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Philosophy and Education for the Future

THE HIGH CITY OF TROY

Anne Conway: the Ultimate
Unity of Spirit and Matter

The Seven Kings
of Rome

Terra Preta

PHILOSOPHY
CULTURE
SOCIETY
ESOTERICA
ART
AND MORE





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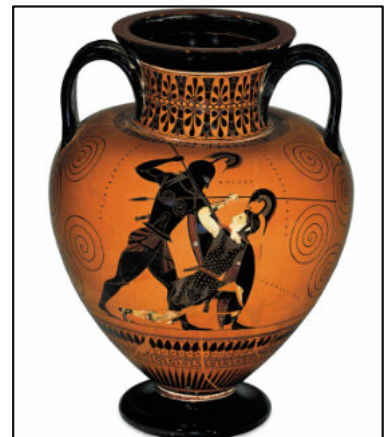


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The High City of Troy



Editorial

Post-lockdown values?

"There are decades where nothing happens – and there are weeks where decades happen." This Lenin quote might sum up how many of us feel regarding the events of 2020. Not that nothing happened before – in my view the last few decades contained quite a lot of events on a mega scale - but the changes triggered by COVID-19 have been unprecedented. As some countries are gradually coming out of complete lockdown, the paramount question is: where do we go from here?

There are many signs that we want to hold on to the positives of the last 3 months and that we see this crisis as a transition and an opportunity to bring in systemic changes. But how can we best use this *kairos* moment to create a world after lockdown that is actually better than the one before?

One tried and tested way of doing this is certainly by identifying clear goals that need to be achieved in order to bring about an improvement. When Britain needed a plan to recover after World War II, the economist Sir William Beveridge identified five problems to be tackled simultaneously: want, ignorance, idleness, squalor, and disease. His report served as the basis for the post-war welfare state and guided social reform for the next 30 years. For the current crisis, the historian Peter Hennessy has proposed another five priorities: social care, social housing, technical education, climate change, and preparing for artificial intelligence.

Whilst it is absolutely clear that any of these points need to be addressed, I wonder whether concrete goals alone will be sufficient to bring about a lasting and sustainable change and improvement. I believe that we will also need to focus on values. Values are, after all, amongst the main driving forces of our actions. Of course, each concrete goal does embody a value, but values are not only broader, they are also deeper and more all-encompassing. For example, the value of 'health' can give rise to a much deeper change of how I lead my life than the concrete goal of attaining a specific weight or running several miles in a specific time or giving up alcohol. As a value, it

also enables me to understand the concept of 'health' on more than just one level: not only as a specific aspect of physical health but also as mental health, emotional health and – why not? – spiritual health. It might even make me reflect on the underlying principles of health and their application on all these levels: balance, harmony, nothing in excess, etc.

I don't think that concrete goals alone will be able to create this better world. It is necessary to address our underlying belief systems and the values they are based on – let us not forget that profit is also a 'value'. If the world is, as Einstein said, a product of our thinking, then we need to change the way we think in order to produce a better one. We need a philosophical examination of the principles that help us to decide what is right and wrong, and how to act in various situations. We will also need stories and narratives that transmit them and open our hearts to them.

Values will always give rise to concrete actions. Concrete actions alone, however, will probably not in the long-term awaken and transmit values that will have the strength to create and sustain a world where everyone can flourish. So, do we need values or specific goals? It's not 'either/or', but 'and'.

Which values will we need to build this better future? This is a question to inspire our reflections and our dialogues. I do not know the answer. But I am sure that amongst them will be a strong emphasis on the 'we'. Wangari Maathai, the first black African woman to win a Nobel Prize, said: "Mankind's universal values of love, compassion, solidarity, caring and tolerance should form the basis for this global ethic which should permeate culture, politics, trade, religion and philosophy." And Barack Obama put it beautifully in his speech at Nelson Mandela's memorial: "There is a word in South Africa – Ubuntu – that describes his greatest gift: his recognition that we are all bound together in ways that can be invisible to the eye; that there is a oneness to humanity; that we achieve ourselves by sharing ourselves with others, and caring for those around us."

