

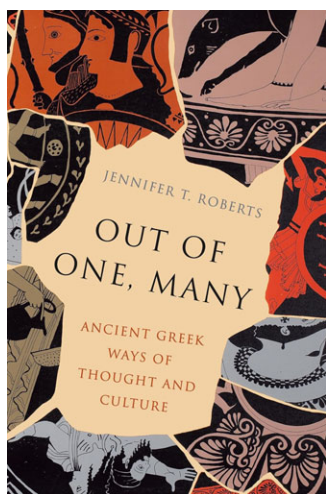
Book Review

Out of One, Many. Ancient Greek Ways of Thought and Culture

Roberts (J.T.) Pp. xviii + 439, ill., map. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2024, Cased, £30, US\$35. ISBN: 978-0-691-18147-9

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Jennifer Roberts' *Out of One, Many: Ancient Greek Ways of Thought and Culture* is an illuminating journey through the intellectual, cultural, and philosophical landscape of ancient Greece. Aimed at capturing both the unity and diversity of Greek thought, Roberts sheds light on the multiple facets that defined this ancient civilisation, from philosophy and politics to religion and art. For students exploring ancient Greek culture and society, this book provides an approachable yet insightful analysis of Greek

ways of thinking, making it a fitting resource for both introductory and intermediate-level study.

Roberts sets out to address a key paradox in ancient Greek civilisation: how distinct city-states with their own customs, laws, and values came to share a collective identity as “Greeks”. This question of unity in diversity is central to the book’s structure and thematic approach, making the text an excellent resource for students interested in cultural studies and classical history alike. By examining both the shared elements and the variations among Greek city-states, Roberts allows readers to gain a nuanced view of Greek civilisation that avoids oversimplification. This theme of “out of one, many” is a thought-provoking lens that encourages readers to reflect on the ways in which diversity and unity coexist within societies—a theme still relevant in today’s globalised world.

One of the book’s most accessible aspects for students is Roberts’ writing style. She successfully balances rigorous academic analysis with language that avoids excessive jargon, making her arguments clear even to those without a background in ancient

studies. For instance, when discussing Greek philosophical thought, Roberts breaks down complex concepts such as “eudaimonia” (the idea of human flourishing) and “logos” (reason or order) in a way that demystifies them without reducing their intellectual weight. By clarifying key Greek terms and ideas with precise explanations, Roberts opens a gateway for students to delve into Greek philosophy, an area that can often seem intimidating.

Moreover, Roberts does not confine her exploration to the most commonly discussed figures like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. She extends her discussion to pre-Socratic thinkers like Heraclitus and Pythagoras, whose contributions are often overlooked in broader surveys of Greek thought. For students, this inclusivity is invaluable, as it provides a more comprehensive view of the philosophical landscape and exposes them to the origins of ideas that later philosophers expanded upon. Through these discussions, Roberts demonstrates how a variety of thinkers, despite their differences, contributed to a shared Greek intellectual identity.

Roberts’ treatment of Greek political thought is another strength of the book, and it highlights the diversity among city-states. She contrasts the militaristic society of Sparta with democratic Athens, illustrating the ideological diversity that existed within Greece. For students, this comparison is particularly helpful, as it demonstrates that “ancient Greece” was not a monolithic entity but a tapestry of distinct, occasionally conflicting ideas about governance, society, and the role of the individual. This section is especially useful for students in political science or history courses, as it lays out the foundations of political thought that would influence Western philosophy for centuries to come.

In addition to her analysis of Greek philosophy and politics, Roberts provides a compelling exploration of Greek mythology and religion, which, for many students, is one of the most engaging aspects of ancient Greek culture. She interprets myths not simply as stories but as vessels for cultural and moral values, which offers readers a glimpse into the moral landscape of ancient Greece. Roberts explains how figures like Zeus, Athena, and Dionysus embodied traits that the Greeks both revered and feared, showing how these myths served to unify Greek cultural values despite regional differences in worship practices. For example, while each city-state might have its own patron deity, the pantheon of gods was broadly recognised, creating a shared religious framework that reinforced a common Greek identity. Roberts’ attention to detail here makes this section particularly accessible and enlightening for students with an interest in religious studies or mythology.

For students who want to explore ancient Greece beyond its intellectual traditions, Roberts’ book also addresses Greek art, architecture, and literature, giving readers a comprehensive look at Greek aesthetics and its cultural significance. She draws on examples like the Parthenon to discuss how Greek architecture reflected civic pride and the idea of *polis*, or city-state, which was central to Greek identity. Her analysis of Greek art and sculpture further reveals how these aesthetic pursuits reflected cultural values—especially the Greek emphasis on balance, proportion, and harmony, which were seen as manifestations of a well-ordered

society. For a student of art history or cultural studies, Roberts' insights provide a meaningful context for understanding Greek art as a reflection of philosophical ideals.

While *Out of One, Many* excels in many areas, students should be aware that the book is more thematic than strictly chronological. Rather than moving through ancient Greek history in a linear fashion, Roberts organises her chapters by topic, such as philosophy, politics, and religion, making each chapter a self-contained exploration of a particular aspect of Greek culture. For students accustomed to more chronological narratives, this structure might require some adjustment. However, this thematic approach also allows Roberts to dive deeper into each topic, offering students a rich and focused study that brings each aspect of Greek culture to life. Additionally, the thematic structure may actually serve as a helpful framework for students writing essays or research papers, as it breaks down complex subjects into digestible sections.

In terms of academic resources, *Out of One, Many* provides an extensive bibliography and a thoughtfully curated list of recommended readings that students will find valuable. Roberts includes both primary sources and secondary scholarship, giving students the opportunity to explore original Greek texts and modern interpretations. This scholarly apparatus is a significant advantage, as it allows students to expand their understanding of Greek culture by engaging with foundational texts, such as the works of Homer and Hesiod, as well as contemporary scholarship on the ancient world. For undergraduates in particular, this bibliography offers a manageable entry point into further study, serving as a guide for deeper exploration.

One area where the book could improve is in its inclusion of visual elements. While Roberts occasionally references specific

works of Greek art or architecture, the book does not include many illustrations or photographs, which could help students visualise the material culture she describes. For students, especially those new to the study of ancient Greece, images of artifacts, monuments, and ruins could provide helpful context and make the ancient world feel more tangible. However, this is a minor drawback in an otherwise well-structured and informative text.

Overall, *Out of One, Many: Ancient Greek Ways of Thought and Culture* is an excellent resource for students interested in the complexities of Greek civilisation. Roberts' balanced approach—blending accessible language with thoughtful analysis—makes this book suitable for both introductory and intermediate-level students. Her exploration of Greek thought, politics, religion, and art provides a thorough understanding of ancient Greece's intellectual landscape while underscoring the theme of unity amid diversity.

Jennifer Roberts has crafted a text that not only informs but also invites readers to reflect on the ways in which ancient Greek ideas resonate with contemporary discussions about identity, unity, and cultural diversity. This book is more than just an academic exploration; it's an invitation for students to engage with ancient Greece on multiple levels, making it a highly valuable addition to any classical studies curriculum. For students seeking a comprehensive yet accessible analysis of Greek thought and culture, *Out of One, Many* will provide both insight and inspiration, solidifying its place as a key text for understanding the enduring legacy of ancient Greece.

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