



THE
NEW CAVALIER
INTRODUCTION TO
ANCIENT GREECE

AN INTRODUCTION
TO AN INTRODUCTION



Χαίρετε! Chairete! Rejoice!

AND WELCOME—to the introductory essay for *The New Cavalier Introduction to Ancient Greece*.

You, splendidly curious person, are about to become very well acquainted with what centuries of the best and the brightest have referred to as ‘the Greeks’, though they called themselves the Hellenes. If nothing else (though there is a great deal else) the Hellenes are a fascinating people. They swore oaths over upturned shields filled with bull’s blood. Instead of saying, ‘Jesus Christ!’ when someone pissed them off they yelled, ‘Herakles!’ They could paint so realistically that birds flew down to peck their painted grapes and their back-handed Golden Rule was, ‘Do good unto friends and harm to thine enemies.’ They revered lying and liars, considered hope to be foolish and love a derangement—and would have thought the idea of running a marathon preposterous. They employed Brazilian slaves to singe off all their pubic hair—and their dildos were encased in dog leather!

But as well as strange they were ingenious. They were insatiably curious. They were noble and mighty. They were simultaneously sceptical and credulous, pessimistic about life and lavish in their estimation of its potential.

Preferring always to fight rather than flee, to inquire rather than believe, to change rather than stagnate—the Greeks are, to us cowardly and believing stagnators, the most dangerous people ever to have walked the earth. But their danger is not to be measured in the likelihood of their taking a machine gun into a high school or their scepticism of vaccine mandates. The danger of the Hellenes lies in their liberating potential. For to understand Hellenic civilisation, to split the Greek atom, is instantly to feel yourself free—today the most dangerous and endangered of inclinations.

As well as the Greeks themselves, you're soon to meet several of the brilliant minds who devoted their lives to studying them. The quality of Ancient Greek scholarship is unparalleled in any Humanities discipline and there has accumulated 200 years of it. Some of the most intelligent pens in all European languages have been dedicated to translating, cataloguing, interpreting, the Hellenes and in reverse chronological order Walter Burkert, E.R. Dodds, C.M. Bowra, Werner Jaeger, Gilbert Murray, Burckhardt are among the best of them. To the end of this essay I've appended an uncritical bibliography—the secondary books, essays, & articles from which the semester is derived. If you'd like to read any of those works I have almost all 180 of them in digital format.

Then there's Nietzsche, the strangest and most radical Greek interpreter but also the most perceptive and the bravest. It was Nietzsche who finally admitted what nobody else would—that as well as enlightened and symmetrical and perfect the Greeks were mysterious, dark, and cruel. It was he who enables us to approach a full understanding of the original fullness of the Hellenes—and therefore of ourselves. So let's form a foundation and a background for that fullness.

First things first, time—time, which is as subjective as history. Recall your Einstein: 'The distinction between past, present, and future is only a stubbornly persistent illusion,'—or open up your Hindu scripture and find that Time it was who ordained Death as the master of all and the destroyer of worlds. Or ideally, start with the Greeks—for whom Time was the father of the gods who devoured his own children—Chronos conquered by Zeus so that Time's power might not be unlimited.

Now that you're thinking on a large enough scale, I want you to rid yourself at once of any time-notion of "Antiquity". There was no such thing. Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome were as different from each other in their forms and aims as were Renaissance Italy and Medieval Cambodia. Rome's core values were order, hierarchy, and obedience. As you're about to discover, the Greeks strove for wisdom, equality, and freedom. Above all the Greeks

stood, and fought, for justice. They also invented the very concept—while the Romans used their word ‘liberty’ as propaganda, a pretext for invasion and subjection. Yet people seem to adulate that which would enslave them and the study of Rome remains popular. I’m yet to make sense of this phenomenon.

As well, Greece and Rome are separated by centuries, five and a half of them. From 580BC, the beginning of knowable Greece, to the triumph of Julius Caesar, stand 536 years—the same amount of time that stands between us and the Wars of the Roses. In fact by the time the Romans and Greeks meet one another the events of this semester will have already run their course. We are not Tudors and neither the Romans nor the Greeks were ‘Ancients’.

