

# THE GREEKS

BY

ROSALIND MURRAY

WITH A PREFACE BY

GILBERT MURRAY

REGIUS PROFESSOR OF GREEK IN THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD

THE HOW-&-WHY SERIES

EDITED BY

GERALD BULLETT

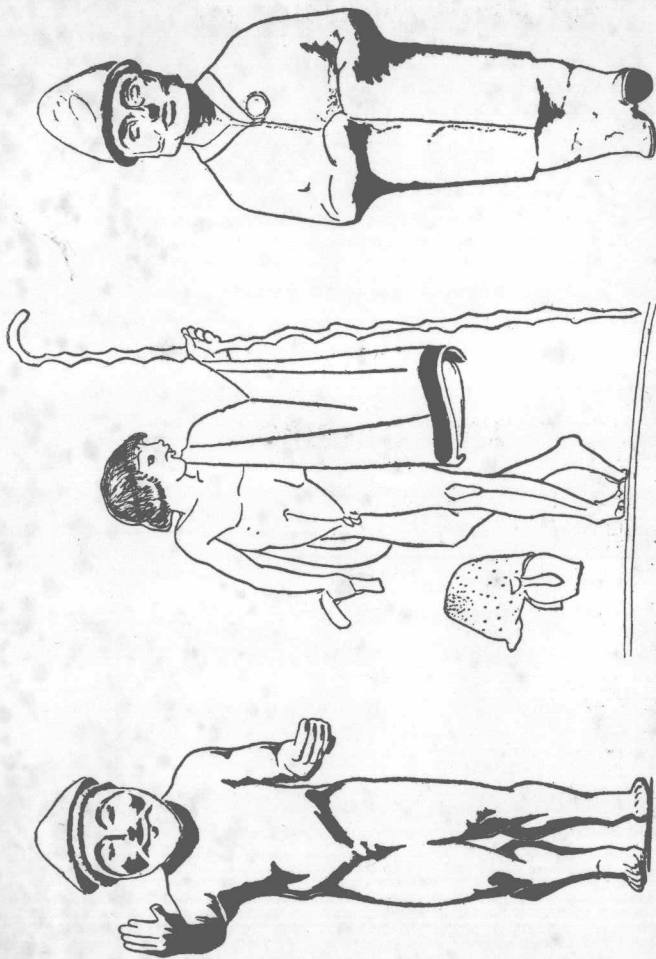
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THE GREEKS



THREE GREEKS: A BEGGAR, A BOY, AND A SHEPHERD  
 From a bronze in the Altes Museum, Berlin; a vase in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts;  
 and a bronze in the Providence, R.I., School of Design

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## PREFACE

THE question why we still study the Greeks would be answered differently by almost every student, or at least with different emphasis. To the historian, the philologist, the philosopher, the artist, the poet, the religious thinker or the enthusiast for human progress, Greece makes a separate and characteristic appeal, and each appeal needs some explanation. If I personally had to say in a sentence why the Greeks specially interested me, I think I should select two reasons: because they seem to show human nature or, as they would put it, 'the Soul', singularly free from mere trappings and upholstery, and because their books are the most beautiful that I can find.

That would be an arbitrary statement of personal taste. My daughter in this tiny book has had to select out of an enormous field, and to reject masses of matter almost, if not quite, as interesting as what she has accepted. It is for others to judge the degree of her success, and how far the result is neither so personal as to be lop-sided nor so impersonal as to be merely flat. To me her book seems to have drawn a true picture. I have enjoyed reading it and I have learnt from it.

G. M.

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# THE GREEKS

## CHAPTER I

### WHY THEY MATTER TO US

CHILDREN all over Europe learn Latin and Greek, and they learn the history of the Ancient Greeks and Romans. This is strange when you think that these languages are not spoken by anyone in the world to-day, and that the people they are learning about have been dead for two thousand years or more. Many people think it waste of time to learn so much about things of long ago; but the Ancient Greeks and Romans are important to us and interesting to us in quite a special way, and when we are learning about them we learn about many other things as well.

The first reason for this is that the Ancient Greeks are our spiritual great-grandfathers. Almost all our 'ideas', our thoughts about things and our ways of thinking, come from them. Just as our bodies, the shapes of our mouths and noses, the colours of our eyes and hair, come down to us, through many generations of ancestors, from the Normans and Saxons and Ancient Britons that once lived in England, so the shapes of our thoughts, our ideas of right and wrong, of what is beautiful or ugly or clever or stupid, and the ways in which we try to express these ideas, come down to us,



through even more generations of spiritual ancestors, from the Ancient Greeks. Even our language, though it is not what is called a Latin language, takes more than half its words from Latin or Greek. 'History' and 'geography' and 'astronomy' are all Greek words, so is 'cinematograph' and 'telegram' and 'gramophone'. 'Virtue' and 'prudence' and 'tradition' are Latin words, and so are 'order' and 'commonsense'.

