

## BOOK REVIEW

*Introducing the Ancient Greeks: From Bronze Age Seafarers to Navigators of the Western Mind.* By EDITH HALL. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014. Pp. xxx + 306. Paper, \$16.95. ISBN 978-0-393-35116-3.

Like the proverbial guest speaker who “needs no introduction,” the reputation of the ancient Greeks precedes them—or at least it *would* have preceded them in almost any other era but our own. Unfortunately, because of technologically-fueled social change and the multiplicity of competing electronic stimuli, the public remembrance of history, ancient or even modern, has continued to diminish like the shrinking image in the rear-view mirror of an accelerating car.

In the last dozen years, three accessibly-written books have attempted to reverse this trend: Thomas Cahill’s *Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea: Why the Greeks Matter* (New York: Doubleday, 2003), Stephen Bertman’s *The Eight Pillars of Greek Wisdom: What You Can Learn from Classical Myth and History* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2007 [2003]), and, most recently, Edith Hall’s *Introducing the Ancient Greeks: from Bronze Age Seafarers to Navigators of the Western Mind*.

The chapters of Cahill’s book use experiential terms as subtitles to describe what the Greeks taught us: “how to fight,” “how to feel,” “how to party,” “how to rule,” “how to think,” and “how to see”. For his part, Bertman identifies and illustrates eight fundamental principles of Greek civilization: humanism, the pursuit of excellence, the practice of moderation, self-knowledge, rationalism, restless curiosity, the love of freedom, and individualism. Hall expands the number of principles from eight to ten: seafaring (echoing Cahill’s maritime metaphor for the Greek adventure), suspicion of authority, individualism, inquisitiveness, openness to new ideas, a sense of humor, competitiveness, a passion for excellence, verbal expressiveness, and a capacity for joy. Paralleling Cahill and Bertman’s approach, she explores each concept in a separate chapter, concluding with a consideration of Roman and Judeo-Christian values. Notwithstanding the striking thematic similarities of Cahill’s and Bertman’s books to her own, curiously Hall cites neither in her bibliography. Nor does she mention H.D.F. Kitto’s

older but perennially engaging book, *The Greeks* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1951, 1964; New Brunswick, CT: Transaction Publishers, repr., 2007).

Like Cahill's chapters, Hall's are arranged chronologically, matching the major periods of Greek history, beginning with the Mycenaean Age and ending with the coming of Christianity. Although the stated purpose of Hall's first chapter is to depict the nautical bent of the Greek mind, the author spends most of her time on dry land, pointing out how archaeological excavations have revealed the nature of Mycenaean society. In Chapter 2, Hall connects the emergence of the independent city-state and the subsequent rise of democracy to an inherent Hellenic distrust of autocracy. In Chapter 3 she depicts the age of Greek colonization as an age of individualism, not only in commercial ventures but also in the composition of personal poetry. The dawn of Ionian philosophy and history-writing, both products of the inquiring nature of the Greek mind, is outlined in Chapter 4. Chapter 5, Hall's longest chapter, "The Open Society of Athens," celebrates the habitual Greek openness to new ideas.

In successive chapters, the author discusses the Spartans, renowned for their "laconic" sense of humor (Chapter 6); the Macedonian kings, whose careers were rent by deadly rivalries (Chapter 7); the intellectual excellence nurtured in Alexandria by the Ptolemies (Chapter 8); the eminently articulate Greek authors who educated their Roman masters (Chapter 9); and the "hedonistic pagan Greeks" who were finally converted to Christianity (Chapter 10).

While Cahill's and Bertman's introductions are aimed at a popular audience not very familiar with the Greeks, Hall's is meant for a more sophisticated and knowledgeable one. Rather than focusing on the core values or sensibilities that defined Greek civilization and illuminating them with history, literature, and art, what Hall has done is write an elegant and erudite cultural history, highlighting along the way the chief ethnic traits she believes characterized each period.

Her narrative concludes with a note on sources and suggestions for further reading, and includes two maps, a timeline, and eleven half-page black-and-white illustrations.

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