After time, we grapple with space. A full third of Greece is bare rock upon which nothing can grow or graze. At the start of our timeline there are perhaps half a million Hellenes living among that rock in 40 small cities. The sea is much more important to the Greeks, across which they will sail to fight and trade and the control of which will determine the misfortunes of men and states. By the end of our semester environmental degradation will have set in and there’ll be eight million Greeks living in a thousand cities from Spain to Afghanistan—at half the population density of modern Greece.

In their respective periods the Greek economy outperforms the Roman and our Athenians will attain a level of prosperity akin to Florence in the 15th century and Holland in the 17th. Within the Roman Empire roughly 90% of the population lived at subsistence level and from 300AD onwards these were hereditary serfs. In Athens 49% of people lived at subsistence level and 50% of the population were comfortably middle class. The top 1%, the elites, did own 30% of all the private wealth (they own 32% of it in 21st-century America), but in Athens 70% of the land was owned by 60% of the population and as few as 20% of Athenians owned no land at all. In England today 50% of the land is owned by less than 1% of the population. And while Rome was run by and for its ultrawealthy senatorial class, throughout most of our semester Greece will have no comparative millionaires. In our final two weeks it will leap straight to having one (multi) billionaire.

That is, Ancient Greece is a time and a place unto itself—early, prosperous, and equal—and with a culture so obviously enriching that it will be swallowed almost whole by the dullard Roman anaconda. The two were themselves, distinct and critically dissimilar—and with time and space—and their distribution—dealt with, the Ancient Greeks.

Through their, and my, instruction, by the end of this semester you will have a better understanding of Ancient

Greece than a 2nd-year undergraduate. If you have time for extra reading you'll come to know more about Ancient Greece than many sinecured historians of the period. And if I as your tutor achieve my ultimate educational aim—and imbue you with the spirit of Hellenism—you will come out with a much lower estimation of comfort, insurance, Netflix, romance, shopping malls, politics, and ignorance than you presently have. Indeed, to have the Greek worldview permeate one's psyche is to begin to see oneself not as a username striving for employability, but as a descendant of the gods struggling with the blind forces of the universe! The Greeks were grand as well as strange.

In order to commence your Hellenisation, we must now begin with the very early history, for only upon that framework can consistent enthusiasms be built.

From 2500BC onwards for at least eleven centuries a civilisation called 'Minoan' existed on Crete. Between 1600 and 1000BC there also arose on the Greek mainland a civilisation we call Mycenaean. This eventually supplanted and absorbed the Minoan, and the language of the supplanters is the very earliest form of Greek. It's called Linear B and was deciphered by a nerd in 1953. 𐀀 is Linear B for wine and '𐀀𐀁𐀂𐀃' transliterates to *ereutero*—which signified people exempt from certain palace tributes. *Ereutero* is etymologically the

predecessor of *eleutheros*, a free person—and *eleutheria*, freedom—words about which we and the Greeks will have much to say.

So we start off by performing the ultimate Western throwback: to 3,200 years ago. The Mycenaeans battled in chariots, made fancy bronze swords, invaded distant non-Greek cities. Their power and societal structures revolved around kings and their hilltop palaces and their most renowned king was Agamemnon, lord of the civilisation's largest palace, at Mikines (the city Anglophones call Mycenae)—perched still today upon an outcrop half way between Sparta and Athens and soon to become blood-drenched. For you may have heard of Mikines' most consequential debacle: a 10-year war waged against a city called Troas—Troy—in modern-day Turkey.



The Mycenaean 'Combat Agate', from the 15th century BC.

The archaeological record tells us that from 1200BC to 1000BC the number of occupied Mycenaean settlements dropped from 320 to 130 to 40. The population declined by anything from 75 to 90 percent. Even areas that escaped physical devastation, like Athens, suffered complete political and societal collapse. Why? As with most things we would most like to know most about, we don't know. One theory is that a large migration of angry sea peoples wreaked a critical mass of havoc. Most Mycenaean palaces show evidence of being torched to the ground in their final days. (In fact the only reason we have any Linear B at all is because the clay tablets upon which it was written were kilned in the fires that destroyed the cities that produced them. What a melancholy end and poetic source for history to rely upon.)