Although the Romans and Greeks were different nations and their languages are different, you cannot really learn about one without the other: they belong to each other in a special way, and much of what we get from the Greeks comes to us through the Romans.

So, because people's minds and thoughts are really more important and more interesting than their bodies, the Ancient Greeks are more important and interesting to us than the Ancient Britons or the Saxons and Normans.

The second reason why we should learn about them is that they are our 'common' great-grandfathers; they are a bond between us and those other nations who, like us, are their spiritual great-grandchildren. When cousins meet at the house of their grandparents, they find that although they live in different places, and their own parents are different, they have something important in common; the same grandfather and grandmother, and the same house and garden to play in, where they all belong equally. The little French or German boy speaks a different language from yours and you cannot understand each other when you talk,

but the Latin and Greek you all learn is the same everywhere; you read in your Greek and Latin books about the same things and people, and you do so for the same reasons. We share this common background with all other European nations.

The third reason why the Greeks are important to us is perhaps the chief reason of all; it is that although they lived such a long time ago and were in many ways such simple primitive people, they did quite a lot of things better than anyone has ever been able to do them since.

They had no machinery, but they did discover some of the most important principles of mechanics. A Greek named Archimedes discovered the use of the lever in the third century B.C. and another Greek, Hero of Alexandria, actually invented a steam-engine in the third century A.D. and made a model of it, about fifteen hundred years before James Watt. But the Greeks did not give their main energy to this kind of invention nor consider it very important.

They were the first people to try to reason everything out and decide what is good or bad by thinking clearly about it; and they were the first people to think of ways in which people could govern themselves instead of being ruled by a king. They probably did govern themselves better and with more freedom than most of the states that have been formed since their time.

Another thing that the Greeks did as well as anyone since, or even better, was building. Some of the temples they built nearly three thousand years ago are still standing, and we can see how

wonderfully they were planned and made. It is very unlikely indeed that any of our buildings will last for three thousand years.

Greek statues, too, and Greek carving are as perfect as anything that anyone has ever produced since; and Greek poetry, to the people who know Greek and can really read it, is perhaps the finest poetry that has been written.

We modern Western people do not do any of these things very well, and because we do not do them well, we are apt to consider them unimportant. We are good at making railways, and engines, and drains, and at making great quantities of things, all exactly alike, and cheap. But we have almost forgotten how to make a few things well. It is good that we should look at Greek statues and buildings, and read Greek books, and so remind ourselves that there is another way of living than our own.

Now I will try to tell you about the Greeks themselves, and the country they lived in.

## CHAPTER II

### THE HEROIC AGE

THE people we call Greeks came down into the Greek Peninsula at different times between 2000 and 1000 B.C.

If you take the map of Europe and look for this country of Greece, you will be surprised to see how very small it is. A little odd-shaped place with a

queer jagged coast-line down at the extreme south-east corner of the map. It is a mountainous country, very rocky and bare, with few trees and little grass. It has never been a rich country for agriculture; even in the fifth century B.C. the people of Athens had to import their corn from Russia, as we did until lately, but we know from descriptions in the old Greek poems and stories that there used to be great forests and green trees, and pasture for cattle. The trees must have been cut down, and the soil that their roots kept together on the mountains must have got washed away by rain on the steep hill-sides, so that in the end there was no more soil for other trees to grow or for grass. The country we must imagine when we think of the Ancient Greeks is a gentler greener country than the Greece we can visit now, but it was always small and poor and the life that people lived there rather hard. The islands round the coast were Greek too, and there were Greek settlements all over the coast of Asia Minor, yet even counting these, this homeland was a tiny spot from which to spread a force throughout the world.

We do not know much about these first Greek invaders, but they were evidently warlike conquering people who lived by fighting, just as the Gauls and Germans who spread westwards over Europe later were, and they belonged to the same great family of nations, what is called the 'Indo-European' race. We know this because all languages spoken by nations of that race have so many words alike, the common important words like 'father' and 'mother' and 'brother' and 'sister', but

this does not tell us much about them, for most of the European nations belong to this same great race.

We have no books or writings from this early age of Greece, what is now called the 'Heroic Age', but we have later books which tell us something about it.

The two chief stories of the Heroic Age are called the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and they are supposed to have been written by a blind poet called Homer. They are all in verse, but people now think that they were not written by one poet at all, but that they are more like our Folk-songs or the old Sagas of the Norsemen; that is, songs or poems that have grown up gradually through a very long time, learnt from one minstrel by another without being written down.

