

## Chapter III

### Classical World

#### Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome– An Overview

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The history of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome goes back to the Bronze Age, though these two people developed in different ways. In the Aegean, it is possible to see the development of two civilizations – the Minoans and the Mycenaeans, whose wealth came both from agriculture and commerce. The paintings remaining from these civilizations, frescoes and ceramics, tell us how different they were. In Knossos they were about nature – plants, animals, fish, dolphins or octopus and are almost everywhere – while in the mainland they represented mostly war scenes. But they also show their fineness and their way of living: the elegance of the ladies, with their jewels and their stylish hairdressing; or the relevance given to the gods.

We have an even better knowledge of these people after the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Since then, the Greek city-states developed in different ways: politically, while cities, like Sparta, kept their kings, some other, like Athens, evolved into a democracy; at the same time, there were other cities ruled as tyrannies or oligarchies. Socially and economically, some evolution took place too, due to the development of their trade in the Mediterranean. In the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, Sparta and Athens were the main cities in Greece – Sparta well known for its military power and Athens for its sea empire, with a strong navy.

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Interestingly, none of the Greek cities ever built an empire, in the political sense of the word, even if in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE they founded colonies along the Mediterranean basin. These colonies were independent cities, and their contacts with their metropolises were mostly commercial, though they could ask for their help, whenever they felt in danger. This is strongly connected with the importance Ancient Greeks gave to freedom, both in a personal and a public sense. If we believe that they defined themselves by comparison with other people with whom they were in contact, we can see how proud they were for not being subject to any man, but being all equal towards the law, giving them a real sense of freedom. Also, their organization in cities politically independent from each other was a sign of their freedom. Whenever a city became too powerful, this was felt as a danger by the others, as if it could overcome the other cities. This happened in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE when Athens economic empire was felt like a threat by Sparta and other cities in the Peloponnesian League, resulting in the longest war affecting the Greek cities – the Peloponnesian War. When it ended, after 28 years, they were too feeble to face the new Macedonian king – Philip II, who was looking forward to a more prominent role in the Balkan Peninsula. After their defeat in Chaeronea (338 BCE), the Greeks tried to regain their independence after Philip's death. Yet, Alexander subjugated them, before he departed to Asia Minor, thus initiating the conquests that led to one of the largest empires in Antiquity. Alexander's death put an end to these conquests and, politically, to his empire. Though for some time his generals – the Diadochi – gave the impression that they wanted to keep the conquered territory under their control, soon the rivalry between them led to the division of the empire into three principal monarchies that lasted until Roman rule: the Ptolemies in Egypt, the Seleucids in Asia, and Macedonia also dominating over the Greek city-states.

Yet, if politically they were independent kingdoms, culturally, Alexander's conquests resulted in a larger open world, where being Greek depended on being, or not, educated.

It is time, now, to talk about the other power in the so-called Classical World.

Founded by the Tiber, Rome became the head of one of the largest empires of ancient times<sup>2</sup>. According to the legend, the place was chosen by Romulus and Remus to celebrate the place where they were found and fed by the she-wolf. Yet, long before that, the site was considered essential for the trade with the mountaineers, namely the salt one (thus the Via Salaria, the road going from Rome to Castrum Truentinum, on the Adriatic coast), as the river was an easy way of communication; it was also a favourable region for cattle breeding.

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<sup>2</sup> Polybius mentions it more than once in his *Histories*. In I.1 he says 'There can surely be nobody so petty or so apathetic in his outlook that he has no desire to discover by what means and under what system of government the Romans succeeded in less than fifty-three years in bringing under their rule almost the whole of the inhabited world, an achievement which is without parallel in human history.', which he stresses in VI.2.

Besides, strategically, its location was easily defensible. Therefore, by the middle of the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, it became clear that it was the best place for the new city.

The history of Rome is one of struggles and battles. Surrounded by other people, its inhabitants soon realized the importance of alliances with their neighbours, which wasn't always easy, leading them to fight and expand their territory. But internal fights are equally relevant. For over two centuries Rome was a monarchy, first with a rotation between Roman and Sabine kings, then with Etruscan kings. The ruthlessness of Tarquinius Superbus led to the abolition of the monarchy. The system of government after the monarchy, the Republic, established rules to prevent the return of any king. During this period, Rome initiated its conquests ruling not just most of the Mediterranean basin, but also the Western and Northern Europe. The Republic lasted for over four centuries. But internal quarrels led to the civil war and, after Caesar's murder, Augustus, his nephew and heir, became Rome's first emperor. With him began a system of government that, even if under different names, lasted in Europe for centuries, until the French Revolution.

It is possible to see in this brief description a vast difference between Rome and the Greek city-states: the way they were organized. While Greece was divided into several city-states, each of them with their specific constitution, Rome became the head of an empire, ruling over most the world known at the time. This had consequences on the development of these people and their cultures, as we are about to see.