Another theory is an all-out systems collapse. The 2nd millennium BC was a globalised world reaching from Sardinia to Afghanistan and centred geographically on copper-producing (and copper-named) Cyprus. That millennium, the Bronze Age, was as dependent on tin as we are on oil—tin which is the 10% to copper's 90% in the manufacturing of bronze. Tin had to travel 2,000km from Afghanistan before it could be smelted in Cyprus—and Cyprus was invaded by the Hittites in the last century of the Bronze Age. This perhaps disrupted the trade

routes that enabled the semi-globalised world to till and to kill.

But for one reason or another, one by one the eight civilisations that comprised the Bronze Age collapsed. Whichever it ultimately disappeared, by 1050 Mycenaean Civilization was gone. The unhappy few who managed to stay alive cowered for centuries behind their city walls as Greece entered the 250ish years of what historians call its Dark Age—a period for which we know no history whatsoever. Even the ability to write was lost.

Then in 776BC someone found a rusty zippo and the lights came back on. 776BC is the first definite date in Greek history, when the All-Hellenic games were organised as a regular event upon the site at which Zeus wrestled Time for control of the universe—Olympia. Yes, Greek history begins with the Olympic Games, and competition and contests—the *agon*—will remain central to its culture. (776BC is also the first precise date in Chinese history. They that year recorded—and angrily denied any wrongdoing in—a solar eclipse. East and West are precisely the same age.)

In about the same decade the Greeks took the Phoenician system of writing, which consisted solely of consonants, and added to it vowels. S t s t th Grks tht w w wrtng s w knw t. With the Phoenician symbols came their Phoenician names: ‘Aleph’, for ox, ‘bet’, for

house—and these were turned into Greek syllables: alpha, beta, and so on. So the Greeks literally invented the alphabet—crucially one that was accessible to everyone, for Hellas had no guild of scribes nor caste of priests to which the knowledge of writing was restricted. It will even become a popular insult to call someone *agrámmatos*, ‘alphabetless’: ‘Look at this f----g agrámmatos!’

(I am hoping that along the way you’ll take the time to learn the Ancient Greek alphabet. It’s only 24 letters, and is outlined on the last page of this *Introduction*. Knowing it will greatly enrich your historical experience.)

From around the same time—as which year? I hope you’re paying attention—comes the poetry ascribed to Homer, which we’ll explore in detail in our first week. For the next 453 years Homer’s epic poems, coupled with Hesiod’s explanation of the ruling powers of the universe, formed the worldview, ideals, and education of a single many-islanded land—Hellas—littered all over with *poleis*, the Greek plural for *polis*: city-state. At the end of our timeline King Aléxandros the Third of Macedon attempts to export this culture to beyond the known world, and in exporting it, kills it.

So in our semester we’ll go from the world that created Homer to the world that Alexander left behind:

roughly from 800 to 300BC. 500 years—all of which are in the BCs so I'll now drop that superfluous addition.

Karl Jaspers once set out to find an 'axis' of world history. Taking into account simultaneous philosophical developments in China, India, Persia, Israel, Greece—he found his *axial age* in the precise period that we're to cover, for 'it was then that the man with whom we live today came into being.' The communist György Lukács claimed that the cultural development of the Greeks, which you're about to trace—from Epic to Tragedy to Philosophy—is in itself a philosophy of history, that the stages of Greek history represent the timeless development of the outward and the inner lives of all humanity. In simpler terms, even as individuals we go—as you might see Hellas go—from an energetic and unthinking youth, to a grand and consequential adulthood, to an overly reflective and withdrawn old age. That is, from Epic to Tragedy to Philosophy.

As well as in its relation to literature and human life, Lukács' assertion is true for several other aspects of Greek history. As only one example, down the centuries the Homeric virtues performed by the individual in service of himself become virtues owed to and rewarded by his *polis*. When the polis repeatedly fails to return its promises, those virtues are repurposed to serve as coping mechanisms in a world of neither heroism nor

cities. So as the Greek goes from epic to tragic to philosophical—and from youth, to adult, to geriatric—he also goes from heroic individual to heroic citizen to homeless mystic.

