

Travel back in time and explore
the amazing world of ancient Greece

The Ancient Greeks

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Stephen Batchelor

*Lecturer in Ancient History and
Classical Studies*

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The Ancient Greeks For Dummies

by Stephen Batchelor



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Stephen Batchelor has taught Ancient History and Classical Studies for a number of years to a wide variety of student groups and is currently Head of School for Creative and Visual Arts at Mid-Kent College. He has travelled extensively in the Mediterranean and worked there as an archaeological tour guide. He has written book reviews for *Current Archaeology* and *History Today*. *The Ancient Greeks For Dummies* is his first book.

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Introduction

When I think about it, I've always been interested in Ancient Greece but I spent a lot of my time not realising that I was. When I was very young I went to Cyprus on holiday and was fascinated by the ruined statues and mosaics. As I grew a little older I loved films like Jason and the Argonauts and Clash of the Titans that were endlessly repeated on television at Christmas. What I didn't understand was the 'Greekness' of these things. I knew that I liked the great stories and scary monsters but it was only when I got older that I realised that they were just a tiny part of the fascinating world of the ancient Greeks.

What interested me most was the fact that, despite the gap of over 2,000 years, the world of the ancient Greeks seemed very real and contemporary. They had the same concerns and problems as people do today and went about dealing with them in tremendously imaginative ways. The Greeks were hugely creative and although they lived in a world with a very dominant religion, they never stopped looking for new solutions to age old problems.

About This Book

Studying the ancient Greeks can be a bit frustrating because an awful lot of their story doesn't take place in Greece but elsewhere in the Mediterranean. The other big frustration is that Greek history isn't really a continuum. By that I mean that it doesn't start at Point X and finish at Y. The Greeks were a fractious bunch, always fighting amongst themselves and with other people, so tracing their story can get quite complicated!

It's worth the effort though. The most wonderful thing about the Greeks is the legacy that they left behind, which you can see, touch, and immerse yourself in. The huge amount of archaeological evidence that still survives is breathtaking. From massive buildings like the Parthenon in Athens to the tiniest coin, each piece of physical evidence reveals something interesting about the way the Greeks lived and what they did.

Another fantastic resource is the huge amount of written evidence that's survived; plays, poems, works of history, philosophy, science, medicine, and epic poetry that read like the plot of a Hollywood action film have all survived for over 2,000 years. Throughout this book I try to quote as much as possible from these original sources because it's always best to hear it from the horse's mouth!

This book introduces you to the world of the ancient Greeks - a world part bizarre, part visionary, and part bloodthirsty. It's not an attempt to tell you everything about the Greeks; more a way of getting started so that

you can carry on exploring their world - and there's enough to keep you going for the rest of your life!

Conventions Used in This Book

The two main issues when looking at any period of ancient history are language and dates!

The biggest of the two is language. The ancient Greeks used an entirely different alphabet to ours, and consequently the words seem strange and different, although a great many English words come from ancient Greek ones. To try to make things easier throughout the book I put any Greek word in italics. So, for example, when I'm talking about an elected official in ancient Athens I call him an *arkhon* because that's the word that the Greeks used.

You might find that in other books some Greek words are spelt differently (often using a c instead of a k) or that the author uses the proper Greek punctuation marks on words. Don't worry - it's still the same word but I choose to use the simpler version.

The other issue is using dates. Virtually every date that I use in the book has BC after it, meaning 'Before Christ'. That's because the bulk of ancient Greek history took place during the two thousand years or so before the

accepted date of Jesus's birth. (I go into more detail about BC and AD in Chapter 1). Of course, this is our dating system, not the one that the Greeks would have used.

Oh yes, one other thing - places. I mention place names all the time. In most cases you can find the places on the map on the Cheat Sheet at the front of the book. In the case of battles, the Greeks often fought in a big open space like a field or a beach, and they'd avoid fighting near towns if possible. Pinpointing these out-of-the-way places can be really difficult so I try to refer to the town nearest the battle.