Sabine Leitner

Anne Conway

the Ultimate Unity of Spirit and Matter

Seventeenth century England was a time of conflict and rapid change, and it is under such conditions that Countess Anne Conway, one of the few female philosophers of her time, developed her clarity of vision and influence. From her home at Ragley Hall and mostly through letters, Anne Conway was in continuous dialogue with the scientific and philosophical developments of her age.

In her posthumously published 'The Principles' we find Conway's view – based upon the idea of 'extension' – that Spirit and Matter are in fact two distinct modes, or 'stages' of the same underlying essence. A good example of this can be found in

water, which at its furthest stage of 'extension' or density is ice and fixed; in its secondary and intermediate stage of extension is flowing liquid; and at its most subtle and least extended stage is a gas or vapour. Each of these is water, but under different forms, with characteristics, functions and actions particular to each stage.

"If Spirits and Bodies are so inseparably united, that no Body can be without a spirit (...) this is certainly a great argument, that they are of one Nature and Substance, and that a Body is nothing but a fixed and condensed Spirit, and a Spirit nothing but a subtle and volatile Body."

(Conway, The Principles)

Furthermore, when Conway speaks of 'Body' and 'Spirit', the term 'Body' refers broadly to any receptivity or density. In this sense, even thoughts have a body – a density by which they can be retained, recalled and held in the mind.

"The reflection of an image requires a certain opacity or darkness which we call a Body."

In her metaphysics of extension, Conway classifies three distinct modes or 'spheres'. The first and highest she calls '**God**', the second '**Christ**' and the third, '**The Creatures**'.

God is essentially 'divine immutability', 'the Good' of Plato, 'the absolute' which nothing is outside of or beyond, that which is most Spirit.

The second sphere, '**Christ**', is comparable firstly to space – that within which all things are and have



their life. It is also reflective of a certain state of consciousness, of which the historical figure of Christ is a symbol. It is the transcendence of matter and a moral life firmly directed towards the first principle, the Good. The Christ principle is the infinite space through which the potential of movement towards 'Good' is possible.

"The second changeable only to Good; So that which in its own Nature is Good, may become yet better"

"[Christ]...for a certain space submits himself to the Laws of Time, that he might elevate the souls of Men above Time and Corruptibility to himself; wherein they receive blessing and grow from one degree of Goodness and Virtue unto another, in infinitum."

In the third sphere, '**The Creatures**', the most dense and bodily, life is changeable in two directions: either towards the Good, the higher regions, or away from it, towards corruption. This downwards changeability, according to Conway, can be due either to a deliberate act of Will or to an indifference of Will. Conway also explains that it is not possible to become infinitely more bodily; however, to become more spirit and characterised by 'the good' represents a long direction of travel and infinite possibilities.

"No creature can become more and more a body to infinity, although it can become more and more a spirit to infinity... [A] body is always able to become more and more spiritual to infinity since God, who is the first and highest spirit, is infinite and does not and cannot partake of the least corporeality" (Conway, 1996: 42)

Conway understands everything which is dense and bodily to be infinitely divisible and changeable, to the extent that it is essentially illusory – matter at the first stage of materiality. Whatever remains is spoken of as the monad.

In some way, the monad – the smallest possible point – shares its nature with the sphere of 'God' or the Absolute, in the sense that it, too, is undivided and wholly unchangeable, it is spirit at its furthest point of extension.

Anne Conway was in the Platonic tradition and also acquainted with esoteric works such as the Kabbalah. Whilst she was not publicly known after her death, her work, as explained in 'The Principles' went on to influence scientific development, in particular Leibniz, who later developed his 'monadology' and was a bridge between Renaissance thought and the modern era.

If life and its laws do not issue from a material basis as Anne Conway suggests, then it is reasonable to suggest that our understanding must also respond and develop on a non-material basis. Consider our material arts and sciences, medicine, technology,



music, etc. With this view in mind, across all of these areas, a deep and accurate understanding of life can only ultimately be achieved with ourselves and our actions becoming less changeable and indifferent to what is (in the highest possible sense) Good. Philosophically speaking, the idea of unity between spirit and matter necessarily raises our interactions with all physical life to the sphere of an ever greater moral and spiritual perfection.

Siobhan Farrar

The Cancer of Separatism

When we argued some years ago in our writings and lectures that a new Middle Ages was approaching, the prediction seemed exaggerated and almost fatalistic.

