CLASSICAL

T. Spawforth, *What the Greeks Did For Us*. pp. x + 335, with colour and b/w ills. Yale: Yale University Press, 2023. ISBN 9780300278699, paperback $22; 9780300258028, hardcover $30.

Asking after the influence of prior civilisations on modern society is a long-established historical practice, one that regularly spills over into the world of what nowadays may be called popular publication. Open the curtains for *What the Greeks Did For Us*, Anthony Spawforth's dazzling *tour de force* across numerous facets of ancient Greek influence on or, more often, resemblances and receptions in the modern world. Written by one of the great connoisseurs of all things ancient Greek for an 'informed general readership' (291), the more than 300 pages go on a treasure hunt after, as the author puts it, 'the ways in which ancient Greece is present in our culture and society *now*' (3, original emphasis). Note that the lens on culture and society is sharply focused on the Anglophone sphere, and especially the British Isles, openly acknowledged in the book's Prologue ('the terrain I know best', 9). Spawforth also acknowledges early on the impressionistic scope of the book, underlining moreover the personal dimension behind his selections: 'It offers the author's personal harvesting of the traces of ancient Greece in (mainly) western culture' (9). In so doing, it also offers several bemusing and amusing anecdotes, giving the book a very human, approachable feel: readers will undoubtedly be tickled by Spawforth's reference to his 'salad days', at school, when he was fascinated by Tolkien's Middle Earth (141), or by his admission to sincere enthusiasm for Hollywood movies depicting the ancient Greeks (which in the case of Oliver Stone's 2004 *Alexander* entails Spawforth's reminiscence about Greek school plays in white dress).

Fourteen chapters explore the overarching theme across diverse and varied niches: Spawforth investigates Greek architectural influences on modern construction, contemporary theatrical debts to Greek drama, the inspiration drawn by modern bards and computer game designers alike from Greek poetry, the liberation that Greek homosexuality has afforded modern same-sex relations, and much more. But perhaps the most regularly noted example of the inspiration that ancient Greece constitutes for us moderns is found of course in the field of politics. Greek democracy, as is well known, is repeatedly heralded as the mother of all good government. To illustrate the conceptual impetus of Greek democracy for modern political life, Spawforth for instance cites in chapter 2, devoted to 'Political animals', the case of US politicians who on modern Greece's Independence Day express their gratitude 'to the ancient Greeks for having invented democracy' (49). Another powerful Greek inspiration falls within the field of sports. The 'Sporty Greeks', who take to the stage in chapter 13, not only excelled in physical exercise under competitive conditions, but they also provided the backdrop for a major modern sports occasion – the Olympic Games. Spawforth's account of the evolution of what was once a significant ancient festival does not shy away from noting the Games' abuse by Nazi Germany for its para-military propaganda in 1936, nor does he hide the ingenuity and craftiness of Pierre de Coubertin in turning what in origin was a religious celebration into the massive sports gathering that it plainly has become. But whatever the modern ingenious uses and abuses, the Greek backdrop to *the* Games cannot be overlooked.

Leaving the allure of enthralling Olympic competition and the wisdom of good government aside, there are also chapters that foreground some of the less daring aspects of ancient Greek society. Chapter 3, for instance, dealing with 'People (un)like us', discusses inter alia, to speak with Spawforth, 'just how judgemental the Greeks were in their opinions about what today would be called "ethnic distinctions" – differences in customs, language and so on' (61). Spawforth here approaches the thorny issue of the superiority the Greeks can be shown to have attributed to themselves vis-à-vis their Persian foes, notably so following success in the battle at the river Eurymedon in ancient Pamphylia (in what is now modern Turkey, roughly half-way between Side and Antalya on the southern coast), in the 460s BC: as Spawforth comments, the Greeks 'started to present the people of Asia, where the Persian empire was centred, as temperamentally suited to slavery, whereas Greeks were the opposite' (70). The notion that European civilisations and races are superior to others has of course many modern adherents, not rarely drawing actively on the ancient Greeks' ethnic discriminations to support their warped views (esp. 66-79). But Spawforth also explores racist leanings that draw on Greek thought that are less often cited, such as the approach that characterised the nineteenth-century development of the idea of an international community of law-abiding nations – citing an Italian expert who 'saw clear limits to where civilisation could be found globally' (74).

