

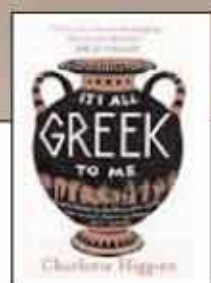
Stoics, cynics and the meaning of life

Stoics, cynics and the meaning of life Its language is now barely known, and only a few of the works produced by its great writers and thinkers survive, but ancient Greece's influence surrounds us. In these extracts from her new book, Charlotte Higgins assesses the culture's legacy

Zeus once let fly two eagles from the ends of the world: one from the east and one from the west. They soared high over oceans, mountains, forests and plains, until they met at the very centre of the earth, its omphalos, or navel. On this spot, a temple to Apollo was dedicated, the home of the Delphic oracle, where those who wished for insight into their past, present or future might come to consult the god. The questioner would be led into the temple's dark heart. In the gloom, the visitor would more sense than see the Pythia - the laurel-crowned woman who acted as the sacred conduit for the god's communications. In a trance, amid the heady fumes of burning laurel and barley, she would begin her utterances: divinely inspired fragments that the priests would interpret and fashion. But as the inquirer passed under the temple colonnade, before he stepped into the inner sanctum itself, he would have seen some letters carved into the portico: gnothi seauton - "know thyself".

It's *All Greek to Me* by Charlotte Higgins 304, Short Books, London, £12.99 Buy it at the Guardian bookshop This extraordinary challenge to achieve self-knowledge still rings out commandingly. It captures one of the things that is most exciting about ancient Greece: from the writings of its greatest thinkers and authors what stands out is an almost visceral need to question, to probe, to debate, to turn accepted opinion on its head - whether the subject of inquiry is the state of the human heart or the nature of justice.

The intellectual achievements of the ancient Greeks were quite simply extraordinary. They shaped the basic disciplines and genres in which we still organise thought: from poetry to drama, from philosophy to history, from natural history, medicine and ethnography to political science. We have been inexorably moulded by ancient Greece: the way we think about right and wrong, about the nature of beauty, goodness and knowledge; the way we conceive of what it is to be a mortal being amid the immensity of the universe; the way we talk about the past, and our ambiguous relationship with war; the way we discuss politics and citizenship. The tracks that lead back from our world to the Greeks' are narrow, meandering, sometimes virtually rubbed out or invisible - but they are there. What the Greeks did and said still casts light on what we say and do; by looking at the Greeks we can understand more about ourselves. The Greeks, in short, can



help us answer their own challenge of "know thyself".

The world of "ancient Greece" was certainly not confined geographically to the Greek mainland, nor was it a single entity. There were Greek settlements dotted all around the Mediterranean, from Marseilles in the west, to the coast of Asia Minor in the east. In fact, many of the most glamorous intellectuals of ancient Greece came from the coastline of what is now western Turkey. Nor is "Greece" (in Greek Hellas) a term that would necessarily have been widely understood. The Greek world was made up of hundreds of politically independent, often disputatious city-states, each with separate systems of government, locally distinct religious cults, even different calendars and names for the months of the year.

When we think of "ancient Greece", we tend to be drawn to just one of these hundreds of city-states, and at one particular time: Athens in the fifth century BC. This is perfectly understandable, as during its flowering of power between the routing of the Persians in 479 BC and its own crushing by Sparta in 404 BC, it was a magnet for writers, artists and thinkers from all over the Greek world, and the scene of the most exciting intellectual revolution that the world has ever witnessed. The Athenians have always made the most noise; and they left us an abundance of literary masterpieces, not least the great dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, written for performance at the Athenian festival called the City Dionysia. Still, it is best to remember that the Athenians weren't the only Greeks, nor were they even "representative" Greeks.

So, it is worth thinking about ancient Greece because it brings us a perspective on the way we live now, from our politics to our sense of history. And reading the Greeks is also a source of unbounded enrichment and pleasure.

But even more important than all this, perhaps, is the idea of "ancient Greece" not simply as a specific place or a time, but a realm where the imagination, the emotions and the intellect can roam free. We will never completely grasp ancient Greece. An enormous wealth of literature, art, architecture and other artefacts have survived but, for every survival, there are a thousand losses. We have 20 dramas by Euripides, but we know that his complete works numbered 90 plays. For Aeschylus, we have seven out of 90 extant. And for Sophocles, just seven out of 123. Works that were seen as masterpieces in antiquity are nothing but dust, ashes and the occasional quote in other texts.

For me, the writing of Plato acts as a

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wonderful metaphor for our relationship with ancient Greece. Plato did not write in the form of treatises; he did not propound theories, even. His philosophy is almost always written as dialogues between two or more speakers: its very form encapsulates disagreement, debate and provisional answers rather than unshakeable dogma. Incompleteness, as it were, is at its heart. In the same way, knowledge of ancient Greece is fugitive, fragile, difficult to grasp. When the mind travels to ancient Greece, it embarks on a quest - an idea CP Cavafy, the great modern Greek poet, put beautifully in his poem Ithaca, which takes the idea of Odysseus' homecoming:

When you set out for distant Ithaca,
fervently wish your journey
may be long, -
full of adventures
and with much to learn.

And, as we set out on that long but rewarding journey towards Ithaca, we

will come closer to answering that ancient challenge: gnothi seauton

Do you speak more Greek than you think?

Spartan

As in, "Tarquin, I know the minimalist look is right up your street, but don't you think the room looks a little Spartan with the actual floorboards removed?"

Simple, severe, lacking in comfort: that does in fact pretty much sum up what we know about the life of the Spartans. Despite its position as a Greek military superpower, the place had none of the kind of impressive architecture that would have overwhelmed the eye of a fifth-century visitor to Athens. Famously, Sparta also lacked walls or fortifications (it demonstrated that the inhabitants were such butch soldiers they didn't need nancy-boy walls to keep them safe). But being "Spartan" also meant adhering to a system of iron discipline, with boys taken out of their families for military training at the age of seven and, uniquely for ancient Greece, girls also given an education and athletic training - the better, presumably, to give birth to warrior sons. This was the background that produced the toughies who, vastly outnumbered, held off the Persians at Thermopylae, until all 300 were slaughtered. Dedication, bravery and suicidal bloodmindedness are thus also Spartan virtues.

Laconic

As in, "Darling, I know being a teenage boy is all about communicating in grunts, but if you could descend from your laconic monosyllables occasionally, I'd be terribly grateful."

Laconia was the region of the Peloponnese that Sparta controlled; "laconic" refers to another Spartan quality: a severe, economic, and sometimes dryly witty way with words.

Aegis

As in, "Don't worry, Henry, the animal care comes under the aegis of the National Donkey Protection League, which I am sure has impeccable standards."

Frankly, the aegis - a symbol of divine power - has always struck me as one of the weirdest things about the Greek gods. I can do no better than quote the Oxford Classical Dictionary, which describes it as an "all-round bib with scales, fringed with snakes' heads and normally decorated with the gorgoneion". (Gorgoneion being classicist-speak for the head of the Gorgon Medusa.) The aegis, the entry helpfully adds, may sometimes be tasselled. I have also heard it described as looking like a sporran.

Charlotte Higgins
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