscape was presented as environment, as a central parameter of the neolithization process, and by extension, of culture.

'Humans, of course, are the tamers of plants and animals, but the success of their efforts depended mainly on the natural environment – the second main parameter of early prehistory after humans. To some extent the environment defined the *receptivity* of a region for the early or late adop-

tion of the ideas of the productive revolution. The study of cultural traits is not enough for the reconstruction of these critical transitional stages; it is necessary in parallel to reconstruct the natural environment, and this is a task for specialist branches of the Natural Sciences' (my translation, emphasis in the original).⁴³

This quote from the introduction of *Dawn* contains in a nutshell D.R. Theocharis' central epistemic preferences. His main reference is to an extra-historical, universal context, within which no particular historical contingency seems to be of major importance or have particular significance for the reconstruction of the long-term event or process. On the contrary, processes of domestication of plants and animals and stages of social evolution are paramount, and lead to a more or less foreseeable end. Predictably, in that context, the role of the sciences is underlined; they are seen as being part of a methodology suitable for archaeological application. It is true that throughout the book, Theocharis cautiously described the limits of this methodology by stating the predominantly cultural dimension of the phenomenon.⁴⁴ Still, the concept of culture as employed here has closer analogies to natural law, than to historical contingency. This may perhaps offer an explanation for his insistence on approaching the beginning of the Neolithic in Greece through the stages that had been already defined in the Near East, such as the so-called 'Aceramic Neolithic',⁴⁵ despite the fact that he was not in the least a firm believer in the Near Eastern origins of the Greek Neolithic.⁴⁶ In many ways, the emphasis here is on the Neolithic being a canonical phenomenon, in the sense that it follows some preordained general rules of cultural evolution.

Placing the Neolithic within the framework of the natural environment and the acceptance of the close relation between environment and culture implies a stable systemic conception of the past. This is more or less concurrent with the general trends of the archaeology of that time, but it would be an exaggeration to speak of Theocharis' contact with the more technical aspects of systems theory or of the new archaeological postulates in the sixties as such. There exists no clear indication of such contact, neither in anything published during his lifetime nor in his notes or the bibliographical sketches that he left behind. Nevertheless, the conception of phenomena as consisting of definable parts, with interconnections that can be defined, observed and analyzed, a central element of modernity since

Descartes' times, is undoubtedly present in *Dawn*, as well as in all his subsequent work.⁴⁷ In all systemic approaches of that time, the environment was conceived of as a super-system, in which subsystems function interconnectedly, an infallible characteristic of what can be called archaeological modernism in the study of culture.

To a great extent, therefore, D.R. Theocharis should be credited with the introduction of that modernism to Greek prehistoric archaeology. His work pointed the way to overcoming the dead-end of culture history that sought simply to align prehistory with the dominant historical narratives of the national discourse. In this sense, it would be worth examining in more detail at some future date other revealing aspects of his work, such as his participation in international projects, the meticulous techniques of excavation – considered a great breakthrough in his day – even seemingly minor details such as the use of English terms in his excavation notes. They all clearly underline his contribution to the changing profile of Greek archaeology, in bringing it closer to the international scene. In that sense, D.R. Theocharis' work is an instance of the long process of modernization, of 'Greece's "belated" relation to Western post-Enlightenment institutions',⁴⁸ contributing at the level of the socio-imaginary by offering an updated conception of culture itself.⁴⁹

The systems theory forms an integral part of the work of George Hourmouziadis, who carried on Theocharis' work on the Neolithic in Thessaly in the seventies. His approach to the Neolithic is clearly systemic, presenting a universal Neolithic with little emphasis on special characteristics, either geographical or historical, which are still present in D.R. Theocharis' work if of secondary importance. In one of his less well-known works, but nevertheless a very important one, 'Introduction to the Neolithic Mode of Production' Hourmouziadis presents the Neolithic as a model with universal power and application.⁵⁰ In the view expressed in that paper, the Neolithic is constituted of independent parts, or subsystems, comprising the organization of space, economy and ideology which function in conditions of systemic balance. The new conception of Hourmouziadis is clearly presented in the setting up of the famous exhibition of the Museum of Volos, with which, one might say, New Museology began in Greece, but also in his vision of Neolithic Dimini.⁵¹

