

# Reviews

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**Jeremy McInerney, *Greece in the ancient world*,  
Thames & Hudson, London 2018, 368 p., ISBN 978-  
0-500-25226-0**

This is a new survey of ancient Greek history, aimed primarily at students of antiquity and history in general, but also accessible to a wider interested readership, a task made easier by the author's long experience in teaching at the University of Pennsylvania.

The book is structured in 13 chapters, covering, after an introductory chapter, the period from the earliest Greek history to the coming of Rome in the Hellenistic world. Two chapters are dedicated to Bronze Age Greece, one to the Iron Age (while avoiding terms like "Dark age"), the Archaic age is covered through chapters referring to Sparta and Athens respectively. The bulk of the book, in terms of number of chapters and of pages, is reserved for the Classical age: one chapter for the Persian wars, three on the achievements of Athens practically alone (democracy and empire, life in Periclean Athens, religion and philosophy), one on the Peloponnesian war, one on the "short" fourth century and the rise of Macedon. The lone final chapter dedicated to Alexander the Great and the Hellenistic age feels like an afterthought. The chapters are all conceived similarly: a brief chronology for the relevant span of time, the subtitles structuring the main text (like the ideal number of guests at a symposium no more than nine, no less than four), finally, under the title Spotlight, the presentation of a special issue deemed of particular interest (such as the Vix crater, the Lapis primus or the debate over Philip's tomb at Vergina). The book also includes a general timeline, an index and a glossary of rare terms, mostly Greek, such as *atimos*, *gephyrismos* or *medize*.

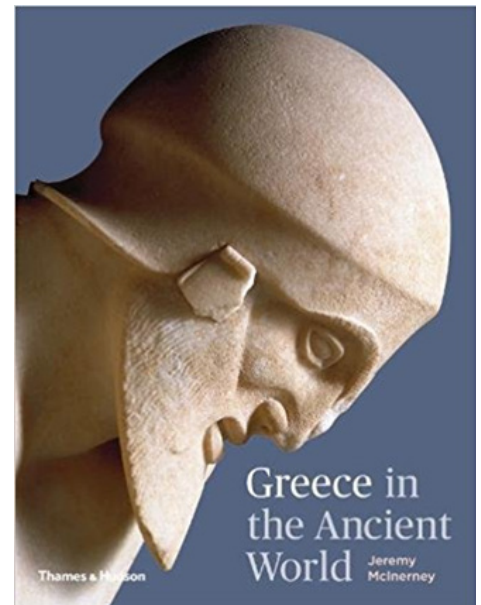
The book has two major purposes. The first is, of course, to show to the reader the main achievements of Greek civilization, to convey as strong an impression as possible of the glory that was Greece. To strengthen this, the author repeatedly underlines the debt that modern Western civilization (not a term that he uses) owes to the ancient Greeks. As such, he devotes ample space to those achievements which are most closely connected to our most cherished values today, mainly Athenian democracy, the highlights of philosophy and science in Athens and the flourishing of tragedy and comedy, again in Athens. (There is, on the other hand, apart from the buildings on the Athenian acropolis, relatively little on Classical architecture, sculpture and art.) To achieve this, the author uses a variety of methods and devices. The first that the reader notices is the abundance of high-quality, well-chosen illustrations, which bring ancient realities into immediate focus. Apart from photographs of well-known monuments and artefacts probably already known to anybody who is likely to pick up this book, the author chose images which exemplify key situations or finds (such as the shackled skeletons of Phaleron, a voting machine used by Athenian citizens, sculptures from the Perserschutt photographed at the time of discovery or a reconstruction of "Myrtis", an Athenian girl who died of the plague early in the Peloponnesian war), or, more surprisingly, modern European paintings such as Edward Dodwell's *View of Mycenae* or Jacques-Louis David's *Leonidas at Thermopylae*. The maps, not as numerous or as rich in detail as to become overwhelming and distract from the text, illustrate certain crucial moments of Greek history. Graphs complete the descriptions given in words for complex abstract structures such as the Spartan system of government, the arrangement of Athenian democracy or the roles of the Athenian *boule* and *ekklesia*. There are also boxes of texts, passages of ancient Greek authors or snippets of epigraphic texts, chosen to additionally illustrate some of the points made in the narrative, although none of them are analysed in detail.

