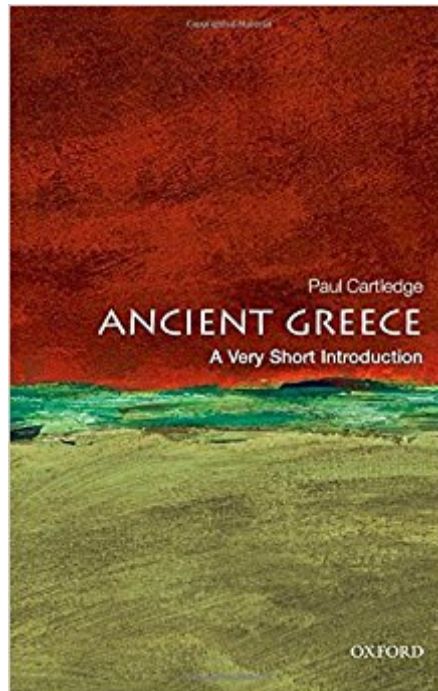




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Ancient Greece: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

This highly original introduction to ancient Greece uses the history of eleven major Greek cities to illuminate the most important and informative aspects of Greek culture. Cartledge highlights the role of such renowned cities as Athens (birthplace of democracy) and Sparta, but he also examines Argos, Thebes, Syracuse in Sicily, and Alexandria in Egypt, as well as lesser known locales such as Miletus (home of the West's first intellectual, Thales) and Massalia (Marseilles today), where the Greeks introduced the wine grape to the French. The author uses these cities to illuminate major themes, from economics, religion, and social relations, to gender and sexuality, slavery and freedom, and politics.

Book Information

Paperback: 216 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (November 10, 2011)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0199601348

ISBN-13: 978-0199601349

Product Dimensions: 6.8 x 0.6 x 4.4 inches

Shipping Weight: 5.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.7 out of 5 stars 25 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #233,833 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #227 in Books > Reference > Encyclopedias & Subject Guides > History #231 in Books > History > Historical Study & Educational Resources > Reference #265 in Books > History > Ancient Civilizations > Greece

Customer Reviews

Cartledge, professor of Greek culture at the University of Cambridge, has created an intriguing overview of Greek history by providing synopses of 11 key city-states, each representing a different facet of Greek life and culture, such as politics, gender, and philosophy. Beginning with the earliest example of the successful polis, proto-Greek Cnossos on the island of Crete, and continuing through the near-mythical city of Mycenae; Argos; doomed Miletus; Massalia (present-day Marseilles), the first of the great Greek colonies; and through to the rise of laconic Sparta, it is easy to trace the development of Greek civilization. Classical Greece is examined in the descriptions of Athens, Syracuse, and Thebes. The description of Hellenic Alexandria is symbolic of the transition of the classical period into the Hellenistic age. A final discussion of the polis of Byzantium notes the decline of city-state independence. A list of significant individuals, a glossary, and a time line are

beneficial. Other than labeling Athens, Ga., as that state's capital in comments on the proliferation of Greek city names throughout the world, errors are few. 20 b&w illus., 4 maps. (Jan.) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Review from previous edition: "Paul Cartledge, Cambridge don and doyen of Classicists, once again shows why he is the surest and most engaging guide to the ancient world. Ancient Greece: A history in Eleven Cities is a tremendously readable tour d'horizon that goes far beyond Athens and Sparta to explore the roots of Greek civilisation." --Justin Marozzi, Evening Standard 21.11.09 "Paul Cartledge has here pulled off a remarkably clever feat of compression and organization, and will once again place very many readers in his debt. Brilliantly carried through." --Simon Hornblower, co-editor of The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization "A wonderfully concise - and witty - introduction to an ever-popular subject." --Sir John Boardman, co-editor of The Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World "A rare work, a compelling historical narrative that is also a useful guidebook" --Peter Stothard, Wall Street Journal 8/5/2010 "Cartledge's success lies in his ability to negotiate a path between similarity and difference; with proper scholarly detachment, he stresses how different the Greeks were; with an eye to broader historical trajectories, he reflects on the grounds for their continuing fascination." --Tim Rood, Times Literary Supplement 11/06/2010 "A rare work, a compelling historical narrative." --Peter Stothard, Wall Street Journal 08/05/2010 "Thoroughly stimulating book." --Tom Holland, BBC History 01.12.2009 "Cartledge is master of his subject." --Peter Jones, Literary Review 01/12/2009 "Paul Cartledge... once again shows why he is the surest and most engaging guide to the ancient world." --Justin Marozzi, Evening Standard 29/11/2009 "A tremendously readable tour d'horizon that goes far beyond Athens and Sparta to explore the roots of Greek civilization." --Justin Marozzi, Evening Standard 19.11.09

