

The Classical World

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The Classical world provides a mirror to our present one, a piece of phantasmic fiction, the more fascinating because of being true after all. That world was very different from yet profoundly and disturbingly similar to the world of today. The differences being mostly superficial and relating to everyday technology, the similarities going deeper pertaining to the very existential fact of being human. Human culture may have changed, but human nature remains the same. Thus the fascination of discerning the familiar in an unfamiliar context. In short of being a piece of science-fiction.

The study of the Classics was for many centuries central to education, even young school-children were familiar with the Greek myths and Roman military exploits. Julius Caesar being a household name, along with many other. A man surely was not really educated who was not versant in Latin¹ and a smattering of Greek in addition certainly did not hurt. Now with the onslaught of science and technology, this attitude no longer could be maintained as essential and instead it grew more and more effete and snobbish. Whether this was a good thing or not is quite another matter, nowadays the Classic departments are embattled deprived of assured academic bounty and need to carry themselves to the general public peddling their wares to a jaded market hoping that the very enduring qualities of their goods are bound to assert themselves. It is tempting to see this book as a case in point, in a mere 600 pages displaying a brief survey of the high-lights of the Classical age, defined by the author to begin with Homer, and somewhat idiosyncratically to end with Hadrian² The story is told intelligently and reasonably grippingly, providing for those half-educated (as the present reviewer) with a ready chronology to string up events logically and fill out obvious gaps. It is a pity though that the publisher has not seemed it fit to provide a brief chronological table for the readers convenience as well as providing a summary . The point is that while we in modern western history have a very keen sense of time and centuries, the 16th and 18th bringing up quite distinct associations, for most of thus this vividness of humanly structured time is far weaker for the Classical era. What happened really in that world during the second century BC? Most people would not have a ready answer, and myself in spite of having just read through the book, cannot supply one either. In fact if you return to the book you will find that the author has not much to say about that period either. It came after the assertion of the military dominance of Rome, but before its Republican nature had been betrayed by strong military leaders (an inevitable consequence of the reliance on the sword?) and provides as such a stretch of transportation between the emergence and the consolidation. However the third century BC provides a lot

¹ During educational reforms in Russia during the mid 19th century it was initially taken for granted that a university education should be barred to those of no Classical learning.

² The author choses to frame his account by Hadrian, supposedly a Classicist by heart and education, an aficionado of Greek culture trying to revive it in Imperial Rome.

of action. There is in its beginning the Greek king Pyrrhus of his infamous type of victory still trying to stem the tide of Roman expansion, and at its end the Hannibal of elephants trying desperately to make the final case for a Carthaganean triumph³. Similarly the fifth century BC is the time of Greek civil war (known as the Peleponnesean), the struggle between Sparta and Athens for predominance, after their common alliance to check the westward expansion of the Persians. History is of course not just dates and battles, but they are inescapable markers to structure events, and the sense of relentless flowing time of history, with crucial cross-roads, inviting counterfactual speculation (surely one of the most futile, if instructive, exercises of history) and concomitant irrevocable turning points, i.e. those who change the landscape for ever allowing nothing but regret but no turning back of clock, is best conveyed by an old-fashioned narrative, so despised by modern professional historians, but eagerly seized by amateurs regardless of competence. Lane Fox is supposedly a professional entering on the field and thus providing some professional authority to reassure the eager reader. Is this history as it should be presented? Does it qualify to the exacting standards of a Collingwood, of not merely being a matter of 'scissors and paste' in the words of that British philosopher, but actually the result of asking some probing questions. In a sense it is neither. Being a Classicist by profession he surely does not need to collect a variety of sources to digest and make a haphazard selection of; on the other hand the book is intended for the (intelligent?) layman and not prompted by specialized questions that may come natural to the author. Still an (intelligent?) reader may find ample source for reflection.

So what are the kind of reflections that a serious reader can be provoked to formulate? First why is it that the Greek and Roman worlds are so connected in our (western?) minds? After all they were very different, and why not couple the Greek and Persian instead?⁴ Were there really any real continuity between the two? We think of the Romans as being the heirs of the Hellenistic world? But surely it was one of usurpation rather than designation. And the Roman world certainly was not a continuation of the Hellenistic, by other means, but had its own dynamism launched independently. The answer to that question is probably that the Romans discovered the Hellenistic civilization as a forerunner (present on the ground) and as a worthy model of emulation. The Greek world was adopted by the Romans, fashioned in their image, and thus conveyed to us doubly refracted⁵.

