

The Greeks

*A study of the character and history of an ancient civilization,
and of the people who created it*

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Kitto is an old classical Classicist of the first half of the 20th century. His book on the ancient Greek bespeaks an enthusiastic idealization. The Greeks were truly remarkable. As the first Moderns they set up standards, most of which we fall short of. How could modern drama compare to that of ancient Greek one? And who could seriously compete with Homer, except possibly Shakespeare? And what modern language possesses the clarity and majestic architecture of ancient Greek? So what made the Greek so great? For one thing they were well-rounded, specialization was looked down upon. And this is why the Greek have acquired a reputation for disdaining manual labor. It was not the manual aspect per se which was the problem, Kitto assures the reader, but the implication that too much manual labor left the man one-sided and unfit for his duty as a citizen. A man should have an active mind as well as a well-trimmed body, not that the body was a pre-requisite for the mind (or the mind a necessary aid to the body for that matter) but the Greeks put them on equal footing. He should know mathematics as well as poetry, appreciate music and the drama, and above all be able to engage in lively conversation. To that was expected to take an active part in the community, or more precisely that typical and unique Greek institution - the polis, for which there is no adequate translation in any modern language. A Greek individual was not primarily an individual but a member of a family and a citizen. As a family member he had obvious duties to his family, to look for its well-fare above that of his own. But also as a citizen he had an equal duty, namely one of active participation.

The Greek are considered the founders of democracy. The way their democracy functioned was rather different from what we nowadays mean with democracy, which makes it tempting to dismiss theirs as a sham. True, not everyone was a citizen, slaves were exempted, and women were disenfranchised, a fact which particular grates our modern sensibilities. On the other hand there is nothing today that corresponds to the very active engagement of the Greeks in their common affairs. Everyone had a duty to participate and to accept what came to their lots. Of course one thing that made that possible was the modest size of a polis. This meant that there did not exist a Greek nation, but only small Greek communities, spread over the Aegean sea and the battered coastline of its border, with colonies being dispatched far afield not only across the Mediterranean but also along the borders of the Black Sea. Indeed it is tempting to conclude that the long fractured coastline was conducive to trade and contact. The Greeks were not politically united, but of course they were so culturally, speaking the same language (with its inevitable dialectal

variations) and referring to everyone not speaking Greek as a barbarian¹. They did in the classical time display a united front against the encroaching Persian empire, which allowed their culture a brief high-summer of particular flowering, but later they exhausted themselves in internal strife and became an easy prey to the imperial ambitions of peripheral monarchy. One may say that the Greek suffered the same fate as many stars, they did not end in a whimper but in a big bang explosion as manifested by the brief Hellenic expansion under Alexander the Great. Of course Greek culture did not expire, what had been forged in the interior was spread around widely and still of course affect us today. What brought about the political decay of the Greeks, according to Kitto, was that the political structure based on the polis had its foundations undercut when life became too complicated and specialization followed suit inevitably. The polis could not exceed a certain size and its function depended on the active participation of the public, whose members needed leisure to perform accordingly.

What was the economy of a Greek polis? It is easy to think of the Greeks as an elite ultimately being supported by a great mass of slaves. Kitto will have nothing of that. Most Greek were simple farmers tilling the soil and maybe at the most being able to afford one slave or two. This does not differ essentially from say life in Sweden until recently, when a farmer had a maid and some assistants, who were not thought of as slaves, and had rights, but otherwise performed similar duties. Kitto also points out that while the slaves were deprived of political rights, it did not necessarily mean that they were socially looked down upon. There was no racial difference and due to the vicissitudes of life in the past, the fortunes of a man could vary considerably during his life time. At one time he could hold high office, maybe even being the head of a small state, only to suffer grief, become ousted sent into exile, maybe taken prisoner in a war and sold off as a serf. However, not all Greek city-states were the same, the Spartans in many ways did stand out. Spartan society intrigued neighboring Greek societies, even enlisting some admiration, because the harsh life style of the Spartans showed how much they submitted themselves to their laws. And laws to the Greek were different than those fashioned in the Roman tradition, to which we still are heirs. The great innovation of the Romans were to divorce law from morality, and reduce their function to a purely regulative one; while to Greek laws were moral entities and to follow the laws were to act morally. The Spartans differed from the other Greek states in the supreme importance it held the military life. In fact the citizenry were reduced to that of professional soldiers (which did not prevent them from occasionally being beaten on the field at the hand of amateurs) living on the proceeds of a slave class - the helots, engaged in agricultural produce.

What was the status of women in Greek society? It is not hard to conclude from extant writing that they were more or less invisible and thus probably led life of Oriental seclusion. Kitto very much opposes this view on the basis of his exalted opinion of the Greek. How could such a wise and curious race overlook their women, he explains rhetorically. He makes two important points. First that the literary bequest of the Greek is very much short on quotidian detail. Homer, as well as the latter dramatists, takes the everyday context for given and hence as uninteresting. They are concerned, as true Greeks, with

¹ The word originally did not have the disparaging sense it has later acquired, but was simply a more or less onomatopoeic expression to convey the unintelligible sounds of a foreign tongue.

the fundamental existential questions, and dispense with mere description. This is true, on the other hand Kitto allows himself to extract a lot of mileage from the few scraps of surviving texts, that might be seen as evidence for the contrary, to champion his own cause. Secondly, he makes the important point, that life for the Greeks was not centered around the individual but around the family, very much as it is still in the Third World today. That the male represents the family may be seen as a formality, internally the family power may have been as distributed as it is today. That women lacked the right to vote may thus be seen as of little consequence, because the man when he voted, he did not vote as an individual but as a representative of the family. It was the family that cast its vote. He also adds that in the same vein the lack of formal education of girls does not matter that much. Many children today pick up by osmosis the skills of reading and writing with no formal instruction, and there is no reason to assume that bright girls who wanted to read and write did not acquire the means of so doing. And besides in a society where books were very rare, the skills were not essential, what was essential was to take part in conversations².