## Cultural development in Greece and Rome

As we tried to show above, these two powers in the Mediterranean basin evolved in different parallel ways. In common, they had the fact that they spread around the Mediterranean, looking for the supplies to their needs. Yet, they did it differently, the Romans imposing his power more consistently.

Greek culture goes back to Minoan times. But from the Minoans and the Mycenaeans, all we have are paintings and utensils. In the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, the alphabet enabled the development of poetry and other literary genres. It begins as a succession of poetic genres, first with the Homeric poems, followed by Hesiod and several other poets in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE. This is almost the same as saying that the sequence begins with epic poetry, followed by didactic poetry, elegy and lyric poetry. These poems focus on the humankind and its relationship with the surrounding world, including the gods. The Homeric poems describe the man and his values: the warrior, in the *Iliad*, with qualities that would be relevant in the centuries to come for the citizen with his responsibilities towards his city-state; Odysseus, in the *Odyssey*, is simultaneously the resourceful man, able to find a solution to any situation he falls himself into, and the curious man, looking forward to acquiring more knowledge, travelling in unknown places that he tries to discover. Female are no less important in both poems: seductive, powerful, mourning, intelligent; each one has something to accomplish in the poems. Hesiod emphasizes the importance of justice and work to fight corruption. Elegy and lyric have different concerns, focusing on several feelings: suffering, love, joy, human life, fate, old age are just some of them.

These poets are from different places (e.g. Ionia and Lesbos), using different dialects (e.g. Ionic and Aeolic), which means that Greek literature emerged in its eastern territories. The first philosophers were also from Ionia.

The 6<sup>th</sup> century and the beginnings of the 5<sup>th</sup> century saw a shift to the West, namely to Magna Grecia, where the Syracusan tyrant was favourable to culture and literature, surrounding himself with poets. Only during the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Athens acquired cultural relevance. In this period, coexisted different literary genres: history, philosophy, tragedy, comedy, lyric poetry, among others. The man was still the central topic, but now as a member of the city, he was raised to serve. Even myth was used by poets to stress the problems affecting the humankind.

When Ptolemy I Soter reigned over Egypt, he decided to develop Alexandria as a new Athens, and so did his successors. The Museum and the Library, on the grounds of the royal palace, testify to this. These monarchs also surrounded themselves by a group of *philoi* (friends) of the king – writers, mostly poets, writing in Greek. With this, they meant to present themselves as protectors of arts and culture. But this politics also favoured the importance of Alexandria as a cultural centre, where it was possible to meet doctors, geometers, poets, philosophers and artists. Alexandria was a vivid metropolis, full of life

and culture. New poetic genres developed there, as the epigram or the bucolic poetry: different times, different ways of living, different literary themes. The city-state and the duties of the citizen were not important anymore. Literature, following the new philosophical doctrines, turned itself to the individual and what affected him. Menander's comedy presents a vivid description of Athenian life in these times: lost children, people travelling around, personal issues over the public ones.

In short, for eight centuries literature evolved from a creation that tried to present explanations to men, teaching values essential for the life in society, to a more individual one, offering knowledge as well as leisure.

As it happened with the literature, so it happened with art. Though we can see it both with painting and sculpture, the last one offers us more examples of this development. With its scope on the human figure, either men or gods, it evolved from a static representation to the beauty of the movement: gods and goddesses, athletes, warriors, female figures they all represent the beauty of the human figure – proportionated, strong, healthy. Later, in the Hellenistic Age, there is a shift in this representation: statues like *The Dying Gaul*<sup>3</sup> or *Laocoön* (Vatican Museum) depict the human suffering; the *Crouching Venus* (British Museum) together with some statuettes (which can also be seen in the British Museum), represent the daily life, combining deformity and ugliness with beauty.

In Rome, things evolved differently, as the Romans felt the need to stabilize their situation in Italy and the Mediterranean. Therefore, the first written literary work dates from the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, and it is a translation of the Homeric *Odyssey* in the Saturnian metre. The Greek hexameter would be introduced later that century by Ennius in his *Annales*. The Punic Wars originated a hostile reaction against the Greeks and their culture. Some, like Cato, criticized the study of Greek writers and wanted to expel the philosophers from Rome, defending the Roman culture. Yet, Scipio and his circle changed this situation, pointing out the importance and refinement of Greek culture, namely Stoic philosophy. Latin literature and art followed the tracks of Greek culture. Yet, despite some tradition that pretends the Romans did nothing more than imitating the Greeks, Roman literature has an excellent level of originality.

One of the fields where this originality is noticed is mythology. Despite the acceptance of Greek gods and their legends, Romans developed their historical legends. And in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, authors like Vergil and Livy use this same mythology to celebrate Augustus, presenting him as a descendent of Venus and Mars, coming to establish peace and prosperity.

