

PAVEL OLIVA, *The Birth of Greek Civilization*. Translated by Iris Urwin Levitová. Edmonton, Alberta: Pica Pica Press (Textbook Division of the University of Alberta Press), 1985. Pp. 200. Paperback. \$11.95.

Professor Pavel Oliva works in the Department of Ancient History of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences where he is the Vice Chairman of the Society of Classical Philologists. He is also a lecturer at the Charles University in the Prague, a prolific author of books and articles, and a representative of his country to various international academic bodies. *The Birth of Greek Civilization* was originally published under the title *Zrození řecké civilizace* and appeared as an Orbis book in London in 1981. It is obviously intended for use as a textbook for the archaic period in Greek history.

The special feature of *The Birth of Greek Civilization* is its ability to cover a great deal of Greek history in a very few pages and to do so with authority and clarity. The author has kept abreast of the latest developments in classical archaeology and classical philology but has not lost sight of the uninitiated student for whom this book is intended. Two maps and sixteen pages of plates of illustrations are provided to illuminate the text, and the six page bibliography is more than adequate for beginning students and teachers. The book is organized around six compact chapters: «From Early Neolithic Times to the Height of the Bronze Age»; «The End of the Mycenaean Civilization and the 'Dark Ages'»; «Sparta and Dorian Crete»; «Greek Colonization and Social Change»; «Political and Social History of Athens»; and «Art, Literature and Thought in Archaic Greece». There is not much in this book that is new to the trained classicist or ancient historian or even less that is controversial. It is an eminently usable textbook for ancient history courses that want and need to deal with the Archaic period separately but, like many such books, it unashamedly prepares the student for the Fifth Century and is built on the assumption that ancient Greek history is well worth studying because «as it developed further Greek civilization proved its superiority and viability in the success it achieved in all spheres of human knowledge and activity, and became one of the most influential forces in the history of the ancient world» (p. 184).

Anyone teaching ancient Greek history would do well to consider inclusion of *The Birth of Greek Civilization* in their required reading list. They will not be disappointed.

JOHN E. REXINE
COLGATE UNIVERSITY

PAOLO VIVANTE, *Homer*. Hermes Books. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985. Pp. xiv + 218. Paperback. \$6.95.

There are certainly better books for the nonspecialist to read on Homer than Paolo Vivante's *Homer*. The General Editor of the Hermes Book Series, John Herington, in

his Foreword, indicates that «the first, middle and last goal of the Hermes series is to guide the general reader to a dialogue with the classical masters rather than to acquaint him or her with the present state of scholarly research.» The editor has sought people who have «a love for literature in other languages, extending into modern times; a vision that extends beyond academe to contemporary life itself; and above all an ability to express themselves in clear, lively, and graceful English, without polysyllabic language or parochial jargon. For the aim of the series requires that they should communicate to nonspecialist readers, authoritatively and vividly, their personal sense of why a given classical author's writings have excited people for centuries and why they continue to do so» (p.x).

Paolo Vivante, who teaches classics at McGill University in Canada, certainly loves the classics but the reader, I suspect, can read his book on Homer several times over without being able to get the vaguest idea of what he is trying to say. The chapter headings («Homer and the Reader»; «The Story»; «Characters»; «Nature»; «Age and Place of Homer») would suggest that the neophyte would receive some clearcut guidance for reading and understanding the Homeric texts, from which there are fairly frequent citations in English translation. But the author's language and comments are often mysterious, mystical, even meaningless. There are good observations buried in a florid and flaccid style that renders the observation pompously empty of any real comment. Try, for example, the following on «the rapturous event»:

Everything is motion, action, swift development, and full fruition. If beauty is a consummation in nature, here we have beauty in the making. Again there is no room for detail, no particular delightful spot begging to be described. It is, rather, the swelling movement that acquires shape. All charm lies hidden in the awesome manifestation of an encompassing power (pp. 184-185).

What in the world is the author trying to say? Such bombastic language and imagery characterizes the entire book and will undoubtedly confuse and discourage the uninitiated reader who is trying to learn about Homer — not struggle with Vivante's own poetic mysticism. When Vivante does manage to say something about Homer, it is trite. He is best at generalizations that can be removed from the text in which they appear and are so general as to be meaningless. Compare, for example, the following:

Aesthetic perception was thus created to conceiving human values. First and foremost, we find the living image, rooted in nature, placed beyond the pale of good and evil, showing through its very existence the inherent innocence and worth of form. Then, growing articulate, the image becomes characterized more and more by the action, yet it retains its primal aesthetic appeal (p. 147).

Paolo Vivante's *Homer* is a truly frustrating book. One wonders for whom it was written and why it was published in a series that was meant to *communicate* the relevance and beauty of the classics to nonspecialists. This book will drive them away.

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