To study the Greek world is really to probe the misty pre-history of antiquity. The Greek world suffered a radical breakage, its civilization including that of its script was forgotten, except that its language survived. I know of few if any other instances of two

³ Both Pyrrhus and Hannibal are familiar from early history lessons, but as such not necessarily fixed in a well-understood chronology.

⁴ In present anachronistic thinking, the Greeks are often associated with Asia, while Rome was genuinely European. Needless to remark, those labels, colorful as they may appear, mean next to nothing.

⁵ The problem of how the Greek world was handed down to us is of course an empirically challenging proposition not to be resolved by clever if inspired speculation. Certainly much of the Greek world we know through Roman eyes, but of course the Greek tradition survived in the East, and I doubt that the Arabic transport was detoured via Rome. The interesting question of what glasses we use still remains as opposed to the mere chain of documents employed in preservation.

different and temporally disjoint civilizations being united vertically by a language⁶. What did the classical Greeks know or suspect of the civilization that preceded them? We know of it solely through archeology⁷ but was it really as remote to the Greeks as it is to us? Did an inchoate memory of it survive as collective myth, set in form by Homer? If language did survive, perhaps also religious mythology? After all language is transmitted by oral tradition and refers not only to words but beliefs and rituals. Greek mythology can be translated into Roman using a well-known dictionary⁸ and also Norse mythology shows similarities with the Classical ones? As the case of the Roman and the Greek indicates, it is not a case of simple emulation, but rather of common roots and convergent evolution, going back to pre-history, maybe possibly reflecting a common Indo-European origin, of which the Norse mythology could be another off-shoot. This is of course pure speculation, keeping in mind that religious inheritance may follow linguistic as little as the latter runs in genetic channels.

The Greek world is ancient, more ancient than the Roman, not just in the tautological sense of chronology as indicated above. Yet to us it seems in many aspects so modern, in fact almost contemporary, and as such much more congenial than the latter Romans. The reason for this is that 'thought' itself has a time-less character. The Old Greek 'invented' or maybe better 'introduced' the ideas of science as speculation tempered by empirical inspection⁹ and in particular delivered to the world mathematics as a deductive science. Such ideas, in spite of much Post-Modernist babble, are ultimately objective, and thus the chasm of time is bridged¹⁰. Many moderns would find themselves quite at home with the likes of Plato, or so at least they so imagine. To a large extent this is tautological, being flattered by the aristocracy of Platos irony (irony being in the nature of a contract between the author and that special reader who is made to be privy to what goes on below the level of mere appearances) they believe themselves to have special access. In truth there would probably be a deep sense of alienation would they be confronted with the more quotidian aspects of the Old Greek, which unlike other fruits of their civilization have not survived. Greek democracy is a case in point. Our modern ideas of egalitarianism would most likely be unintelligible to them, such that slaves should enjoy the same ontological status as free

⁶ Whether the Greeks of prehistory was genetically related to the historical ones is an interesting question although ultimately irrelevant, the transmission of language being independent of the transmission of genes.

⁷ As well as by script - Linear A and B, spectacularly deciphered in the 30's by Chadwick on the assumption that they were based on Greek. I do not know how many documents actually survive from that period, and thus how amenable it is to a real historical exploration. The case is similar with the Mayan script only recently decoded. As is well-known most of the written sources of the Mayans were destroyed by zealous missionaries, but the fragments which remain give tantalizing glimpses of a sophisticated civilization far stranger to us than those of the Classical.

⁸ Jupiter and Venus, corresponding to Zeus and Aphrodite, to refer to common knowledge.

⁹ This may come as a surprise to the reader, because Greek science has traditionally been castigated for its exclusive reliance on speculation; yet the life-blood of science is curiosity, which generates speculation but is not inspired nor sustainably fed by it.