Differences of opinion

One of the exciting things about history is that it is always up for debate. Answers are never 100 per cent right or wrong and interpretation (understanding the 'why' rather than the 'when') is the most important thing. You can probably expect to read some things in this book that seem to disagree with things you've read elsewhere. When you're dealing with events that took place over 2,000 years ago there'll always be differences of opinion, just as there'll always be new archaeological discoveries that completely blow older theories away. In a few years' time whole new schools of thought on many of the issues that this book discusses might emerge. I hope so, because that's what keeps history fun!

How This Book Is Organised

This book is split into five specific parts, all covering a different aspect of ancient Greece.

Part I: Travelling Back in Time

Part I is all about establishing who the Greeks were and where they came from, which isn't quite as straightforward as you might think - even the Greeks weren't sure! Modern historians have established that the really ancient Minoan and Mycenaean cultures were the forerunners of the ancient Greeks and I look at them in Chapter 2. After that comes the story of how the Greeks came into being and spread all over the Mediterranean. I also look at how they developed into such amazing warriors. It was just as well they did because the last chapter in Part I focuses on the wars with the Persian Empire when it seemed as if ancient Greece might actually be wiped out.

Part II: Athens to Alexander: The Rise and Fall of Empires

Part II is a fantastic rollercoaster of a story! It looks at the period of greatest Greek success following the Persian Wars and how the city of Athens became so wealthy and dominant. However, after a difficult period a new power emerged in the north: Macedonia. Under Alexander the Great the Macedonians went on tremendous military campaigns and built up an empire that stretched as far as India. This didn't last either, as after Alexander's death the empire broke up and new kingdoms emerged. The last chapter in this part deals with how the kingdoms fought amongst themselves until they all finally succumbed to the threat of the Romans. Ancient Greece was effectively at an end.

Part III: Living a Greek Life

So what was being an ancient Greek actually like? Part III looks at life in the towns and cities of ancient Greece from the food they ate to what sort of exercises people did at the gym, to what happened when people got divorced. I include specific chapters on theatre, art, architecture, and what life was like in the countryside.

Part IV: Mythology, Religion, and Belief

One of the things that people find most interesting about the ancient Greeks is the world of mythology. The stories about gods, heroes, and monsters were dominant themes throughout Greek life, influencing their plays, literature, and art. Religion was a major part of public life, full of strange and bizarre rituals. Part IV is all about these themes with a focus on how the Greeks lived their lives surrounded by these ideas and based a lot of what they did on examples from mythology.

This part ends with a look at the Greek philosophers, the men who challenged these beliefs in gods and monsters, and set out to make sense of the world using their own powers of logic and reason. They were an odd bunch but their ideas are fascinating!

Part V: The Part of Tens

This final part has four brief chapters intended to give you an idea of where to go next to further your experience of the ancient Greeks. I include chapters on places to go and books to read. Chapter 23 is all about Greek inventions – you’ll be surprised at some of the things that the Greeks came up with but they’re all true, promise! Chapter 25 is about interesting but slightly dodgy characters; the people in history who are worth a second look and a reevaluation.

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout the book I use a series of icons to capture your attention. I hope they’re as useful to the reader as they were to the writer!



As much as possible I try to use bits of what the Greeks actually said. Reading something first-hand is fascinating and the huge amount of writing that survives from Ancient Greece makes this easy to do.



Just like urban myths today, a lot of ‘facts’ about ancient Greece aren’t actually true. Occasionally I point them out with this icon.



This icon pinpoints important information to bear in mind when getting to grips with the ancient Greeks.

Some of the stories from ancient Greece are like the plots of Hollywood films and increasingly they are



being made into them. This icon means that I'm referencing a film you may want to check out.



Sometimes I include information that's interesting but not vital. This icon highlights more complicated stuff that you can skip over if you want to.