The zenith of these trajectories is traditionally taken to be the middle 400s, more precisely the year 430—when Pericles, Pheidias, and Socrates could attend a play written by Sophocles in the Theatre of Dionysus beneath the brand-new Parthenon. It is—with its paragons of democracy, art, poetry, architecture—a period absolutely unparalleled in the history of the world. Renaissance Florence had bad poetry and Elizabethan England had no philosophy and both found the mortal truths of Tragedy offensive. I don't even want to mention our own architecture, but we in 2025—beaming as we might be—have added to human life break-dancing, arse implants, and the demonisation of jaywalking.

So 5th-century Greece, Athens by the year 430, is what's termed the 'Classical Age' or even the 'Golden Age'. It was, in the words of Bertrand Russell, an age in which it was possible 'to be both intelligent and happy, and happy through intelligence.' A rare occurrence indeed, and a worthy aim upon which to set our sights. Whether Russell's estimate is correct we shall find out for ourselves, though our primary evidence will be scant. From that 5th century we possess about 5% of the

literature that we know was produced and of the earlier Greek centuries we have not nearly as much. Almost all of what we do have from any time comes from Athens—for it's in Athens that the most nourishing elements of the Ancient Greek soul concentrate themselves.

Your *Introduction* is also a history of that Greek soul and of the Greek mind: what formed them, what they achieved, where they went after they died—on both an individual and civilisational level. For as well as from epic to mystic and from hero to zero, we shall see how and why the Hellenic psyche goes from a purely material conception to an immaterial one, from our visible breath to a shade composed of atoms—finally to an unseeable soul which exists forever.

That is, amid the foundational structure of their familiarly horrible political history, we are to trace the uniquely brilliant *inner* history of the Greeks. All the intertwining threads of these developments—historical, material, cultural, mental, and spiritual—are what amount to your *New Cavalier Introduction* and each week will be headlined by a different Ancient Greek word, one that encapsulates the innovative genius of humanity's first flowering as it—we—consciously tried for the first time in history to make mortal life more comprehensible, fairer, and richer.

In an Austin-Powers nutshell the following is both the chronological narrative and historical hypothesis to which your *Introduction* holds. 8 separate weeks of New Cavaliering, 9 points in need of proving, 9 stages in the cultural development of Ancient Hellas. All are, of course, open always to challenge:

- **KLEOS**, Glory: *In recalling the memories of Mycenaean Greece, Homer composed poems of such extraordinary worth that the actions and values of their characters formed the values of Greek individuals for centuries to come. Chief among these values were Achilles' embodiment of excellence and glory, and his insistence on the just distribution of the rewards of toil.*
- **DIKÉ**, Justice: *Hesiod outlined an ordered world and a priestless religion in which the gods maintain an equilibrium of worldly justice—a balance which the aspirations of man should never aspire, let alone attempt, to upset.*
- **ELEUTHERIA**, Freedom: *Aristocratic political monopolies were supplanted first in Sparta, where the Homeric ideals of excellence and glory became rewards bestowed not by poets but by the polis. At Athens Solon then transferred Hesiod's conceptions of justice and balance to the same.*

- **ISONOMIA**, Equality: *After passing through history's first cultural and political Renaissance, Athens took its justice-system further from tyranny by instituting a program called isonomía—a system which ensured all citizens played a part in writing the laws under which they lived and in deciding how justice should be maintained.*
- **MAINYU**, Evil (a non-Greek word and an un-Greek concept): *The Persian Empire, with a dualistic rather than wholistic view of the world and of man's place in it—in several ways an epitome of not-Greece—spends 33 years attempting to subdue Hellas and fails.*
- **TRAGODIA**, Tragedy: *Victory over Persia instilled in the Athenians a cultural pride through which they practically invented comedy, history, architecture, beauty, & education. Out of poetic grappling with the individual's immense power but ultimate powerlessness comes Tragedy, one of humanity's supreme creative achievements.*
- **FILOSOFÍA**, Philosophy: *So-called wisdom-lovers moved from the periphery of Greece to its new centre and at Athens reappraised all existing values. Compounding atrocities in Greece and military defeat in Athens added to increasing uncertainty about the benevolence of the gods and their just distribution of the rewards of virtuous striving.*
- **HUBRIS**: *Upon inheriting hegemony of Greece, Alexander III of Macedon conquered the Persian Empire then invaded*

India. His life transcended, or destroyed, the limits set on what a Greek ought to aspire to achieve. His successors then divided the world into empires in which they ceased distributing rewards according to Hellenic principles of justice.

