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Humanising the ancients

Tom Payne welcomes an engaging celebration of the Greek civilisation that manages to be both an introduction and a reassessment



Introducing the Ancient Greeks
by Edith Hall

306PP, BODLEY HEAD, £16.99 (PLUS
£1.99 P&P) 0844 871 1515 (RRP £20,
EBOOK £11.99) ★★★★★

Imagine if you were writing a history of Europe over, say, the past 600 years. There would be a chapter on Spanish domination, then French, then British, with a long, reflective look at the land that

eventually became Germany. But then imagine you wanted to demonstrate that all these nations somehow represented a European character. Would we seem adventure-loving? Canny? Phlegmatic? Efficient? The question seems impossible to answer.

Edith Hall has set herself a question that's a little easier, but only just. Can we identify characteristics that are quintessentially Greek, and somehow consistent from the time Mycenaean civilisation emerged on the mainland (in the mid-16th century BC) to the point of no return for the Christianity that had ousted the Greek gods by the end of the fourth century AD? Yes, argues Hall, and she goes further, by offering 10 traits: these Greeks were seagoing, suspicious of authority, individualistic, inquiring, open-minded, witty, competitive, they prized excellence, they were

articulate, and loved pleasure.

Then she gives groups of Greeks a moment on the stage, in chronological order, and each takes it in turn to demonstrate one of these qualities. So the Mycenaeans are the pioneering voyagers; the Ionians are the inquirers, because quirks of their geography, such as rivers whose silt kept changing the coastline of Asia Minor, gave them plenty of phenomena

to explain; the Spartans represent the wit; Alexander the Great's Macedonians, with their internecine courts and endless power struggles, reveal the Greeks' competitive nature; and so on. The Athenians are special, it turns out – they demonstrate pretty much everything it means to be Greek.

She makes this new history of ancient Greece seem like a kind of concerto for orchestra, with different instruments picking up the big themes and handing them on to others. But Hall's writing is too naturally engaging for the book to be stuck for long with essay-like treatments of sometimes arbitrary ideas.

Yes, there are moments when she needs to make digressions – for example, Aristotle has to appear among the Macedonians, even though his writings can make him seem temperamentally Athenian – but the reader quickly comes to appreciate the sweep and scholarship of Hall's project.

One thing Hall does splendidly is introduce less appreciated

Greeks, and here, the search for the right souls to embody the characteristics can lead to rewarding shifts in emphasis. So she gives curmudgeonly Hesiod equal space alongside Homer; she throws a spotlight on the shrewd sceptic Xenophanes, about whom we read as much here as we do about Plato; there are 360-degree appraisals of Pythagoras, and the geniuses who were Eratosthenes (who was only 50 miles out when he calculated the circumference of the Earth) and Galen. These portraits are all the richer for the context Hall provides – it

deepens like an Ionian coastal shelf throughout the book.

So *Introducing the Ancient Greeks* pulls off the trick of being at once a genuine introduction, of the sort students will avidly welcome, while also providing timely reassessments of the Greeks for readers who thought they knew the ancients. From

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the start she wants to praise Greek achievement without making them seem like the only civilised people in the Mediterranean world – and as the author of *Inventing the Barbarian* (1989) she is quick to credit, for example, the Babylonians with discovering Pythagoras's theorem long



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before Pythagoras did.

One consequence is that the book is less beholden

than others to the notion that we owe our own civilisation almost exclusively to the ancient Greeks. Indeed, her book closes with lines that end up in the mouth of the Delphic oracle, as if the gods are writing themselves out of existence: "Apollo has no chamber any more, and no prophetic bay-leaves, / No speaking spring. The water that had so much to say has dried up completely."

It's an unusual end to a book celebrating the ancient Greeks – it makes them seem like a wonderful episode from the past rather than pioneers who bequeathed us so much. But throughout, Hall exemplifies her subjects' spirit of inquiry, their originality and their open-mindedness – she even finds good things to say about those artless murderous bastards, the Spartans. And in doing that, when the place of classics in our education system seems ever shakier, she reminds us of how civilising and humanising a study of the ancients can be.