

Honest Truth

Say the words “Ancient Greece” and you might think of the poet Homer but not, perhaps, its everyday people. Now their inner lives are uncovered in a new book by Professor of Greek William Furley. Here he tells Sally McDonald what made the Ancient Greeks tick.



What timescale did Ancient Greek civilisation span?

There was a vigorous culture in Bronze Age Greece already, but what we know as Ancient Greek civilisation spans roughly from Homer's Iliad in the eighth century BC, when writing was introduced, to the last works of classical literature in the fourth and fifth centuries AD, when Christianity replaced earlier religions.

How much territory did it cover and where was that?

It covered modern Greece plus a lot more. The Greeks colonised the East Aegean early and the western Mediterranean as far as Sicily and southern Italy. Then came the era of Classical Greece in the fifth and fourth centuries when individual city-states – in particular Athens but also Sparta, Corinth, Thebes, Miletos, Syracuse – flourished. In the later fourth century BC, the young Macedonian king Alexander The Great conquered huge new areas from Persia all the way to India, the Levant and Egypt. From then on what was known as Hellenism came to dominate the Mediterranean lands with Greek language and education setting the benchmark of culture.

What was the position of women?

Public life was dominated by men in Ancient Greece, on the battlefield, in law courts, education and theatre, etc. Particularly in Athens, women tended to manage the household. In Ionia and Sparta, however, women were more visible and publicly active. Nor were women in Athens all the same: married women's freedom was restricted but there was a large class of hetairai, who were in effect girlfriends who lived by befriending men and exchanging their talents, not only in bed but also in beauty, culture and the arts, for a living. In Greek myth, art and theatre, women easily hold their own against men even if social reality was different.

Were they into fashion?

Men and women wore similar items of clothing, though with different ornament. For both sexes we hear of under- and overgarments of wool, cotton and silk ranging from the long straight Dorian gown (peplos) to the sleeved Ionian dress (chiton) and a wrap draped around the body (himation), as well as shorter tops (chlanis) and military coats (chlamys). There were no fashion houses but there was appreciation of beautiful clothes, jewellery and hairstyles like today. Finery was linked to wealth, and display was admired except by the dour philosophers, who praised abstinence.

War, politics, slaves and parties: The lives of the Ancient Greeks



Ancient Greeks enjoy a party with music and good food.

How did the Greek state work?

Manufacturing ranged from cottage industry to quite large units mass-producing arms but manual labour, mining for example, was the burden of the huge slave population of an ancient city. Slaves were either Greeks or, predominantly, foreign neighbours captured in warfare and sold on the slave market. Children were born into slavery and freedom was a boon granted by the slave owner, not a right. The upper classes, ie the landowners, did not work but were active in politics, public office and the judiciary. War remained a vital source of income, but trade, too, both local

and international, thrived, mainly by cargo boats plying the seas. The state took tithes (10%) of goods and produce.

And government?

Early on, monarchies ceded to the so-called tyrants in the sixth century BC, who, in turn, were ousted by more collective systems. Famously, Athens developed full-blown democracy with policies being decided by debate in the Assembly and Council, leading to the explosion of rhetoric as a skill required of an educated man, whilst other states, such as Sparta and Thebes, restricted power to the few. In Athens, the factions were not so

much political parties as social classes: put simply, the nobles against the tradesmen.

How and why did they party?

Men had drinking parties, either in private homes or public houses. They reclined on couches, drank wine mixed with water and enjoyed entertainment by women artistes. Women socialised at funerals and women's festivals. Partying was a celebration of the wine god Dionysos. Greeks also celebrated key moments such as marriages and births, coming of age, successes and a voyage survived. Worshippers of the healer-god, Asklepios, celebrated his miracle cures.

What were their favourite entertainments?

Lyric poets sang to the lyre, chorus lines danced to music, and tragedies and comedies were staged. Sport played a huge role, especially at the pan-Hellenic Olympic and Pythian Games. Educated men and women also read in private and the novel was born, usually focusing on romance and adventure. One even ventures as far as Scotland, entitled The Wonders beyond Thule.

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