

What kind of Greece?

Jennifer Wallace

To an Indian man or woman this picture probably wouldn't seem odd. For them, this would be an accurate picture of Mary and Jesus. But to Westerners, because we can view it from the outside, this picture is strange. We can see the motivations behind the picture. The painter has tried to paint a realistic depiction of the Nativity scene, and yet he has represented the baby Jesus as Indian. He has allowed his own knowledge and concerns to shape the painting.

Now we think we don't do this. We claim our depictions of the past are objectively true. Previous historians have been mistaken, we say, but 'this is how the Greeks really were'. If accounts of the ancient Greeks or the approach to the classics have varied in the past, we argue that this is due to the failure of previous scholars. But the Greeks themselves, we think, were always unequivocally how we depict them. Our understanding is growing ever nearer to the truth.

Because we are insiders, like the Indian painter with his picture, we don't realise the degree to which our own Western or modern concerns shape our understanding of Greece. We can't tell how much we are imposing our own cultural values, because to us they seem natural and perhaps universal. But one way to obtain a clearer picture of how we approach the classics now is to compare our approach with that of the past. We assume that the representation of the Greeks has been unchanging over the centuries, but in fact it has fluctuated radically. It has undergone changes of fashion, of taste, of political significance.

The Augustan age

Back in the eighteenth century, everyone's main interest was not in Greece but in Rome. The early years of the century were even known as the Augustan Age because Walpole, the prime minister of the day, compared the new constitution and lasting peace which had been established after the turbulence of the seventeenth century with the new empire and peace established by Augustus after the upheaval of the civil wars. And just as poet-propagandists for Augustus had portrayed Rome as the culmination of a development of civilisation begun in Greece, writers in the Augustan Age perceived the Roman heritage as an improvement upon the Greek. Roman culture constituted the climax, whereas Greece they considered as primitive. Gibbon anatomised the 'greatness' of the Roman Empire in his *Decline and Fall*, allowing that the Greeks possessed 'charm' but asserting the superiority of the 'dignity of the Latin tongue'.

Mostly, therefore, Greece and Greek literature were ignored. Greek literature was hardly read at all in schools or universities. If the subject had to be raised, a scholar had two choices: either to make Greece vaguely acceptable, to make it Augustan; or to shun it and make it appear as alien as possible. Alexander Pope translated Homer and tried to make him vaguely acceptable. He used rhyming couplets to tame Homer's wild, flowing language, and he improved the manners of the heroes which he considered 'vicious and imperfect'. In France, Aristotle's *Poetics* were codified into strict rules for the composition of drama. The three essential unities of time, place, and action had to be maintained, and induced tragedies from Racine and Corneille that were more like Seneca than Sophocles.

If Greece and its literature could not be made Roman and incorporated into the Establishment culture, they were represented as completely different and alien. Of course Greece the country was at that time under the rule of Turkey, part of the vast Ottoman Empire, so its customs and general appearance were exotic and eastern. Lady Mary Wortley Montague, a friend of Walpole's and one of the earliest female travellers, continued her letters describing her travels in Turkey right into the Greek islands, writing of the island of Chios: 'here is the best manufacture of silks in all Turkey'. About a hundred years later, Byron wrote some adventure poems known as the *Oriental Tales* and set them in Greece. These poems just pandered to the popular notion of Greece as wild, primitive, and different.

Greek rebellion

But all these rules and Roman decorum were stifling. There had to be some rebels, and since the Greek heritage was ignored, Greece was the ideal subject matter through which to stage a rebellion. The German Johann Winckelmann really started the change of mood. He travelled to Rome to study the Greek statues (admittedly Roman copies) and came up with a new theory of aesthetics. The Greek statues were the most exquisite, he declared, because the Greek people were too: 'the forms of the Greeks, prepared to beauty, by the influence of the mildest and purest sky, became perfectly elegant by their early exercises'. Because Winckelmann's theories were new and different from orthodox ideas, they assumed radical connotations. Political rebels latched on to his ideas. The visionary revolutionary, William Blake, although no philhellene, drew defiant, naked men after the manner of Winckelmann.

The new perception of Greece as a fresh, open-air culture did not just affect art. In literature too these ideas had an impact. The radical William Godwin wrote about Greek mythology for schools: 'The language of the Greeks was the language of poetry: everything with them was alive: a man could not walk out in the fields without being in the presence of fauns'. The pantheism of the Greeks seemed so much more liberating to him than the repressive views of Christianity which dominated Britain at the time. To write of Greece, then, or to write Greek was politically radical.

British Greece

Icons of rebellion cannot last. What is shocking today is old-hat tomorrow. Gradually the new ideas about Greece – the beauty of its art, the freedom of its blue-skied, open culture – were accepted by the Establishment. As a result, in the nineteenth century, Greece began to mean something different. Winckelmann's theories of art became the standard rules for judging sculpture. The Elgin Marbles, statues taken from the Parthenon, after initially being rejected as second-rate, were finally housed in the British Museum in 1817 and shown to all visiting foreign statesmen. Greek art which had previously been considered rough and primitive was now appreciated as original and pure. Most importantly, the Greek heritage was now perceived as part of our British heritage – the pure origins from which we had sprung.

Not only did Greek artefacts such as the Elgin Marbles add to the status of Britain, but British values began to alter Greece. When the Greeks began their uprising against the Turks in 1821, the British came to their aid. Enthusiasts steeped in literature, who called themselves the Philhellenes, rushed to recall the ancient Greek battles against the Persians.

*The mountains look on Marathon
And Marathon looks on the sea:
And musing there an hour alone,
I dreamt that Greece might still be free*

Byron wrote, using the by-now sacred name of Marathon to whip up emotion. But that emotion was British, and the freedom, nationalism, and religion were intrinsic to the developing British empire. Greece was represented as the home of sacred purity and independence: 'that beautiful home that God made for the free' someone wrote in the *Gentleman's Magazine*. The independent state of Greece was established by the Philhellenes to fit the image.

Not only was modern Greece recreated in the Victorian image of classical Greece. The youth of England were educated so that our country could become a second Greece. Greek entered the syllabus in schools and universities. Perceived Greek ideals of athleticism and amateurism – winning only laurel wreaths instead of money – pervaded the school ethos. Thomas Arnold, who was headmaster of Rugby School, advocated team games and large doses of Greek literature in order to instil a sense of honour and gentlemanliness into his pupils. 'The mind of the Greek', he explained, is in all the essential points of its constitution our own; and not only so, but it is our own mind developed to an extraordinary degree of perfection.' Some schools, founded in the nineteenth century, were even called Academy, after Plato's Academy, and adopted a prefect system based upon the officers of the Spartan or Athenian state. The education of the boys, the code of behaviour associated with the

'Greek spirit', was vital to the British constitution. It created the administrators of the British Empire, and the elitism of the Greek language served to bolster the superiority of the ruling class. However, the perceived perfection of the Greeks did cause some anxiety. Matthew Arnold, son of the strict Thomas, wondered how he could ever rival the great classical writers and write good poetry himself.

After looking at the great changes in the treatment of Greece in the past, we can turn back to today. How do we see nowadays? How are we shaping our late-twentieth-century picture of Classical Greece? What does our picture of Greece tell us about our concerns? Perhaps we try to think of Greece as different from our culture, as distant or barbaric as they did in the eighteenth century. Or perhaps we idealise it, make it fulfil all the criteria that we now think important. One thing is certain: to an alien culture, our picture of Greece would probably look as bizarre as the Indian painting looks to us.

Jennifer Wallace is a research fellow at Clare College, Cambridge.