¹⁰ Also being accepted in our age, we tend to think of the Greeks having discovered it, rather than invented it

citizens¹¹. Still one should not belittle the achievement as little as one should exalt it. Every society, especially every civilized society encounters the problem of leadership and authority, and the general solutions to those are similar, reminiscent of convergent evolution, indicating that although the problems are human, human nature puts some limits to them. Democracy is not just about election, a tyrant can be elected, and the tradition of electing a king is probably quite old; democracy is about institution and the more active its citizens are politically the more alive it is¹². The Greek were politically divided into city-states, each one constituting a political experiment, but sharing a common language and culture, including a common mythology. They were geographically concentrated in present day Greece, but they were spread widely, colonizing not only the western coast of Asia Minor but extending into the coastal regions of the Black Sea, not to mention most of southern Italy, including Sicily and extending to the western Mediterranean. According to the author they were very competent, easily adjusting themselves to the surroundings, unlike more recent colonizers such as the British. Now what was the reason for this superiority? Why the Greek, why did not all kinds of people spread out likewise? As a friend of mine remarked, formerly the answer to that question was easy, it was a matter of genetic superiority, they were Aryans after all. This explanation no longer has the same force it formerly held. Still it is true that the Greek probably had some superior institutions, that their societies were well-organized, so there was a blueprint for each colonial expedition to enlarge and develop. And of course they were not alone in such enterprises but had at least initially competition with the Phoenicians. Added to this one should not forget that part of superior organization is that of way-fare and its technology. The Greek were probably better armed than their opponents, making a difference whenever there was a conflict. Otherwise the world was more pristine at the time, not as densely populated, and hence there was room for initiative, just as in the American West, with the difference that the frontier status of expansion lasted for many generations, not just a few.

But there were inevitable conflict. The Persians expanded in all directions, including the western, and thus confronted the eastward expansion of the Greeks. The Persians were strong and numerous, united under tyrannical monarchs; while the Greeks were divided. Yet for the purpose of defense they made peace with each other, and through a combination of luck and skill, and also, the author indicates a stronger motivation due to their mostly democratic constitutions, making the soldiers fight for themselves not only by compulsion, they were able to prevail. It is tempting to view this contest as one between modern western democratic ideas and eastern despondency with momentous consequences for the future of western civilization, and the author falls prey to this temptation, as have no doubt countless historians before him. And is that so very wrong? Maybe this is one of those pivotal decisions tipping history one way or another. Of course you could never

¹¹ the case of the disenfranchisement of women may strike modern feminists if possibly as even more damning, but that issue is to some extent technical, the real division in ancient slave societies was not one of gender

¹² It is quite likely that the active participation of free men in Athens was more involved than in modern societies, probably involved to such a degree that it imposed hardships for the majority of people to whom such activities were not fully congenial. Just as modern committee work for academics is something to be shunned if possible.

really know, except that had it gone the other way, we would no doubt have looked upon the event as either equally meaningful and provident, or maybe not at all. the subjugation of the Greek being just one among many.

The unification of the Greek world was not to last, for that the antagonism between Athens and Sparta was too deep. Civil war may have spelled political catastrophe as well as commercial degeneration, but the golden period of culture and thought ensued nevertheless. So there is Greek drama and Greek philosophy the former, like most of ancient literature only surviving fragmentarily, the latter epitomized by Plato and Aristotle of whom by fortuitous circumstances most seems preserved for posterity. And so the second and final phase of the Greek real life drama was to play out, an explosion of sorts which deposited Greek culture and heritage all over the eastern Mediterranean. It was the very marginal Greek monarchy of Macedonia which suddenly asserted itself through the ruthless King Philip unifying reluctant states through regular conquest. The exploits of his son are legendary, and indeed so spectacular as to endow its owner not only with the qualification of the great, but to bestow on him a mythological character, close to that of a deity. He would of course provide inspiration for generations of future men of military ambition and seeker of glory in the ancient world. His reign was but brief, and hence the more magical, struck down as he was by disease. His most far reaching excursion was to the Indus, making contact with the Indian civilization, establishing a small Greek colony to survive some non-trivial amount of time, and bringing back oriental wonders, of which the elephant was not the least, henceforth to prove such an important role in further Greek war-fare¹³. The realm of Alexander the great disintegrated after his death, but the remains proved to be strong political forces for a century or so after that. And many of the really great Greek scientists such as Euclid, Archimedes, Eratosthenes and Ptolemy were active far and awide in this post-Athenian period dominated by Alexandria.