For a book of such brevity, this is a remarkably full accounting of the Ancient Greeks. As Cartledge observes, ancient mainland and Aegean Greece included over 700 individual city-states (poleis), as well as hundreds more Greek colonies and trading-posts along the rims of the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Thus it is salutary that Cartledge chooses to approach ancient Greek history through the technique of considering 11 representative Greek city-states in 11 successive chapters, and an Epilogue. This is appropriate, as the polis remained the fundamental unit in over two millennia of Greek History, even when under the later hegemony of such Great Powers as Macedon, Rome, and Constantinople. The poleis Cartledge chooses are as follows: Prehistory: Cnossos (on Crete) and

Mycenae; Dark and Archaic Ages (ca. 1000-500 B.C.): Argos, Miletus, Massalia, and Sparta; Classical Period (500-330 B.C.): Athens, Syracuse (on Sicily), and Thebes; Hellenistic Age (ca. 330-31 B.C.): Alexandria; and, finally, Byzantium (later Constantinople and Istanbul). As Cartledge makes clear, this list of necessity leaves out many other worthy contenders such as a Black Sea settlement (though Byzantium is on the narrows of the Bosphorus, which lead into the Black Sea); the significant North African city of Cyrene, on the eastern Libyan coast (though Alexandria is later placed some 400 miles east, on the coast of the western Nile Delta); or a city of Magna Graecia (mainland Italy), maybe Cumae, on the Bay of Naples. Through the cities Cartledge DOES choose, he is well-able to narrate the history of Ancient Greece, including the Minoans on Crete; the Mycenaeans on Crete (after 1400 B.C.) and the mainland (Mycenae, Argos) who used Linear B, (deciphered as the earliest known written form [ca. 1400 B.C.] of Greek by Michael Ventris in 1952) mainly for taxation and inventory purposes; colonization; the rise of tyrants; the Greco-Persian Wars (ca. 500-479 B.C.); the Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens (431-404 B.C.); the ascendancy of Thebes (early 4th c. B.C.); the rise of Macedon (ca. 338 B.C.); and the coming of Rome (2nd c. B.C.). Professor Cartledge's mind is clearly brimming with a lifetime's learning, and he ranges with alacrity across this sweep of time and geography. This is the first book by Cartledge that I have read, and I quite enjoyed it. He has an engaging style, often leavened by humor. As the book was published in 2009, Cartledge is able to incorporate the most recent scholarship, often archaeological. We learn that a Linear B tablet was found at Thebes with a word that looks like "Lakedaemon," the southwestern region of the Peloponnese which includes Sparta, and is mentioned frequently in Homer as the home of Menelaos, King of Sparta, original husband of Helen (later "of Troy"). No Mycenaean palace (as would have housed King Menelaos), has yet been found in Lakonia, but recent surface finds of Linear B fragments in the vicinity of Sparta offer tantalizing prospects. Also, in Athens, the recent tunneling for the new subway uncovered mass graves, probably from the plague that swept Athens in 430-29 B.C. and took the life of Pericles (builder [and rebuilder] of the sacred structures on the Athenian acropolis) and countless other Athenians. In his narrative, Cartledge notes some interesting facts. He states that Sparta was by far the largest Greek polis in terms of land area, followed by Syracuse, and Athens/Attica in third place. He mentions that at the height of its "Athenian Empire," (ca. 440 B.C.) Athens was collecting 1,000 talents a year from its "allied" poleis, an huge sum not to be equaled by a Greek power until Alexander the Great pillaged the seemingly limitless wealth of the Persian Empire after 331 B.C. Cartledge also makes the important point that, to the "Old Greeks" in the eastern homelands, the colonies of Sicily, Italy, and the western Mediterranean, represented the "Golden West:" a region of rich agricultural lands

