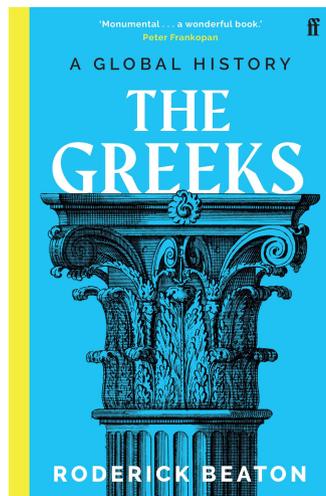


## The Greeks: A Global History

Beaton (R.), Pp xii + 588, maps, colour pls.  
London: Faber & Faber, 2021. Cased, £25. ISBN:  
978-0-571-35356-9

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This monumental work is a distillation of the life's work of one of the foremost scholars of Greece, ancient and modern. The 460 pages of text follow the Greeks from the volcanic eruption on Thera to Covid. This extraordinarily ambitious undertaking inevitably means a good deal of selectivity, but Beaton's command of the subject is authoritative, enabling a broad overview of events.

Beaton makes clear that this is not a history of 'Greece', indeed there was no such entity until 1821, and even

then the boundaries of the state created by the revolution were very different from what they are today. Nor strictly have there been people called 'Greeks' – at different times they have called themselves 'Achaiwoi', 'Romioi' or 'Hellenes', but never 'Greeks', at least not in their own language. So, this is a history of the speakers of the Greek language, and it is a global history because the Greeks, emerging from the Eastern Mediterranean, have at different times settled in many, often far-flung corners of the globe. The Greek language is one of only three (Chinese and Hebrew being the two others) with an unbroken written tradition of more than 3000 years. Beaton invites us to use this evidence to examine 'how identities are created, perpetuated, and modified or reinvented over time', helping us to understand the identities competing for influence in the world today.

The first six chapters cover the centuries from the emergence of the Mycenaeans to the battle of Actium, outlining historical events but also discussing literature and the arts. For me the most revealing chapter, Chapter 5 'Cultural Capital', puts into context the literature of Athens in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and points out the paradox that such a flowering of philosophy and rhetoric takes place when Athens has ceased to have political power. Beaton's focus on the broad sweep of history means that individuals do not always get the coverage we might expect – Plato's achievements are covered on two pages – whereas Isocrates is given more prominence because he 'redefined what it meant to be Greek' – not sharing ethnicity but adopting a way of thinking. Hence Isocrates foresaw the attraction of the Greek language, customs and the Greek way of doing things, which has had such a powerful effect over the centuries.

Chapter 7 covers Greece as part of the pagan Roman empire and continues to illustrate the effect of Greek culture on other nationalities, in this case the ruling Romans. The rise of Christianity is an important section in this chapter, in particular because the oldest Christian texts that we possess, the letters of St Paul, were written in Greek. The chapter concludes with the accession of Constantine and the founding of Constantinople, a city of huge importance for Greeks thereafter.

Chapter 8 'Becoming Christian 337–630' embarks on Beaton's coverage of the Byzantine empire, and so we leave the Classical world as normally studied by classicists in school and university. The waxing and waning of the power of Byzantium, the rise of Islam, the arrival of the Ottoman Turks and the spread of their empire – all these are covered in Beaton's clear and incisive style. By the time we reach Chapter 14 'European State, Global Nation 1833–1974' we have seen the birth of the nation of Greece for the first time. 140 years described in 40 pages will of course mean that events cannot be analysed and explained in detail, but I felt that the civil war of 1945–9 deserved more coverage. The final chapter 'New Ledgers, New Legends 1974–2021' (the title alluding to Chapter 1) brings us up to date with the financial crisis of 2010, the economic impact of Covid and the pressures of the arrival of refugees from the Arab world and elsewhere.

Is this a book for the school library? For those interested in the politics of the eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world, it is hugely informative and helpful. Members of staff would surely read it, and bright sixth formers – classicists, but also those wishing to understand the world today – would benefit from the insights shown here.

doi:10.1017/S2058631023000764

## What the Greeks Did for Us

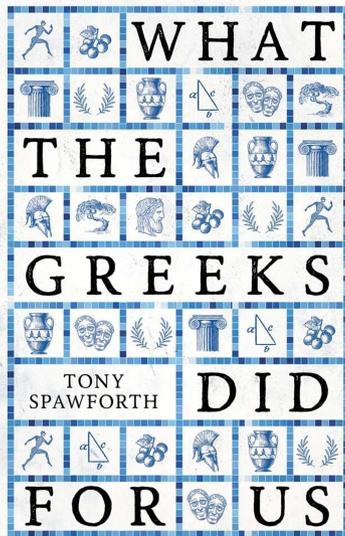
Spawforth (T.). Pp. x + 335, b/w & colour pls. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023. Cased, £20. ISBN: 978-0-300-25802-8

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'This book does not allow the concerns of elite culture to dominate content.' 'A role in shaping the cultural texture of everyday life and popular taste is a worthwhile measure of the enduring influence of ancient Greece.' These two quotations from Tony Spawforth's Prologue sum up his aim succinctly. His three introductory examples (which give an idea of the range within the chapters which follow) are a word like 'pandemic', the Freudian notion of the Oedipus complex, and a replica Parthenon in a Chinese theme park (as well as those in Bavaria and Nashville, Tennessee).