The reasons we are really interested in the Greek is in fact not so much because of their daily lives, nor even of the example provided by their political activities, but the fact that modern science was born in ancient Greece. Classicists are not particularly equipped to appreciate those aspects of Greek life, although they are very eager and willing to acknowledge it with parental pride. Their concern is more with the arts, especially literature, epic as well as dramatic, and here Kitto displays his true love and fascination for the vanished culture. As to science, the most remarkable achievements of the Greeks were in mathematics. Every classicist worth his salt knows of course of the axiomatic method and has studied Euclid in his youth, and is prepared enough to appreciate simple number theory³ and thus able to understand to some extent the special, so to speak eternal quality of mathematics. Greek mathematics was of course not technically advanced⁴, but had fathomed basic principles still guiding modern mathematics. Popper in his musings on the pre-Socratics, sees the germ of true scientific principles already present, if poetically, in the daring hypothesis as to the nature of the world. The Socratic method, of always asking probing questions, and to take nothing for granted, is a further confirmation of this basic attitude, an attitude mixing curiosity with skepticism, daring guesses with sober doubt. The Greek quest of simplicity, as manifested by Parmenides and Plato, finds its most articulate expression in the dialogues of the latter⁵. The idea that the world of the senses, the one with which we are confronted, is not the real world, is a very potent idea, with strong religious implications.

Greek religion is a source of embarrassment for the student of the ancient Greek world. How could such a sophisticated race of people believe in such a primitive polytheist religion, where the gods are no better than the participants in a modern soap, carried away

² This is a bit disingenuous, because after all the need to be able to read is apparent even if there are no books to be read. Written messages must have been ubiquitous all over cities.

³ Kitto itself displays his amateurish forays not without some touching aspects

⁴ Still advanced enough that it would last almost two thousand years before mankind went beyond their achievements as happened in Renaissance Italy with the algebraic solution of the cubic

⁵ As Whitehead remarked, all Western Philosophy is in the nature of footnotes to Plato

by human emotions writ large, such as caprice and vengefulness and erotic passion⁶? The origin of the Greek religion is thought to be the result of the fusing of two quite different strands. On such matters speculation is unfettered. Kitto points out that the Greek gods are after all not omnipotent, they are subjected to the restraints of more fundamental principles. The God of Aristotle was an inspiration of medieval catholic philosophers, and Plato, or more specifically neo-platonism was a strong inspiration to the early Christians, with their emphasis on an immortal soul and a reality behind appearances. One should probably compare Greek religion to Hinduism, which also is littered with various deities, but which nevertheless allows a far more sophisticated interpretation and shows great affinities with Greek philosophy and Platonic forms. To get an idea of Greek life in its hey-day a visit to Indian temples may not be far afield. Old Greek quotidian life allows probably a most colorful affair, smiler to the variety and onslaught on the senses which characterize Modern Indian life. As has been recently noted, Greek sculpture was not in its present austere form, but vividly, maybe even gaudily painted, just as Hindi Gods and Goddesses today are brightly colored. Our conception of the Old Greeks is something that should be kept apart from what Greece once was. It is an idealized, in many ways fictional reconstruction of a vanished past into a present, to mildly paraphrase the definition of history due to Collingwood. Also Kitto remarks, our conception of the Greek mythology is in fact that of a mythology, that is degenerate religion paraphrased and parodied by a civilization in its decline.

Greek morality differs from Christian. The most notable difference being its rejection of meekness. The Greek did not offer the other cheek. Just as you should refrain from boasting and overstating your status and importance, you should never underestimate it. That too was an offense, in fact on par with the first. Justice and moderation were indeed the virtues of the Greek mind as was truth. You should not hide your own true value. To take revenge is frowned upon by believing Christians, not so by the Greeks. Revenge, if justified was a duty, a duty to your own integrity and dignity, and which you had no right to shirk. Pagan Greek virtues were of course not emphasized in classical study, but it fell to the lot of Nietzsche not only to point to them but also to champion them in defiance of a prevalent Christian morality, something which of course rejuvenated interest in the Classics, and may be seen as Nietzsches greatest contribution to modern thought.

The greatest and most important question to the likes of Socrates and Plato was not science but the pressing one as to how a life should be led. 'An unexamined life is not worth living' as Socrates pointed out. The question is still a most pressing one, but in recent centuries it has been side-stepped. Maybe, this is the major lesson of Classical studies and the source of its lasting fascination. The Greek are held up to us as ideals as how to live successful and satisfying lives. And what was that success and satisfaction based on? As we already noticed, the well-rounded life, in which specialization was avoided, and instead a man took active part in all the worthwhile activities of society, thereby taking full responsibility.

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⁶ I remember my own embarrassment as a child. How could they seriously believe in this?