We also explained at the time that the repetition of historical cycles did not necessarily have to be seen as a calamity or regression, but as part of the natural course of life, which progresses gradually in a circular and spiral-shaped manner, touching

similar points along the way, although at different levels of evolution.

Far from being fatalistic, let alone exaggerated, events today are proving the truth of those words. Now there are a great many authors and scholars who are talking about the phenomenon of a medieval period resulting from the last few centuries of our history, as a period of rest and recovery before a possible “renaissance”.



There are various characteristics that indicate the presence of an intermediate cycle for our civilisation. But there is one which is particularly relevant today, due to the serious complications it may bring if we fail to realise its true magnitude. I am talking about separatism.

Beyond its political meanings – although these are also included – separatism is a force that infiltrates all human expressions with a tendency to dissolve everything that has been achieved until now. It leads one cell to oppose another and results in an extreme form of individualism, which encloses each person within themselves, within their own reality.

Terms like freedom, independence, autonomy, free expression, self-determination and so many others are no more than synonyms of the process of separatism. Today nations are divided into provinces and regions, which claim absolute originality and self-sufficiency. But the process continues, and the regions and provinces continue to be divided up into smaller segments, based on any differences or distinctions that can be shown. The next step will

be for one town to become separated from another, and even within the same families we will begin to notice cracks that will inevitably result in clashes between the generations.

When, as the culmination of this process, the individual becomes the ultimate unit and becomes “separated” from all the rest, what will happen then? We will be in the heart of the Middle Ages.

Everyone will have to look out for themselves even in the simplest of difficulties, and all the achievements of civilization, founded on collective work and cooperation, will have disappeared.

Perhaps, in the present, we may find it difficult to imagine a world without communications, where roads are cut off, where there is no fuel or energy; it may be almost impossible now to imagine large houses in the middle of the countryside and the great cities abandoned because they have become uninhabitable... But as separateness increases, all of these trends are on the rise.

However, as there have been many other Middle Ages before, and as human beings have emerged from all of them, we will also be reborn from this strange period that awaits us. But to be reborn an awakening is necessary, a firm mind that allows us to recognize the mistakes of the present in order to transform them into future successes.

The human being is a social being. The family, the village or town, the Earth that witnessed our birth all give rise to feelings of affection that cannot be erased from human nature. Those bonds just need to be strengthened in a healthy way. It is enough to remove the parasites from this plant of civilisation, so that the new Middle Ages can pass over us like a fleeting dream and, after that brief hour of rest, the dawn of a new world can re-emerge, powerful and radiant.

New and therefore better.

This article is an excerpt from a book called *The Everyday Hero*, a collection of articles by Delia Steinberg Guzman (Honorary President of New Acropolis International).



Paracelsus

the Five Causes of Disease

As we are at present living in the throes of a worldwide disease, it might be interesting to look at other possible causes than the ones we are familiar with from the news bulletins.

This esoteric perspective comes to us from a late medieval/renaissance doctor, alchemist, astrologer and general philanthropist (lover of humanity), known by the name of “Paracelsus”. He was born in 1493 near Einsiedeln in what is now Switzerland. “Brought up among the fir-cones”, as he himself put it, he was initiated into many of nature’s secrets by his father, a doctor and keen researcher into the medicinal properties of herbs,



Portrait presumed to be of Paracelsus by Quinten Massys, Louvre Museum, Paris.

plants and roots. He also accompanied his father on visits to mines and mining villages, where he observed both metals and the diseases of miners, a subject on which he was later to write a book.

In this short article I cannot, unfortunately, enter into the details of his life, fascinating as they are. So I will recommend you a book, *The Life of Paracelsus*, by Dr. Franz Hartmann. It paints a picture of a man who was dedicated to the task of alleviating human suffering by his art and who, in order to do so, carried out extensive and deep studies into Nature and the human being. He taught that there are Four Pillars of Medicine, namely Philosophy, Astronomy, Alchemy and Virtue. He gained many enemies throughout his life as he frequently railed against the apothecaries and ‘sham-physicians’ of his day. He died at the age of 48, perhaps at the hand of an assassin.

“The highest foundation of medicine,” said Paracelsus, “is Love”; but alongside this must be Knowledge of the visible and invisible aspects of life. “The physician should know the processes of nature, the invisible as well as the visible man”... “A physician who wishes to be rational must know the constitution of man... he should have an understanding of [the sciences] by the power of interior perception, which cannot be taught in books, but must be acquired by art”.