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<sup>3</sup> As many others, this statue is known to us through the Roman copy of the Hellenistic sculpture, that is in the Capitoline Museums (Rome).

## **Roman and Greek Studies**

Greece is often referred to as the cradle of European civilization. But if the Romans spread the Greek culture in Europe, it arrived in several other places in the world, due to the European expansion since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Together with Christianity, it reached distant regions that ancient Greeks never thought of. This is one of the reasons that justify the study of Greek and Roman civilizations. The knowledge of the past contributes to the understanding of the future. And when we talk about a civilization focused on the human being, not just as an individual, but also in its relationship with the rest of the surrounding world, this knowledge becomes even more relevant.

When we talk about the study of Greek and Roman civilizations, we are talking about two different things: the study itself and its reception. A description of what has been and still is the study of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome would be exhaustive and too long to do it here. Let us just enhance that it comprises several independent fields, like History, Linguistics, Literature, Philosophy or Religion, just to keep with the traditional ones. Gender studies, social studies, and many others that had developed in the last decades have a rich and interesting field for research in the so-called Classic Civilizations.

One aspect should be noted in this respect, and it concerns the way the Hellenistic Age has been considered. For a long time, scholars dedicated themselves to the Archaic and the Classical Ages. The period following Alexander conquests was thought as one of decadence, thus not representing the ideal of Greek measure and perfection. The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century marked a shift on this, and the amount of studies about the Hellenistic World is increasing.

As to the studies on the reception of Greek and Roman culture, we should point out some stages. And in these, I am going to start with the translation of the texts, though usually, it is not a subject included in this topic. The edition and translation of ancient texts is one of the most relevant aspects on the study of ancient Greece and Rome. The more accurate they are, the best will be our knowledge of the civilizations they describe. Yet, when we think of Chapman's or Dryden's translation, for instance, we realize how their poetic vein influenced their English version of Homer.

Clearly, the most usual studies on reception are those on how ancient authors influenced writers and poets. This influence can be found in the recurrence to the same topics or figures, the language, the influence of some philosophical doctrines, or adaptations of works or subjects. Going back to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century Portugal, we may mention a poem by António Ferreira – “Amor fugido de Mosco” (Fugitive Love by Moschus). As the title indicates, the author is closely following Moschus’ poem ‘The Runaway Love’. The Portuguese poet describes the same situation – Venus (or Cypris) concerned after Cupid (or Eros) run away. The child is depicted in the same way in both poems, though Ferreira insists on the mother’s suffering and concern.

The mention to classical figures – gods, heroes, either real or mythic – is a usual resource for several authors. Luís de Camões does it, in *The Lusíads*: gods, like Venus or Dionysus, appear in the poem as well as the mythic Odysseus or the very real Alexander and Trajan. But Camões did even more – he wrote his epic poem following the steps of Vergil and Homer and adding episodes that prove he knew other poets<sup>4</sup>.

Adaptations are one of the most interesting ways of reception of classical authors: it gives the possibility to revisit the theme, giving a different interpretation of it. This is what Eça de Queirós did in one of his short stories “Perfeição” (‘Perfection’). He goes back to the episode of Odysseus at Calypso’s island, in Book 5 of the *Odyssey* and retells it, stressing the reasons why the hero prefers going home to his wife Penelope to immortality with a goddess: “Therefore, I will endure with a patient mind all sufferings, with which the gods may charge me on the dark sea, to go back to my mortal Penelope, whom I command and comfort, reproach, and accuse, teach, humiliate and dazzle. It is for these things that I love and with a love that feeds on the wavering moods just as fire nourishes itself from the opposing winds!”<sup>5</sup>

In the same way, Maria Alberta Menéres wrote her *Ulisses* (Odysseus). As she points out in the beginning, she is adding some more to Odysseus’ adventures. Margaret Atwood (*The Penelopiad*) gives us an exciting interpretation of the *Odyssey*, through the eyes of Penelope. But it is not the same Penelope of the Homeric poem. Atwood’s Penelope, like a 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup>-century woman, has a critical view on the story.

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<sup>4</sup> I am thinking about the episode of Adamastor, whose love for Thetis can be compared to the passion the Cyclops Polyphemus felt for Galatea and that is told to us by Theocritus.

<sup>5</sup> The English translation from the Portuguese was done by me and reviewed by the late Simon Edwards.

Another way of reception is what Margaret Doody and, more recently, Steven Saylor do in their mystery novels. *Aristotle Detective* and the series *Roma Sub Rosa* depict the life, respectively, in Athens and Rome as faithfully as any historical novel. Also, Mary Renault's novel *The Persian Boy* offers a view of Alexander and his politics from the point of view of a young Persian. In this case, it worth mention how she kept most of the information given by the historians of Alexander, namely Ptolemy.

In this brief introduction, I tried to enhance the most significant aspects of Greek and Roman civilizations and how relevant they are for us in a cultural, historical and literary way.



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