and favorable settlement sites. Indeed Sicily, known as a breadbasket and land of sumptuous local coinages, exerted a powerful pull on the Athenians' imagination; and fantasies of riches led to the Athenians' ill-fated Sicilian naval expedition in 415-13 B.C. This horrific defeat at Syracuse planted the seeds for the Athenians' final defeat by Sparta in 404 B.C. Cartledge brings the narrative full-circle by ending with Byzantium. Originally founded as a colony of Megara (on the eastern coast of the Isthmus of Corinth) in 688 or 657 B.C, Byzantium controlled the trade-routes to the rich grainlands of today's Ukraine and south Russia. Constantine moved his main capital from Rome to Byzantium (renamed "Constantinople") in 324-30 A.D. Here Latin was the official language until the reign of Justinian the Great (527-65 A.D.). Later, as the capital of the "Byzantine Empire," (through 1453 A.D.) the inhabitants spoke Greek, but continued to call themselves "Romans." To me, Cartledge's book is a compact but rewarding read. However, as some other reviewers note, it may not be the ideal introduction to someone who knows very little about Ancient Greece. If you paid attention in a decent college survey of Ancient Greek History, much of the book should be familiar. But if there are too many names and places coming too fast, I would suggest reading Cartledge's "Ancient Greece: A History in Eleven Cities" along with H.D.F. Kitto's "The Greeks" (1951), or Moses Finley's "The Ancient Greeks" (1964), both short treatments that will further flesh out the details. The maps in Cartledge's book are quite good, and there is a helpful Glossary, Who's Who, and suggestions for further reading. All in all, a very good book.

While reading this book I went through excitement at first, to boredom second, and finally to annoyance that the book would not end already. Considering that it is an extremely short book that could easily be read in one day, that is not saying much for it. I am not sure who the target audience of this book is. If I had to guess, it is for people with a mild interest in Greek history, but who don't really have the time or desire to dig too deeply into it, and who might choose to read while on an airplane, or on the subway, or something like that where they have little choice but to sit still for a while. I am not a fan of Dr. Cartledge's writing style. I have read his book on the Spartans, and his biography of Alexander the Great (which I am reading for a class), and it is fairly consistent from book to book. It usually has long sentences that seem to run on, full of strange place names or obscure people. He also tends to go on tangents a lot. For example, his chapter on Alexandria was talking about the assassination of Philip, the Seleucids, the Battle of Cannae, and finally ended with the stoning of Hypatia. There was some Alexandria in there, but not much. On the positive side, the organization of the book is chronological, from pre-history, to Archaic, to Classical, to Hellenistic, and he does this by highlighting the cities that were in ascendance during these particular time

periods. Also, there are a few interesting facts or bits of knowledge that even veterans might gain. For example, I always thought Miletus was an island, but it turns out it is actually on the mainland of Asia Minor. I guess it's good that people do write these introductory level books, so that everybody has access to the ancient Greeks.

I've come to appreciate the "Very Short Introduction" series as they are usually very informative and well written. I can't quite put my finger on it, but I found this book much less enjoyable to read. Cartledge organizes his book by 12 cities, each representative of a period or place in ancient Greek history. I think I would've preferred the more traditional narrative that moves forward in time. Nevertheless, that structure still could've worked for me but for the writing. I found it tedious. He loves his subject, and loves throwing in Greek words that no-one else would know, in the process forgetting that this is a "short introduction" designed to appeal to a broader audience than he normally addresses.

Most of us (including me) have only the haziest idea of what ancient Greece was like. This book takes an unusual approach, made up as it is of profiles of several of the individual city states. Many of them are well known, such as Athens, Sparta, Thebes, and Alexandria, some of them less so. Because of the restricted length of this series of books, none of the profiles is heavily detailed, but I suspect most people will find that fine. Recommended as background for those reading the ancient Greek literature.

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