The third foundation of medicine, alongside love and knowledge, is to serve Nature: “A physician should be a servant of Nature, and not her enemy”.

“Nature is a great physician” and the doctor should assist Nature in taking its course, not try to divert it into contrary directions. The Paracelsian doctor does not see himself doing battle with Nature. Disease is in many cases the result of not living in accordance with Nature’s laws. Therefore, the solution to disease is to understand those laws and readapt to them, not to try to prevent this process of readjustment.

The Five Causes of Disease

As we have already noted, Paracelsus claimed that the vast majority of diseases come from invisible causes. Paracelsus lists five invisible causes of disease:

1) Astral influences. These are the influences coming from the planets and the stars. They can affect human beings collectively and individually, physically and psychologically. Individuals may be affected by the astral influences of a particular planet (or astrological aspect) when this is connected with their personal birth chart. These influences can cause disease in susceptible bodies

and can also bring about cures, if managed by a doctor well versed in astrology.

Such cures would consist in applying the influence of the contrary planet by the use of sympathetic plants and herbs, metals and minerals or talismans. For example, an illness caused by the influence of the Moon could be cured by subjecting the patient in some way to the influence of its opposing planet, the Sun. This could take the form of using gold (a metal under the influence of the sun), or a plant connected with the Sun, on a day when the Sun is in a benefic aspect to the patient’s horoscope.

This type of operation is based upon the science of ‘signatures’, the network of correspondences that exists in nature between the planets and the different species and forms in nature. However, says Paracelsus, it is not just a matter of looking up such correspondences in books, but above all being able to “read in the book of Nature”, to “see” the correspondences between macrocosm and microcosm, by journeying into the interior of our own being and opening our inner eyes.



2) Impurities, poisonous substances and internal obstructions. In modern language this refers to the build-up of toxins in the system, whether from the food and drink we ingest or from our polluted environment. The following quotation from Paracelsus shows the clarity of his thinking in this respect:

Man is much more subject to diseases than animals in a state of liberty, because the latter live in accordance with the laws of their nature, and man acts continually against the laws of his nature, especially in regard to his eating and drinking. As long as his body is strong, it may expel or overcome the injurious influences... but a time will come when disease will be the result, because the organism requires a period of rest and a renewal of strength to expel the poisonous elements. If the physician attempts to prevent such an expulsion of poisonous elements he attempts a crime against Nature.

3) The misuse of organs or injurious influences. This refers especially to the abuse of physiological powers, e.g. over-eating, over-drinking, excessive sexual activity, resulting in problems such as obesity, diseases of the stomach, liver complaints, impotence, sexually transmitted diseases, etc. These can be cured mainly by ceasing to indulge in the injurious activity. "Nature", said Franz Hartmann, "is a patient mother that often forgives the sins committed against her, although she cannot forget them."

4) Psychological causes. These can be internal or external. There are diseases caused by our own negative states of mind, such as fear, stress, anger, hatred, etc. And there are others caused by negative psychic influences around us or sent directly to harm us by invisible enemies. While many people nowadays would put the latter down to medieval superstition, Hartmann gives several examples of such 'invisible attacks' which were known to him personally. These may not be conscious 'curses', but merely thoughts and intentions wishing us harm. However, such negative energies will not affect honest and upright people, says Paracelsus, whose virtue acts as a luminous and defensive shield.

In the case of the internal psychic causes, these are widely accepted today, and the illnesses caused by them are known as "psycho-somatic". There are some illnesses which do not have any physical cause at all, only a psychological one (e.g. stress), and if this were to disappear, the illness would also disappear.

Paracelsus refers to these emotional-mental states as "Imagination". He says: "Imagination is the cause of many diseases; faith is the cure for all. If we cannot cure a disease by faith, it is because our faith is too weak; but our faith is weak on account of our want of knowledge; if we were conscious of the power of God in ourselves, we could never fail." Faith, for Paracelsus, is not blind religious faith, but an unshakeable inner conviction in one's own powers, based on knowledge.