Where to Go from Here

You can start at the beginning so that you have the historical context before you start looking at how the Greeks lived their lives. Alternatively, you can start with Part IV, all about religion and mythology and where the Greeks considered that they came from. This is just as important to understand as the historical background.

Each chapter in the book is written around a specific topic so you can really dive in anywhere. If you want to know about Alexander the Great, go to Chapter 11. If Greek drama is your thing then Chapter 16 is the one for you. I include cross-references in the chapters so if something comes up that's mentioned in more detail elsewhere, you're directed to it.

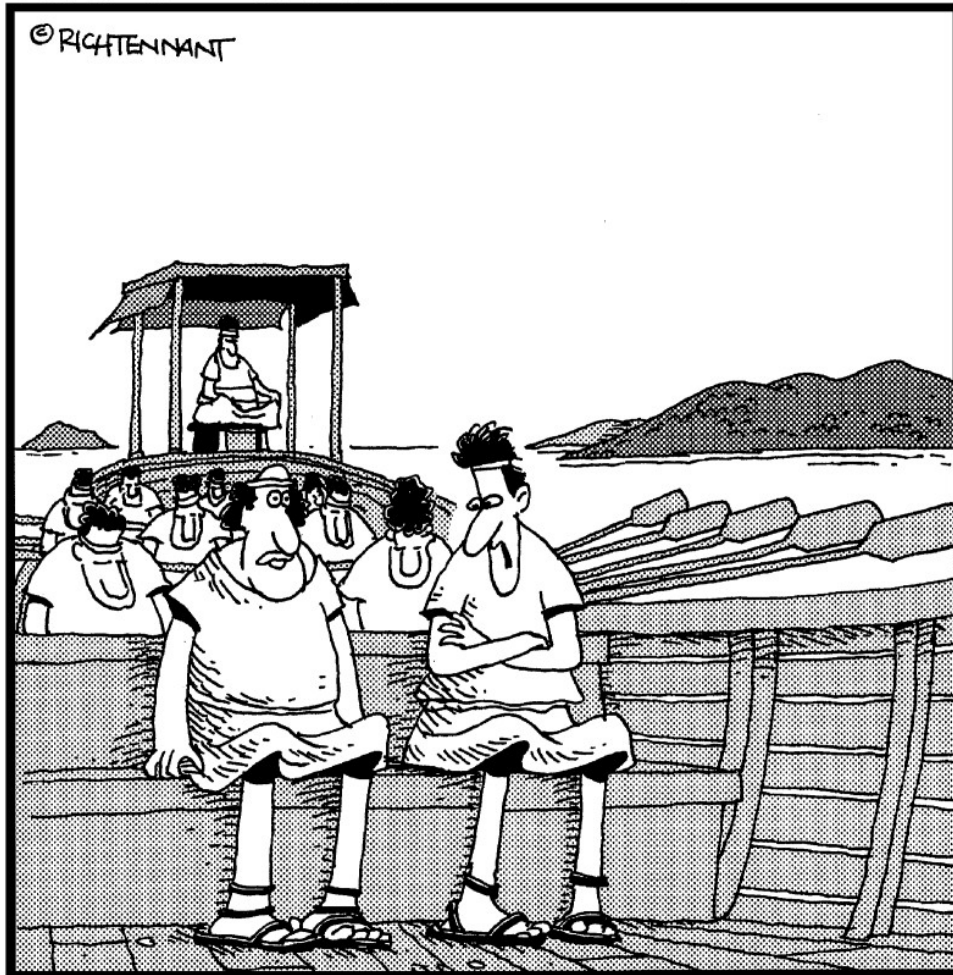
Whichever way you choose to enjoy the book, I hope you find it fun and interesting.

Part I

Travelling Back in Time

The 5th Wave

By Rich Tennant



“Well, that was just terrific! We pull up to shore, announce that we’re Minoans bearing the framework for civilisation, and you start eating houmous with your fingers.”

In this part . . .