Hourmouziadis' reading of prehistory could well be the object of a different paper. Just as the wider conditions and

terms of the connection of Greek prehistoric archaeology with Marxism, a definitive – and strong – trend in Hourmouziadis' work, from 1974 onwards, might also make an interesting research topic.⁵² The difficult co-existence of the Marxist paradigm with the materialist neo-positivism of New Archaeology underlines the difficulties involved in such undertakings. Irrespective of these difficulties, however, we should perhaps now ask, in concluding this brief sketch of Neolithic studies in Greece, whether the introduction of modernism first by Theocharis and later by Hourmouziadis had any visible effect on the official archaeological discourse of Hellenicity. In the work of both scholars, though perhaps more so in Theocharis, one can find references to the contribution of Neolithic culture to the core of the Hellenic civilization, either in the functionalist sense of the role of the particular place, or, more rarely, expressing an almost timeless Herderian *Volksgeist*.⁵³ I consider these expressions, however, merely as simple attempts to communicate with the established archaeological discourse, and by no means characteristic of the profound dimensions of their work.

The acceptance on the part of established archaeology of the Neolithic and the accompanying modernism can be evaluated only from the concrete results, as documented in the body of Greek society. Several decades on, school textbooks still ignore the Neolithic period,⁵⁴ while certain attempts to introduce an overall assessment of the significance of the Neolithic transformation of humankind to the national curriculum were withdrawn in the face of a wave of reaction against the 'de-hellenization' of (our) history.⁵⁵ Despite much effort since D.R. Theocharis' time, Neolithic archaeology still does not offer material suitable for the national imaginary. The archaeological museums of the country, with a few notable exceptions, continue to underrepresent the Neolithic. It seems, therefore, that the aim stated by Lambros remains unfulfilled, and Greece, as so often in countless other instances in its recent history, is entering post-modernity fast, without having really absorbed the significance and the limits of the previous, modernist condition. This, however, could be the theme of another book.

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NOTES

1. Hourmouziadis 1992, 227-28.
2. Tsountas 1908.
3. Tsountas 1893.
4. Wace 1932.
5. Marinatos & Hirmer 1960.
6. Mylonas 1966.
7. Evans 1921-1936.
8. E.g. Platon 1971; Alexiou 1969.
9. Renfrew 1980.
10. Bernal 1987; Lefkowitz 1996; Kotsakis 1997.
11. Haley & Blegen 1928.
12. Andreou 2005; Kotsakis 1991; Kotsakis 1998; Kotsakis 2003b; Skopetea 1988a.
13. Meskell 2001.
14. Fotiadis 1995.
15. Fotiadis 1995; Morris 1994.
16. Foucault 1986.
17. Kotsakis 1993.
18. Alexander et al. 2006.
19. Skopetea 1988a.
20. Kalpaxis 1990.
21. Thomas 2004.
22. Gourgouris 1996, 40-46.
23. Thomas 2004, 227-28.
24. Tziiovas 1997; Tziiovas 1989.
25. Mouzelis 1978.
26. Tziiovas 1997, 2.
27. See also Kotsakis 2003b, 59-60; Sykoutris 1956, 401-2.
28. Herzfeld 1982; Kyriakidou-Nestoros 1978.
29. Trigger 1989.
30. Marinatos 1973.
31. Dimaras 1986; Skopetea 1988b.
32. E.g. Milošević 1960; Schachermeyr 1955; Weinberg 1965.
33. Willey & Sabloff 1974.
34. Trigger 1980; Trigger 1989.
35. Kossina 1920.
36. See e.g. Sloan 2003.
37. Kotsakis 1998.
38. Lambros 1884, 1.
39. Milošević 1960.
40. Theocharis 1967.
41. Ferris 2000; Toulmin 1990.
42. Jusdanis 1991; Tziiovas 1997; Kotidis 1993.
43. Theocharis 1967, 4.
44. 'The role of "specialists" and "techniques" in archaeological research must be recognized but not overstated. Culture is the creation of humans, not of the environment; and in Prehistoric Archaeology, the concept of culture is dominant, as, to some extent, the concept of art is dominant in Historic Archaeology. As long as this essential restriction applies, the first role in research must be given to the archaeologist, who is basically responsible for the study of cultural expressions' (Theocharis 1967, n. 2).
45. Demoule & Perlès 1993.
46. Kotsakis 2003a; Kotsakis 2005.
47. Theocharis 1973.
48. Gourgouris 1996, 71.
49. The major volume on Neolithic Greece (Theocharis 1973) is a good example of this 'cosmopolitan' archaeology, which addresses an international audience, and coordinates an international crew.
50. Hourmouziadis 1981.
51. Hourmouziadis 1979.
52. Hourmouziadis 1974.
53. Kotsakis 1991, 70-76.
54. Kasvikis et al. 2007a; Kasvikis et al. 2007b; Kasvikis 2004.
55. Stavrianos 1984.

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