5) Spiritual causes created by disobedience to the law of God ("Karmic" causes). In this case, there may be no evident cause for the disease and it may be caused by what in the East is called "karma" – previous actions carried out in this life or a previous one. In order to discover such causes, the doctor would need to have the "interior perception" referred to earlier. As for the cure, in such cases there is none, except to be patient and wait for the karmic causes to be worked off. If the doctor, due to ignorance of these causes, tries to fight the disease at all costs, they may end up doing more harm than good, by fighting against Nature.

Paracelsus is an interesting mixture of scientific doctor, homeopath, naturopath and faith healer. As a result, he is often criticized, at least in the UK, as being a pseudo-doctor, charlatan, etc. In German-speaking countries, however, he is well respected. He is often considered to be the precursor of homeopathy (a form of which he used to cure the plague), but at the same time he knew the value of hygiene. Homeopathy is often vilified today, but hygiene is praised. Some of his "miraculous" cures have been historically authenticated. Could his five causes of disease be applicable today?

Julian Scott

John Keats

Immortal Beauty

“A thing of beauty is a joy forever. Its loveliness increases; it will never pass into nothingness”

So begins the epic poem *Endymion* by John Keats. And in these opening lines, as through his exquisite body of work, he presents to us one of the core themes of his poetry, if not all art: that the archetype of Beauty is immortal.

Keats knew death intimately. By the age of fourteen he had lost his father, baby brother and his mother. As the eldest remaining male in the family, he left education and became a surgeon's apprentice. At eighteen he enrolled at Guy's Hospital in London to train as a surgeon and apothecary, where mortality

would have continued to be the inevitable and constant truth.

But he soon renounced his medical career in pursuit of poetry. Over the next five years of his life he wrote some of the most sublime and enduring poems of the English language, as well as suffering another death – that of his brother Tom, from consumption. Perhaps through poetry he sought out an alternative Truth; in *Endymion* he explored the immortality of the soul.¹

Keats knew his own death was imminent. On the 3rd of February 1820, after suffering a fevered fit of coughing, Keats held a candle to



a single drop of blood on the sheets, and said calmly:

“That is blood from my mouth. [...] I know the colour of that blood; – it is arterial blood; I cannot be deceived in that colour – that drop of blood is my death warrant – I must die.”²

Keats died penniless aged only twenty-five, in the Eternal City of Rome, the climate of which his faithful friends had hoped would alleviate the tuberculosis.

But in his short life, Keats experienced love and beauty as closely as he had sickness and death, and perhaps it is this understanding of duality that moved him to write as he did.

In the poem *Ode to a Nightingale*, perhaps his most famous, he lies beneath a tree and listens to the birdsong in an almost dreamlike state. “Embalmed in darkness”, he is reminded of the ecstasy and pleasures of life, and in his exclaiming “Thou art not born for death, immortal Bird!”, he recognises that the beautiful song existed before him, and would certainly outlive him.

Keats perceived immortal Beauty in Nature, and everywhere, not least of all in art. In *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, he reflects on the figures depicted on the ancient artefact – scenes depicting life, on a vessel intended to carry the ashes of the dead; a vessel that has outlived its maker by millennia.

The subjects of the Urn are forever captured in a single moment: trees whose leaves are never withered by time; lovers always caught in the anticipation before their kiss, their lips never meeting; their beauty never fading.

And just as the Urn is a vessel, so Keats believed poets themselves to be vessels of

Beauty – “chameleon” beings with “no identity [...] filling some other body, the Sun, the Moon, the Sea,”³ and also possessing the trait of Negative Capability: “that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”⁴.



For Keats, the search for Truth through poetry meant embracing the unknown and relishing its endlessness. As he concludes in *Ode on a Grecian Urn*:

**“Beauty is Truth, and Truth Beauty.
That is all ye know on Earth,
And all ye need to know.”**

Maria Virginia Reina

¹ Motion, A. (1997). *Keats*. Page 169. Faber & Faber Limited.

² Brown, C. (1820). Letter cited in: Keats, J. & Barnard, J. (ed.) (2004). *Selected Letters*. Page 490. Penguin Classics.

³ Keats, J. & Barnard, J. (ed.) (2004) *Selected Letters*. Page 263. Penguin Classics.

⁴ Roe, N. (2013). *John Keats*. Page 201. Yale University Press.