- **THANATOS**, *Death*: In response to a new unfree and citiless world, philosophers sought consolation through internal independence from external events. The Greeks soon transferred all value from tangible real life to the philosophical idea of an eternal one, where justice might be meted out more fairly. The ideas and values in all previous weeks—those which created and ruled the Greek world—thus consumed themselves and expired.

Such is the lengthy hypothesis we are to test together. It runs through almost all of the major events, changes, and individuals in Greek history. Upon further reflection it also embodies several dualisms the concentration upon which allows us to take stock of where we ourselves rest on these eternal spectrums. If we inject some of the spirit of the Greek wisdom-lovers we're then able to speculate as to where we would *prefer* ourselves to rest and where best might our own society sit: ought we to be unthinking or overly critical? A hero or a zero? Do I desire regimentation and stability, or freedom—and the freedom to fail? These possibilities all once existed in the world, and the example of Ancient Greece shows us that

they might all exist once again. The expansion of life's potential which the history of the Hellenes bequeaths us proves that they truly are the most dangerous people ever to have walked the earth. To spend time with them is to remember what heights of human endeavour are always possible.

The subjects I'm going to emphasise over the next 8 weeks are perhaps not the most mainstream ones. Whole works of academic tedium run volumes without mentioning them. And though I keep up with the latest scholarship, I pay no attention to the fads of gender or race. But *The New Cavalier Introduction to Ancient Greece* contains a complete historical portrait of the period and the subjects I focus on are those which most vivified and distinguished the Ancient Greeks. So they are the subjects that stand the greatest chance of re-vivifying us and which form the distinguishing essence of Western Civilization—the thunderbolts that animate our mongrel peninsular life, the burn scars that mark us off from the fellaheen of the East, the circle-worshippers of the South, and the wildmen of the North.

The youth, the originality, the subtlety of Greek life have a potency which, I hope you'll see, is difficult to deny and almost impossible to resist. Aside from the realms of politics, philosophy, art, history, tragedy, comedy, and exercising naked—I above all hope that the

Greeks, having thrived as the wholdest of humans, might through the next 8 weeks teach you a few of the secrets of recovering what it means to fully live. They were freer than we are—but free by exertion, not from exertion. They considered it preposterous for someone to abide by laws they didn't make for themselves. They valued neither words nor action by themselves, but held greatness to consist in their combination. Eating directly from the soil and the sea, they lived lives longer and taller than most of us can hope to. In being comfortable with eternal death they were joyous in transient life. They thrived among subtle paradoxes and felt no need of seeing thought reduced to destructive solutions and before Socrates they were both intelligent *and* wise. It's my adamant belief—and my own hopeful personal embodiment—that it's possible to not only live as a free individual, but by returning to original principles to constantly rejoice as one.

Socrates, whom you'll meet in Week 6, had a word for this process: ἀνάμνησις. *anamnesis*, a remembering of things forgotten, in which the philosopher acts not as a teacher but as a midwife. I here hope that in receiving the legacy of the Greeks you remember some of what has been forgotten and that my hands will be for four fortnights *covered* in placenta.

And with our hypothesis soaked in afterbirth—a hypothesis which is also our historical narrative—let's now spend the better part of two months testing whether its umbilical cord allows it to remain connected to its *omphalos*, to its navel—let's see if its *rhythmos* stays within the harmonious confines allotted to it by Fate—if our vision of the Greeks' essential inner nature, their φύσις, proves to be true.

Let's see if indeed the history of Ancient Greece contains as many ideas worthy of consideration as I believe it does.

Let us begin,

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THE
NEW CAVALIER
READING SOCIETY