In terms of method, Spawforth regularly sketches first the factual contours of the topic under scrutiny in each chapter. For example, when discussing the inspiration drawn from Greek democracy, the chapter begins 'by calling out a couple of key facts about the style of democracy which developed in ancient Athens in the 400s BC' (40). From there, Spawforth proceeds by offering multiple, often intriguing illustrations of how the respective topic (democracy, poetry, architecture, beauty ideals and so forth) is utilised in one or other modern context. As he readily admits, his discussion cannot be called systematic; nor can 300 pages cover all and every aspect that falls under the book's remit (291). Spawforth also contends right at the outset that his exposition is not historical in nature, i.e. that he does not seek to sketch the development, over the centuries, of this or that element of Greek heritage and its transmission to modern society: a very brief outline of this development is offered in chapter 1, which goes 'Back to the Greeks'. There is thus a gap of over two millennia, give or take, between the subject proper of this book, i.e. the modern uses of things Greek, and the world that forms the backdrop to this subject, i.e. ancient Greece. By definition, several of Spawforth's examples underscore the actual distance of the modern receptions of Greek thought and practice from anything the Greeks would have recognised as Greek. At base, the book thus deals with the modern inspiration derived from things Greek, even if these things had a quite different meaning in the ancient Greek world. The already mentioned Olympics constitute a case in point: 'One thing the ancient Greeks certainly gave to modern Olympism was the idea for one of its most famous sporting events – although the ancient model had nothing to do with sport' (263). Another good example is found in the final lines to the chapter on Greek poetry, which comment on its religious context: having concluded that it is now 'time to ask what else Greek religion as such did for us, apart from bequeathing this treasure of myths', Spawforth adds that it is 'probably safe to say that these myths, while wonderfully entertaining, do not inspire many people today with truly religious feelings' (177). The chapter-concluding refrain of 'what the Greeks did for us' has therefore regularly a hollow ring to it: the matter seems more a question of what *we* do with the ancient Greeks than what *they* did to us (as in fact actively noted: e.g. 9, 13).

More troubling in my own view is that despite Spawforth's ready acknowledgment of what I have called above the less daring aspects of Greek society, the book offers overall an accepting celebration of all things ancient Greek. Spawforth's excitement about the subject matter – both ancient and modern – is not only palpable throughout, but plainly articulated by him on several occasions. Leaving his passion for the above noted Greeks on the Hollywood screen aside, Spawforth offers inter alia autobiographical insight into what he terms his 'enthusiasm for a historical figure and a period of history' (238) when undertaking research on Alexander the Great. This enthusiasm is what makes the book so lively and rich. It also explains the concluding impassioned remarks (296; cf. 10, claiming a dispassionate approach to the topic):

'Ancient Greece offered – offers – encounters with things that strike me and many others as wondrous or as fascinating, whether by their beauty, their human ingenuity, their strangeness from today's societal norms or, indeed, their similarities despite the passage of time. In a challenging world, ancient Greek culture in all its boundless variety in time and place reminds us of the equally boundless creativity of the human mind. It surely gives us hope.'