The Seven Kings of ROME

The period known as the *Roman Kingdom* with its seven kings represents the time when the seeds of an emerging civilisation were firmly planted in the "Italian" soil. There is a growing academic consensus that the seven kings of Rome were all real historical figures, including Rome's founder Romulus. This doesn't mean that all the mythological and legendary stories surrounding their lives have to be taken literally. They are only pointers and symbols which are meant to give the historian some clues as to the essential character of the civilisation in question.

With regard to the foundation of Rome, from the earliest records that we have we can deduce the following points: Rome was born within a rural-agricultural context, it was guided by a strong martial spirit, it was formed by a mixture of different peoples (Latins, Sabines and Etruscans) and its socio-political vision and



Statue of Numa Pompilius

strength were rooted in the sacred.

At the very beginning of the story of Rome, we find its first king, Romulus, ruling not alone but jointly with the Sabine king Titus Tatius. This tradition of joint leadership (where two elected consuls served together), which was devised to allow for a better balance of power, lasted nearly 700 years. Romulus and Titus Tatius soon established the

king's council, the basis of what would later become the Roman senate. It was formed by the most noble men, the Roman *fathers* (later called senators and also *patricians* - from *paters*). Romulus was also responsible for the creation of private property and the basic "laws" relating to landed property. The first structuring of society into different social groups or classes (similar to a caste system) is also

attributed to him. Romulus's reign ended with his deification and ascent to heaven. He becomes a hero, the founder and protector of Rome, also identified as the God Quirinus.

The second king, Numa Pompilius, was instrumental in building the spiritual and 'sacred heart' of Rome. His main achievements consisted in the creation of various religious colleges: 1) the *Flamines* (priestly figures) each of whom was devoted exclusively to the worshipping of one deity. Of the 15 *Flamines*, the most important 'served' Jupiter, Mars, and Quirinus, respectively. 2) the *Vestal Virgins* who tended the state cult of Vesta and kept the sacred fire of Rome alive. 3) a college of *Augurs*, devoted to the observation and interpretation of signs of the will of the Gods (called *auspices*), such as thunder, lighting and the flight of birds. 4) The *Salii* or leaping priests of Mars who decided on the opening and closing of a military campaign and magically 'protected' Rome's army. 5) The *Fetiales*, a group of priestly officials concerned with various aspects of international law and relations, such as treaties and declarations of war. 6) The *College of Pontiffs*, made up of the highest-ranking priests who organised and supervised all the other religious colleges. Its head was the *Pontifex Maximus*, the most important position in the ancient Roman religion.

After Numa Pompilius, a new king was unanimously elected, Tullus

Hostilius. Loved above all by the popular classes, he was a warrior and belligerent king and his surname, which means hostile, was the proof of this. He embarked on many bloody wars against Rome's neighbouring cities, including the ancient city of Alba Longa (founded by Ascanius, the legendary son of Aeneas, the mythical ancestor of Rome).

The fourth king, Ancus Marcius, tried to readdress the balance between war and peace. This was nevertheless a time of continuous and intense warfare between cities. Marcius was a great military strategist and intelligent king. With him commerce and economy prospered. He started the construction of salt marshes for the production of salt, a priceless and essential source of wealth (this is where the word *salary* comes from!). His greatest achievement was the establishment of the first Roman colony, the coastal city of Ostia, which became Rome's harbour and gave direct access to the sea.

The fifth Roman king, Tarquinius Priscus, was an Etruscan. He had the great ability of forming many political alliances between foreign and hostile peoples. For instance, until then, the Etruscans had been Rome's greatest enemies, but thanks to Tarquinius they could be kept at bay. This was also the time when many Etruscan cultural and symbolic elements were incorporated into the Roman world. Other great achievements of this king included the foundation of religious festivals like the *Roman*

games (Ludi Romani) and the construction of one of the world's earliest sewage systems (the *Cloaca Maxima*).

It is quite clear that by the end of Tarquinius Priscus's reign, Rome had expanded so much that some very radical social and political reforms were needed.

This is when Servius Tullius came onto the political scene. Despite being the son of a slave, who came from a very humble background, he became one of the greatest Roman political reformers. Through a major population census the Roman army's *centuria* system was born. And thanks to his reforms, Rome's ordinary citizens became a distinct force within Roman politics, who were now entitled to participate in governmental decisions.

