

When Oprah met Sappho

The Greeks

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The Greeks: Crucible of Civilisation

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The ancient Greeks are not a crucible of civilisation. They are a fun-house mirror, a clouded and cracked discard from a cultural carnival that went bankrupt in most western countries when it stopped drawing crowds three or four decades ago. The passers-by we classicists can lure into our tent look at the ancient Greeks and see distorted reflections. We assure them these reflections are their own, misshapen by the defective mirror of history. This trick has been practised since Plutarch paired prominent Greek and Roman statesmen - note the conspicuous and historically explicable absence of women - in parallel biographies written to instruct men of standing and presumed quality about how they should conduct themselves in their civic lives. And like a well-run sidewalk game of three-card-monte, it works because so many of the elements are true. But play it, and in the end you lose your money.

Paul Cartledge operates this game skilfully. He uses 15 brief biographies arranged chronologically from Homer to Alexander the Great to explain those aspects of ancient Greek culture he thinks will interest viewers of the Atlantic TV Productions-BBC series *The Greeks*, and others who mainly like to watch. For more than 150 years of this routine, knowing your audience has been all.

Explaining the Greeks is daunting. George Grote, on the 255th page of the first volume of his landmark *History of Greece* (prefaced March 5 1846), had not even reached his real subject - or perhaps he had. He was at that point explaining the discrepancies between the legend of Jason and the Argonauts and "the enlarged geographical knowledge and improved historical criticism" that the Greeks themselves had acquired by the 5th century BC. Grote explained that sincere faith in the Argonautic tales persisted among later Greeks "trained in a more severe school of criticism" essentially because their will to believe triumphed over informed disbelief.

Grote's history exploited "the inestimable aid of [19th-century] German erudition" in order to separate legendary from historical Greece. His guiding principle was the same as Cartledge's: to lay out a picture of ancient Greece for his readers "not omitting the points of resemblance as well as contrast with the better-known forms of modern society." Grote set forth for an intelligent readership of liberal pro-parliamentary persuasion "the history of a people by whom the first spark was set to the dormant intellectual capacities of our nature". Likewise, Cartledge writes of "the tension of sameness and difference that strikes anyone contemplating" the political, cultural, social and economic lives of the ancient Greeks. His 15 ancient Greeks "stand for a culture and a civilisation that still mean a great deal to our own in all sorts of different ways".

A. E. Housman, arguably the greatest classical philologist of the 20th century, revealed a secret that could apply to all this: "And faith, 'tis pleasant till 'tis past:/ The mischief is that 'twill not last." How long did the reverie last for Rupert Brooke on orders for the Dardanelles and fantasising that "the fort on the Asiatic corner will want quelling" and that he would fight Achilles-like on the plains of Troy? While Robert Graves was saying "Goodbye to All That", Oxford's Sir John Myres ironically was inviting all that to stay, and on very comfortable terms. In his Sather lectures published in 1930, Myres asked "Who Were the Greeks?" In eight chapters running to 530 pages, he surveyed the evidence of regional environment, physical anthropology, comparative linguistics, comparative religion, prehistoric archaeology and collective Greek folk memory.

Myres, too, used the image of the crucible, which for him was the formative period of the Greek migrations, roughly 1200-900BC. But all his elaborate scholarly labour was predicated on a kind of culturally dictated self-hypnosis. Millions of human beings had just been butchered along the trench lines of Western Europe, yet Myres could assert, without any note of desperation, that modern popular notions idealising the ancient Greeks for their "standards of physical perfection, and clear self-consciousness of how a thoroughbred Greek should look", their "characteristic modes of expression in the arts", and their "notions of a rational order in external nature, in society, in individual experience and conduct, [their] own ideal standard of living - of a 'good life' in the fullest and highest sense" - were confirmed by the self-conceptions of the ancient Greeks themselves. In short, the operator of our three-card-monte game truly believed that he was not manipulating the cards.

What one world war could not accomplish, a second war did. In 1949, E. R. Dodds delivered his own Sather lectures on the subject of "The Greeks and the Irrational". He criticised Greek scholarship for its self-imposed isolation. He criticised classical scholars for being at least 30 years out of date in their use of anthropological theory. He anticipated being attacked for applying to the Greeks anthropological methods then normally used to study "lower" cultures: "I expect to be reminded, in the first place, that 'the Greeks were not savages'." Perhaps not, but then again, Dodds might have said, just contemplate Dachau, Dresden,

Hiroshima, Berlin or London and ask whose reflection that is in the mirror of ancient Greek history.

By such stages, we have reached in western culture our modern period of heightened self-absorption. Our take on the Greeks is virtually no take at all. The authors of a recent popular critique of classical scholarship, admittedly excessive and scatter-shot, could legitimately rail against the very scholars who should be trying to make the Greeks relevant to a public increasingly uninterested in history. Instead, classicists grapple in print with "disparate, feminist, split, psychoanalytic, gender-troubled and adrift selves".

It is no surprise then that the 15 Greeks who are made relevant by Cartledge would be right at home on the Oprah Winfrey show. How do these Greeks demonstrate "their tension of sameness and difference"? Sappho is a "Sapphic", a "lesbian", "probably what we would call a bisexual" who "passed from a predominantly homoerotic to a chiefly heterosexual (married) lifestyle". Whatever does the word in parentheses portend? Socrates who also "got married", possibly to two women at the same time, but who did nothing to suppress his homosexual proclivities. Alexander the Great as a "preferred homosexual" who entered into two marriages "only for dynastic reasons". "Similarity and difference, therefore, once again," says Cartledge with a practised look towards his grateful audience that says:

"Look what secrets I have made them reveal to you. See, they are just like us."

Good thing too, because "all history is present history" and "all history is personal". The Greeks did write androcentric, male-chauvinist history, Cartledge admits, but "we can, and must, do better" by interviewing seven mainly obscure and poorly documented female guests, including: Artemisia, queen of Halicarnassus; Aspasia, Pericles's common-law wife; Cynisca, Spartan princess and patroness of chariot races; and Diotima, a perhaps fictitious "woman of Mantinea whom Socrates somehow and somewhere met, an expert on the subject of love -that is erotic passion". The talk show in this book thus strikes a politically correct balance that is sure to please the target audience, and keeps the focus on the two things that boost ratings: sex and privacy stripped naked. Androcentrism is out, gynocentrism and intimate personal revelation, extracted from exiguous evidence, are in. The Olympic Games are even described as "radically gendered".

I can state without irony that I enjoyed reading this book, but I brought to it 30 years of concentrated study of the ancient Greeks. There are perceptive insights about, for example, what ancient Greek slave ownership implied for personal social status and how modern British and American democracies would be viewed by the ancient Athenians. These would fascinate any reader. But *The Greeks: Crucible of Civilisation* mainly reassures us that our modern confusions and messy personal lives are validated by the archetypes of Western European culture. If further proof is required, the only two maps in this book identify Italy, Greece, the Persian Empire, Egypt, the Mediterranean, Athens, Sparta and Sicily. That's it for geographical understanding. Readers are not expected to be curious about where Lesbos,

Mantineia, Macedonia, Miletus, Thebes or Halicarnassus were. Eastern Mediterranean geography, intensively studied by Grote and Myres for its effects on the formation of Hellenic civilisation, is now irrelevant. The ancient Greeks might have lived anywhere. Why, they could even move in next door and you would hardly notice.

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