This review is not the place to conjecture where this wondrous enthusiasm for things classical comes from in today's world. There is likely no single answer to the question. But it is appropriate to note that if the book under review is taken itself as evidence for what the Greeks did for us (*vel sim.*), then we may also say that they appear to have given us license to privilege perceived positives over the negatives, championing lop-sided historical vistas. This is not to say that contemporary values that reject racial and ethnic inequalities, human commodification, or gender discrimination, to name just some of the most obvious issues that the ancient Greek world was known for, make for an unproblematic historical yardstick. Nor would it be appropriate to ignore the mention of several negative dimensions of ancient Greek society in Spawforth's account – 'the light *and* the dark' (16, emphasis added). But the question remains why the Greeks (as much as their classical alter-ego, the Romans) should nonetheless attract an overall positive, or in any case cheerful and optimistic reading of their legacy. In clear contradistinction, the engineering feat that led to the creation of Nazi Germany's *Reichsautobahn*, the logistical achievement that all but erased unemployment in that country in the 1930s, or the raising of awareness and active promotion of breast self-examination to detect tumours in the early stages in these years, have not credited Germany's national socialist government and society with a positive appreciation – and rightly so. I am not suggesting that whatever societal evils ancient Greek populations manufactured can readily be compared with the horrors that national socialism engineered in the 1930s and 1940s. Rather, the

pointer to Nazi Germany serves as a reminder that we are perfectly capable of a discerning perspective on a historical society that gives centre stage to the negatives that emerge from that society's historical record. The underlying interpretative balancing act is not dissimilar to that involved in weighing up the pros and cons of the toppling of statues of individuals whose record includes – besides actions and practices that helped to put them on a pedestal – involvement in actions and practices today deemed undesirable. But note that in this context, too, the issue is firmly over the removal of representations of the likes of the seventeenth century merchant, Tory politician and enslaver Edward Colston, not about the likes of the war-mongering, colonising and enslaving Alexander the Great: once again, the ancients get the better over the moderns. Nazi Germany apart, we seem to be struggling with finding a timely approach to dealing with complex historical phenomena that cannot easily be pinpointed on our moral compass. If the ancient Greeks could help us to figure out an answer to this conundrum, they would indeed have done us some good. But we should not be surprised if by the end of what is likely to be a long odyssey we come to the conclusion that there is less hope for us after all.

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HELLENISTIC

Richard Stoneman, Ursula Sims-Williams, Adrian S. Edwards and Peter Toth (eds) *Alexander the Great: the Making of a Myth*. pp. 302, with colour figures and maps. London: British Library, 2022. ISBN 978071235769, £40.

The reign of the Macedonian king Alexander III is marked by destruction: razing Thebes to the ground, the overthrow of the Persian empire, the burning of Persepolis, the murder and execution of his associates (Clitus, Parmenio, Callisthenes, etc.), and the killing of countless others who remain unnamed and unknown. Seven years after his final victory over the Persian king Darius, he was dead with no heir capable of taking his place. In his famous and no doubt apocryphal last words he envisaged the wars for his empire as his funeral games. The legacy of this short and violent reign was the establishment of Greco-Macedonian political and cultural dominance in the Eastern Mediterranean, albeit not as a unified Macedonian empire, but rather as a group of kingdoms ruled by rival Macedonian warlords. In spite of this, Alexander has emerged as one of the most well-known and heroic figures from antiquity. His story has been told in increasingly imagined versions across a range of traditions, both Western and Eastern, the positive outweighing the negative. He is an explorer, a visionary, a lover, a philosopher and a role model for rulers.

This book was published to accompany the British Library's 2022 exhibition of the same name and edited by Richard Stoneman in collaboration with the curators who organised the exhibition. It consists of essays by nine leading scholars and a catalogue of the exhibition itself. It is not about the historical Alexander but rather it focusses on the stories and myths that developed around him, a process which began in his lifetime and which has continued ever since (Moore 2018). As the record of a British Library exhibition the catalogue has an understandable emphasis on manuscripts of various forms, some beautifully illustrated. Particularly impressive is a double-page from the lavish edition of Nizami's *Khamsah* commissioned by the Mughal emperor Akbar in the late 16th century. It shows a priestess successfully pleading with an enthroned Alexander not to damage a precious golden statue (cat. 65). The catalogue's images are supplemented by the illustrations for individual essays, such as the striking 4th C. AD mosaic from Baalbek showing