The reign of the last king, Tarquinius Superbus, was characterised by a kind of dictatorship, which eventually marked the end of the monarchy and the beginning of the Roman Republic. Superbus's arrogant leadership ended in a popular revolt which sent his family into exile. But Rome had to win a series of bloody battles and withstand a siege in order to completely get rid of this king, who by then had become its worst enemy. This, in short, is the fascinating story of Rome's first steps, which patiently but resolutely marked its cultural supremacy over the ancient world.

Agostino Dominici

Terra Preta

the Black Earth upon which Civilisations were Built

"Agriculture is the noblest of all alchemy; for it turns the earth, and even manure, into gold, conferring upon its cultivator the additional reward of health." – Hebrew proverb

In 1542, a Spanish conquistador named Francisco de Orellana set sail along the Amazon river with a group of his fellow countrymen, looking high and low for the Kingdom of *El Dorado*, a mythical city of gold.

Although the Spaniards were unsuccessful in their quest for precious treasures, the name *El Dorado* may symbolise something far more prosperous and life-giving than gold itself, as we shall see.

Francisco chronicled his extraordinary experiences, which ended due to his involuntary departure fleeing unwelcoming indigenous peoples. His testimony told of millions of inhabitants living in civilisations and cities with a horn of plenty.

About a hundred years later, a new generation of Spanish conquistadors, lured by the tales of Francisco and his compatriots, returned to continue the explorations, but encountered



nothing that resembled Francisco's extraordinary claims – instead, they found little more than jungle.

It was much later understood that a smallpox and flu epidemic contracted from previous Spaniards, against which the indigenous peoples had no immunity, had created a demographic collapse; but until this was known, Francisco's accounts were given as much credence as a fairy-tale.

Until the last century, any inquiry or attempt to reinforce Francisco's claims seemed like an archaeological wild goose chase. His claims were categorically denied, largely due to the absence of any conclusive evidence, as the Amazon's poor yellow soil is not arable enough to support the Spaniard's assertions.

Only small-scale cultivations have been known to exist in the Amazon by indigenous tribes, and any undertakings of intensive agriculture have proven futile. For extensive and progressive cultures like those described by Francisco to thrive, a sustainable agricultural system with arable soils would be essential.

However, a series of scientific discoveries in the 1960s, based on extracted soil samples in the Amazon region, became a catalyst for rediscovering a rich tillable soil named *terra preta*.

Terra preta is Portuguese for “black earth”, with samples found over 2,000 years old and still fertile. It's a black topsoil that has been discovered predominantly on the higher lands. It's now estimated that terra preta was cultivated to cater for a

population of at least 20 million, covering 10% of the Amazon basin, which is roughly twice the size of the United Kingdom.

Around the globe, darker soils loaded with decomposed organic matter are generally presumed to be richer than lighter ones, and records of dark soils in antiquity have been documented elsewhere. One example is Egypt, previously known as Kemet – “Black Land” – a name attributed to a fertile black soil that relied on an annual flooding of the Nile, which provided silt as a fertiliser to the surrounding land. Terra preta, on the other hand, performs to a completely different key.

The essential constituents are its microbes and biochar – a charcoal composed of organic residues and produced from a process known as pyrolysis (transformation of a substance by the action of heating). Bones, human faeces, ash, organic matter and broken pottery dating to before the Common Era were also found within compositions. This is a conclusive indication that the soil is not naturally occurring, but man-made, meaning that perhaps Francisco's descriptions were not as embellished as once supposed.

Since the rediscovery of terra preta, innumerable benefits have been unearthed, with an increasing number of international scientists advocating its potential to ameliorate global issues such as famine, water shortages and greenhouse gases. It has the propensity to encourage fertile soils for healthy and reliable yields, the ability to process waste material into natural manure and convert desiccated areas into agricultural

plots. Terra preta's popularity is also growing as it offers a feasible alternative to costly fertilisers and significantly lowers the need for artificial methods, including toxic pesticide use and genetic technology.

Unlike the surrounding weak Amazonian soils, terra preta is less vulnerable to nutrient depletion by rain or flooding, as the porous structure of charcoal enables it to collect and store a high concentration of essential microorganisms, while simultaneously resisting any leeching.