The steady rise of the Roman world had a most inauspicious beginning, steadily usurping neighboring states. Its great rival was of course Cartage, closely situated across Sicily in present day Tunisia. The key word here is Punic wars, the first and the second, fought during the third century BC, for supremacy. In their southward expansion the Romans encountered the Greek (Pyrrhus) in the beginning and were temporarily vanquished by Hannibal at the end of that century. But his triumphs turned out to be temporary and the Romans prevailed. Theirs was a strong militaristic society its wealth based on conquest and plunder, in fact due to its political and economic structure it was (like modern economies) doomed to either expand or collapse. It was defiantly Republican, opposed to the notion of a monarch. The supreme power being divided among two councils each elected for two years. The incentive for political office was the bounty it would entail in a society no doubt greatly corrupt. There was a division into an upper aristocracy and a plebeian under class, with the proviso that even the latter had some political clout, both being standing on a belly of slaves, continually replenished through conquests of war. But a society that is based on war sooner or later will become hostage to the most forceful of commanders. That eventually happened in the middle of the first century through Caesar, although he was of course not the first wielding strong military power, only the most

¹³ As noted above the elephant is associated with Hannibal in the popular imagination, but was employed by Pyrrhus and others Hellenistic military inheritors way before that

cunning and ruthless of them all¹⁴. His opponents did get their comeuppance, having him stabbed in the senate through the machinations of a Republican conspiracy, which like so many subsequent conspiracies throughout history failed because they did not press their advantage. He was succeeded by his adopted son Octavius, and a civil war ensued between him and another favorite of the ceased Caesar - Mark Anthony. The outcome eventually was, somewhat surprisingly, to the advantage of the former, in spite of his lack of any military prowess. With Augustus, as he soon was to be termed, the consolidation of the institution of an imperial governance was effected, and the Republican Rome would never more reassert itself. Augustus, ruthless as he must have been bound to have been, proved himself an able ruler, that could not be said of his immediate successors, ironically all of them descendants of his rival Mark Anthony. The list of early emperors are surely familiar to most people¹⁵ the depraved Tiberius, the mad Caligula, the drooling misfit Claudius and Nero himself, the epitome of the insane ruler, the excesses of which provides good copy to this day. That line was decapitated and then there followed a succession of mostly short-lived tenures, until the empire stabilized and more able men were put in charge. As Lane Fox remarks, being a Roman emperor did not entail on the job-training, those who were not fitted from the start were only liable to prove themselves even worse than expected.

The Roman world is in many ways rather similar to our modern one, as noted initially, human nature not changing over the centuries. But it was also rawer and more honest to that very nature than it is allowed to be today. Political downfall did not just bring resignation but also bloody retribution, with heads decapitated and bodies hacked to pieces. Human entertainment did not shy away from pure sadism at its core, criminals were thrown to the wild beasts, and the wild beasts themselves of which there was an unending supply in those environmentally pristine times were slaughtered en masse¹⁶. Why was this done? According to the author as a means of the leaders to cater to the tastes of the populace and ensure their support in elections. The daily life of the period naturally attracts our curiosity without necessarily fully satisfying it. There was a social division between Roman subjects, who could count on the protection of the law, and those below for which no such thing existed. Rome itself was a megapolis of a million, an unheard conglomeration of human flesh at the time. It sucked in most of the wealth of the empire, feeding an idle population, as well as supporting a mass of slaves. The inner sanctum of the city was prosperous and impressive, but most of it would compare to a contemporary third world urban hell of squatters and slum dwellers.

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¹⁴ It is intimated in the book that the campaigns in Gaul on which he based his reputation and power, caused a million casualties, something he seemed to have been more proud of than anything else.

¹⁵ if not through schooling at least from the popularized volumes of Graves based to a large extent from the biographies of Suetonius

¹⁶ North Africa was the big supply, from which elephants and giraffes were drawn, but one should not forget that lions were rampant in the present day Balkans, and maybe even on the Appenninian peninsula itself.