The scope of evidence is sensibly limited by Spawforth, defining the 'us' in the title as largely the Anglosphere and the time span as, in essence, the 400s and 300s BC. One of the delights of this book for me was the frequent autobiographical interludes which help, in his words, 'to leaven the loaf'.



He claims throughout that he is focusing on the ‘now’ but, as is inevitable, that means significant references to the intervening centuries. The Romans, as we know, were in thrall to Greek thought (e.g. Stoicism) and elements of entertainment (re-enactments of sea battles such as Salamis and drama and poetry based on Greek myth). To take examples of a more recent kind, there was the Spartan idealism of Nazi Germany and the Periclean instincts of Boris Johnson (ancient history now?).

Chapter 3 begins with a striking sentence – ‘Ancient Greeks were fascinated by male genitalia!’ This intriguingly leads to a discussion on ‘ethnic distinctions’ (the link being a vase painting depicting a circumcised Egyptian and an uncircumcised Greek). To give an example of the range of citations within just this one chapter, the following all get a mention: Naomi Campbell, J. Paul Getty, P.D. James’ Adam Dalgliesh, the American plantation owner William J. Grayson, *Dungeons and Dragons* and Cleopatra.

There follows a chapter on sex. Did you know that in 2018 3,000–4,000 gay women visited the island of Lesbos? The next chapter covers the plethora (a good Greek word!) of Greek words in English and the power of Greek rhetoric (Pericles inspires Lincoln at Gettysburg). There is an intriguing chapter entitled ‘Facts and Alternative Facts’. How ‘true’ is Thucydides’ history? Can you believe Herodotus (with a nice sideline on *The English Patient*)? The links to ‘fake news’ are clear.

‘Poetry Matters’ concentrates on Homer where it is obvious that his influence stretches to all kinds of societies and media. Amongst the more recent evidence Spawthorp cites 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, the video game *Assassin’s Creed Odyssey* and Margaret Atwood’s *The Penelopiad*.

Greek statues have a chapter to themselves. Nazi ideology and modern American white supremacists figure prominently. They lead on to an interesting discussion on the colour(s) of the statues. Colour is also discussed in a chapter on buildings. Among the advocates of classical architecture are King Charles III and, perhaps slightly more surprisingly, Donald Trump. It is probably difficult in small town America to find a courthouse or town hall that does not have a Greek temple-style frontage!

It won’t be a surprise that the author has plenty to say about the cinema and the small screen. Many will not be too familiar with the 1910 *The Death of Socrates* or the 1911 *The Fall of Troy* but will (along with children of today) have been delighted by the 1973 *Jason and the Argonauts*. Spawthorp has some fun with the ‘inaccuracies’ of *Alexander* but is quite impressed by the ‘visual stylishness’ of *300*.

And so to the Olympics, via the Much Wenlock games with its wheelbarrow race! Details discussed include nudity, female participation, amateurism and the abiding ‘obsession’ with games in most British and American schools.

The final chapter looks at the stage. It starts with no less than six pages on Isadora Duncan. The author goes on to point out that the

catharsis element of tragedy and the sort of messaging inherent in, for example, *Frogs* and *Lysistrata*, make Greek plays a continuing choice for modern-day producers.

This is an excellent book full of detail and analysis coupled with humour and anecdote. It seems suitable for all ages and for those whose knowledge of the ancient world is limited or even non-existent. There are 23 pages of notes and a page of bibliography, but both can safely be ignored by most readers.

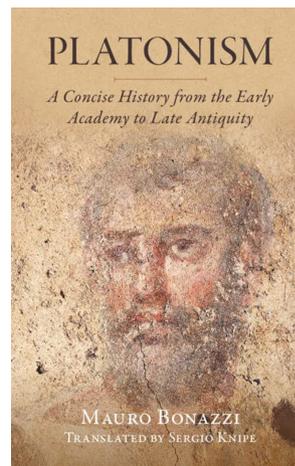
doi:10.1017/S2058631023000818

## Platonism: A Concise History from the Early Academy to Late Antiquity

Bonazzi (M.), Pp. xvi+233. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Cased, £30. ISBN: 978-1-009-25342-0.

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This short book undertakes the large task of showing how Platonism fared for the first thousand years of its existence. The book covers four main eras in four chapters: Plato’s times, the Hellenistic era, the development of Platonic thought under the Roman Empire, and the Neoplatonists.

Bonazzi reminds us throughout that Plato was not the dogmatic founder of a school expecting fidelity to his teachings. It thus makes little sense to see one ‘Platonism’ but rather a whole bunch of Platonisms all assisting

the great man’s enterprise rather than insisting on following his ideas to the letter. Running through this book is the constant tension between the dialogues as transmitted to us and the ‘unwritten doctrines’ (of the Monad and the Dyad, for example) which we hear of in Plato’s successors but which Plato himself did not commit to writing. Can we be sure what Platonism was even before the Platonists got their philosophical hands on it?

The second chapter takes this theme further in looking at how Platonism encountered Scepticism. Plato was no stranger to sceptical thought – remember Socrates’s dictum that he only knew his own ignorance and the aporetic conclusion to many of the dialogues. The imagery of the cave in the *Republic* should also alert us to the fact that (for Plato) full knowledge of the truth was not freely given without massive effort and would ultimately remain beyond our grasp. Different thinkers took the quest for truth in different directions, and Bonazzi spends a fair amount of space on Stoicism but much less on Epicureanism and Cynicism, even though Epicurean epistemology claimed to have solved the