One other astonishing quality is its self-sustaining ability to mineralise and grow deeper into the soil. The regenerative properties are still puzzling to soil experts, with the cause lying somewhere in the unique microbial content, containing thousands upon thousands of bacterial species and fungi.

The science on terra preta is still young and immensely positive. If applied correctly, this re-emerging black soil could potentially play a pivotal role in avoiding many agricultural pitfalls and climate threats. However, its immeasurable potential may face fierce opposition to protect competing business interests.

Meanwhile, terra preta has been revelatory, changing the landscape of soil sciences, agricultural methods and history, and supports the hypothesis that the Amazon – “the lungs of the planet” – is not just the largest and most biodiverse rainforest on Earth, but a garden, untamed for centuries, abandoned by a fallen civilisation.

Gareth Kinsella



The High City of Troy

Long ago at the dawn of history, on a distant seashore near the sacred Mount Ida, stood a marvellous city, the walls of which were built by the gods themselves. It was there that Poseidon and Apollo did their penance labouring for king Laomedon on the orders of the great Zeus. The city was Ilium or Troy, the jewel of the world before history began. The Father of Gods and Men honoured it with all his heart.

However, history unfolds in cycles, and the inhabitants of Troy succumbed to pride and forgot about virtue. The decline of the mighty city began when king Laomedon failed to honour his promise to pay Apollo and Poseidon for their work. To punish him, Poseidon sent a sea-

serpent, which was killed by the greatest hero, Heracles. But the king did not honour his promise again, this time to Heracles. So, the hero destroyed the city and only the youngest son of the king survived – Priam. He rebuilt Troy, but only to meet his end there when destiny brought the war of all wars. By the naïve choice of Priam's son, Paris, and his abduction of Helen, the divine will to relieve the all-nurturing Earth from the burden of humans was put into motion. The Trojan War began and Troy's fate was sealed.

Thousands of valiant warriors on both sides, the Trojans and the Achaeans, clashed in the war. It lasted ten long and hard years, full of wrath, loss, grief, rage, despair, pride and glory... Gods

kept intervening on the battlefield. Warriors showed overweening ambition and masterful skills. Hubris overcame them and death came to many: Hector, Achilles, Helenus, Patroclus, Sarpedon, Ajax, Memnon, Orestes... Those who did not meet their end under the walls of Troy had many misfortunes afterwards. Finally, by a ruse – the wooden horse, an apparent gift to the gods filled with hidden warriors – the Achaeans managed to enter the impregnable walls of the city. Troy fell. Thus ended the age of heroes.

In every end, there is a beginning. Following his higher mission, the young Trojan prince, great-hearted Aeneas, son of Aphrodite, escaped the burning city with his aged father on his back, the sacred palladium of Athena in one hand and his son clinging to the other. Thus, the high city, pure Troy, with its experience, values and potential for the future, was saved.

Together with some remaining Trojans, Aeneas built a fleet and led his companions to the new homeland.

There are many more elements to the myth, many more heroic acts to remember and symbols to interpret. The story of Troy, a high city, a place of great heroes, a centre of a civilisation, has been reverberating throughout history. It became a chronological marker for the start of history and the ideological source that shaped the ancient Greco-Roman world. Many ancient Greek cities traced their origins to the aftermath of the Trojan War. The story tells that Aeneas reached Italy and his descendants founded Rome.

The archaeological city of Troy, on the Hisarlik mound in north-west Turkey, is an incarnation of the myth, and still keeps some secrets. Many prominent figures paid homage to it, including Xerxes, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Augustus, Agrippa, Hadrian, Constantine and Julian.

Although the city was abandoned in the 7th century CE, the story of Troy continued to inspire. It became an important source of origins in medieval Europe. Between the 7th and early 12th centuries, several different claims to Trojan ancestry were made by European noble houses, royal dynasties and national chroniclers. Geoffrey of Monmouth described in his *History of the Kings of Britain* the story of Brutus, a great-grandson of Aeneas, who founded Troja Nova (New Troy), which developed into Trinovantum or modern London. The first ever printed book in English was the *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* (1473).

The idea of a high city, where justice, virtue and wisdom dwell, continues to call to those who learn from history, both mythical and actual, and are willing to build a high city in the here and now.

Nataliya Petlevych