A great many of the earliest poems in all countries were like that; each minstrel who sang the songs changed them a little, and added bits of his own in the same style, and the people who study them can tell what parts of them have been written later than others, and that all are describing things that happened long before.

These two poems tell the story of a great war that the kings of Greece waged against the city of Troy in Asia Minor; how they sailed across the sea and besieged Troy for ten years because a prince of Troy called Paris had stolen the Greek queen Helen from King Menelaus of Sparta. After ten years they succeeded in capturing Troy by a trick. They built a great wooden horse, and hid inside it, and the Trojans did not know what the wooden

horse could be, and dragged it up into their city; then in the night, when the Trojans were asleep, the Greek soldiers came out of the wooden horse, and fell upon them, and killed the king of Troy, and most of his people, and destroyed the city and burned it down.

Part of this story is told in the first poem, which is called the *Iliad*, from 'Ilium,' which is the Greek name for Troy. The second poem is called the *Odyssey*, because it is about Odysseus, one of the Greek kings who fought in the Trojan war. It is the story of his return from Troy and all the adventures and misfortunes that happened to him on his way home to his island of Ithaca. It took him another ten years to get there, for he was shipwrecked and had all kinds of misfortunes, but he did reach home in the end.

Now the people in these poems are not quite real people, and the things that happened to them are clearly not all true; they are not what we should call 'historical accounts' of the Trojan war; but they are not exactly invented stories either.

There probably were real people called Menelaus and Agamemnon, and they probably did live in Mycenae and Sparta; they may really have sailed across the sea to Troy and sacked it; but as the various minstrels or bards have sung about them, the stories have got changed, and made more wonderful.

These minstrels used to be at every court or little group of fighters round a chief; often someone blind or lame was a minstrel, because he could not fight, and when the soldiers were tired after a day's

fighting, they liked to have someone there to tell them stories, or to sing. At first, he would sing about the chief who was listening to him and praise his deeds and his bravery, and then gradually the songs about some of the special chiefs became favourite songs, to sing anywhere; they were more sung than others, perhaps because that particular chief had been a more interesting person than the others, or perhaps because his minstrel who made the song had been a better minstrel. In this way, certain of the songs or legends were handed on from one minstrel to another, and instead of making up quite new songs of his own, the new singer would sing the old songs again about the first great heroes of the early days, only he would change them a little to suit his audience, or add something to them which might interest them. Nothing was written down until much later, the stories and songs were just repeated and remembered, often no doubt changes came by accident, through some mistake in remembering or repeating.

The nearest thing that we have in England to these legends are the stories about King Arthur and his knights. There, too, we know that there was really a King Arthur, but the legend about him has made him much more important than he really was, and added a lot of magic and fairy story.

We know that there was really a town of Troy and that it was really sacked, for people have been digging and excavating in the place where they thought it must have been, and they have found the ruins of not one, but seven cities, one below



the other, and the stones of two of them are charred by fire.

More lately, too, people have been digging at Mycenae, in Greece, and they have found tombs of kings and queens, with beautiful gold ornaments in them, and carvings and inscriptions, and they think that they may be the tombs of Menelaus and Helen.

Quite apart from the question of how true these stories are, they tell us a great deal about those early Greeks; the sort of way they lived and how they were governed, what weapons they used and how they used them, and the kinds of ships they had.

They were evidently very like the Northern heroes that we can read about in Icelandic legends; the same sort of people as the Vikings who came and raided England in the time of King Alfred; brave, rather noble barbarians, who lived by fighting and raiding.

By the time the poems of Homer came to be written down, somewhere about 550 B.C., the Greeks had become very different from these 'heroes'. They had become much gentler and more thoughtful. They had found out that there are a great many other things to do besides fighting and raiding, and we can see that a great deal has been added to the simple hero stories by much later poets who looked at things differently from the early minstrels.



## CHAPTER III

## CITIES AND COLONIES

THE first six hundred years after the Greek invasions were a kind of Dark Age in Greece, like the Dark Age in Western Europe, after the Roman Empire, when the Goths and Huns came down from the north and destroyed the old Greek civilization of Rome. These early Greek invaders destroyed the Minoan culture that they found, but they had none of their own at that time.

Their sons and grandsons were not such great fighters and adventurers as they had been. They did not go on and conquer more new countries, they just settled down and went on raiding among themselves and fighting each other, and telling the stories of their great-grandfathers and all they had done.

We have no records of the life in this Dark Age, we do not know exactly how or why it began to change, nothing much seems to happen, but we find that somehow or other, between the Homeric Age and about 750 B.C., a great change had taken place in Greek life and customs and ways of doing things.

Instead of living in separate castles on the hills, sort of robber strongholds from which they could sally forth to raid their neighbours, they had collected into cities and were cultivating the land.

As soon as people began to cultivate the land and grow crops, they need a settled life and order