The next important thing one notices is the style of the book's writing. The author possesses the valuable quality of being able to turn his subject matter into an interesting read. His is a strong and persuasive voice, vivid without being facetious,

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solid without being arid, able to convey nuance and detail without losing an eye for the main thing. This is not to say that he talks down to his readers, even though the book is built on the solid basis of many years of scholarship in the various fields of ancient Greek history, and the bibliographical list, covering six tightly-written pages, includes fundamental works as well as the most recent contributions to the current scholarly debate.

The second of the two major purposes of this book is to show that the study of ancient Greece is still relevant today. In order to prove this, the author critically examines those aspects of the civilization and way of life of the ancient Greeks which would not fail to surprise or even shock the modern reader. Thus, the development of Athenian democracy is shown hand in hand with the growth of the Athenian empire and the warlike character of democratic Athens. The build-up of the rights and liberties of Athenian citizens is accompanied by the discussion of marginalised categories, such as women, gay people, metics and the institution of slavery, and by the highlighting of the manifold aspects and consequences of economic inequality. The process of “othering”, examined against the background of the Persian wars, is further explored by a sub-chapter devoted to those who were in the eyes of Classical Greeks the “Other” par excellence, the Persians. Then again, in trying to prove the close connection between modern values and those of the acme of Greek civilization, to prove that “we are the Greeks” (p. 28), the author calls upon topical issues, such as Zach Snyder’s film *300* or Spike Lee’s *Chi-Raq*. Whether or not these will still be watched or talked about ten or twenty years from now, a scholarly work drawing upon items of popular culture risks setting its own date of expiry. Too eager attempts to bring matters of the past over into contemporaneity may stir the echoes of the *vox clamantis in deserto*.

This is a survey and as such, although it keeps up to date with the newest research, it does not attempt to be in any way ground-breaking or set forward revolutionary new theories. This is manifest in two respects. On the one hand, in a work such as this there is little space for in-depth discussions of controversial issues.

The author accordingly skips over matters of contention over which in the past rivers of ink have been shed. For instance, the long-debated causes of the fall of Mycenaean civilization look more like a concatenation of coincidences; the causes of Greek colonization are only briefly discussed. More broadly, this is, in spite of its modern looks and the use of recent research, a fundamentally traditionalist book. It includes, and even discusses, archaeological artefacts, inscriptions or coins; but its main outlook is through the eyes of Greek writers. It intends to be a history of the Greek world, and for the early ages it does look at several of its places and areas, but come the Archaic age, what Gehrke called *Das dritte Griechenland* all but disappears; the focus is exclusively on Athens and Sparta. The author does not claim, with John Stuart Mill, that the battle of Marathon was more important than the battle of Hastings, even for English history; however, of all the peoples and civilizations who touched the Greeks, influenced them or were influenced by them, the only one worthy of a separate discussion in this book are the Persians, in the context of their wars against the Greeks. Other Greek cities are barely mentioned, except in connection to the two great powers; for instance, Corinth is presented as the main instigator of the Peloponnesian war, it, not Sparta, being alarmed by the increase of Athenian power. In the same line of thought, as soon as the focus of Greek history moved away from Athens and Sparta after the battle of Chaironeia, the author’s interest also faded. The three hundred years of Hellenistic history from the death of Alexander the Great on are summarized in less pages than those devoted to the Peloponnesian war alone; although described “as rich and important as the Classical age”, the entire period is dismissed in the same breath as “hardly remembered today” (p. 323).

None of this however, detracts from the value of this book, which conveys a large amount of information and interpretation in a style that is eminently accessible without being facile. Quite apart from the wealth of historical detail, skilfully put together to convey a comprehensive image of ancient Greek civilization, it is a good read. Anyone at all interested in the ancient Greeks ought to read it.