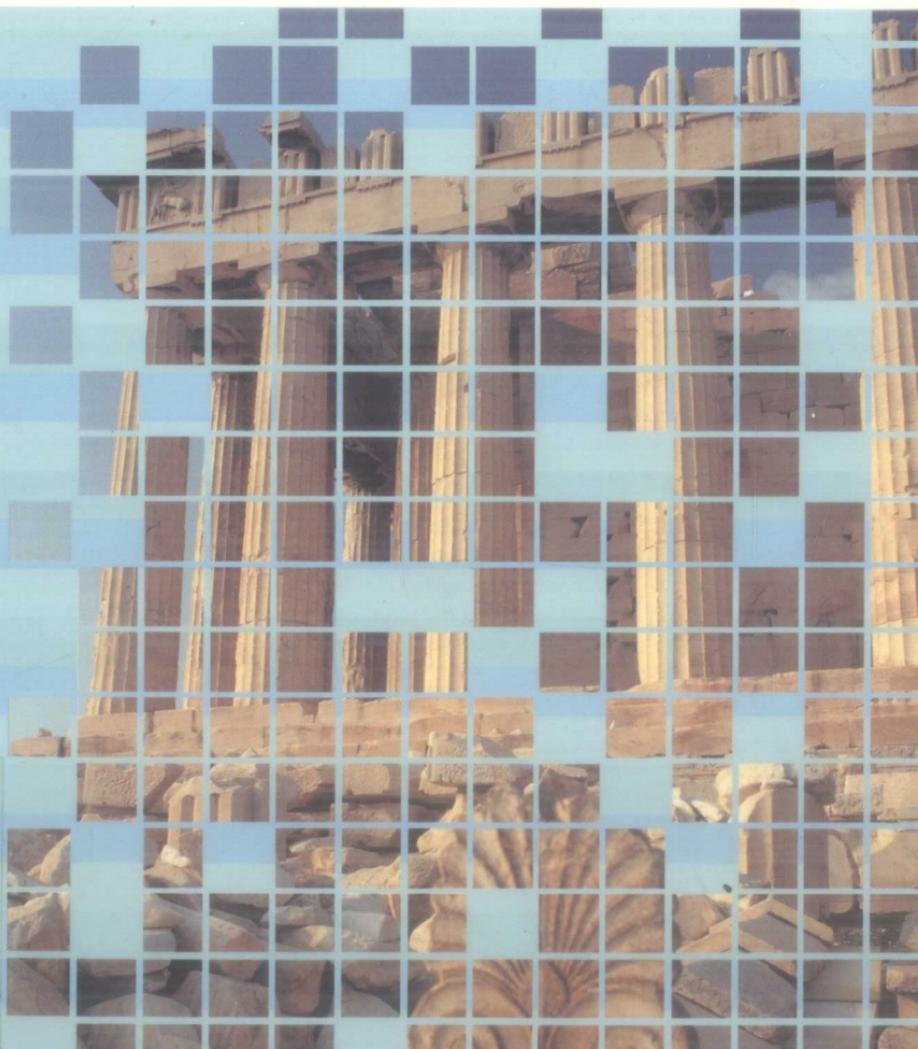


CLASSICAL FOUNDATIONS

# GREEK HISTORY

ROBIN OSBORNE



# Greek History

Robin Osborne

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# Greek History

Robin Osborne's energetic and lively guidebook is the ideal introduction to the study of ancient Greece, from the end of the Bronze Age (c. 1200 BC) to the Roman conquest in the second century BC.

Covering all the most important topics in the study of the Greek past, it also explores the different approaches to Greek history – such as cultural, political, demographic and economic – that students will encounter.

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**Robin Osborne** is Professor of Ancient History at the University of Cambridge and a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge. His books include *Greece in the Making c.1200–479 BC* (Routledge 1996), *Archaic and Classical Greek Art* (1998) and, with P. J. Rhodes, *Greek Historical Inscriptions 404–323 BC* (2003).

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## Preface

That I should write this book was Richard Stoneman's idea, and he has waited for it patiently. Classics and history undergraduates unwittingly acted as a guinea-pig audience for the main text. Numerous colleagues over several years have equally unwittingly contributed to the view of Greek history that gets exposure here. Alastair Blanshard wittingly and willingly read a first draft and offered helpful suggestions for improvement. I am grateful to them all.

## Abbreviations

- dr. drachma
- FGH F. Jacoby (1920–57) *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, Leipzig/Leiden.
- ha. hectare
- IG *Inscriptiones Graecae* (Berlin, Berlin Academy, 1873– )
- ML R. Meiggs and D.M. Lewis (1969, with addendum 1988) *A Selection of Greek Historical Inscriptions to the End of the Fifth Century BC*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- RO P.J. Rhodes and R. Osborne (2003) *Greek Historical Inscriptions 404–323 BC*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- W M.L. West (1980) *Delectus ex Iambis et Elegis Graecis*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.



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## Introduction

This book does not claim to tell anyone everything about (ancient) Greek history, but it does claim, to echo the title of the series in which it is published, to lay the foundations of the subject.

The foundations of history are not a sequence of dates and events, though there will be both dates and events enough in my account of Greek history. The foundations of history are a series of questions about how men relate to one another and to their environment over time. And those relations involve us. My opening questions are about how the ancient Greeks relate to us. Only once we appreciate how (dis)similar ancient Greek versions of familiar modern phenomena are – and one might choose warfare or education, but I choose athletics and courting – will we be alert to the need for constant vigilance about the assumptions which we necessarily import in order to sustain historical interpretation.

I proceed with questions about how we relate to the ancient Greeks, that is with questions about the sources from which we construct our histories of Greece. Whatever our historical interests we find ourselves piecing together a story from a mixture of contemporary writing, material remains, and later traditions. The material evidence can only be made to speak by creating contexts for each object: what any object 'meant' depends entirely on how it was used. This is familiar enough, and the reconstruction of contexts is the basic task of the archaeologist. But

the same also applies to texts – not just to the fragments of poetry whose tone can be understood only if we know the occasion of their performance, but also to the later histories. We can only understand an ancient author's take on the past if we also understand what that writer or his informants' take on their present might be.

As we seek to control our own interpretations of source material there are a number of constraints which it is important that we do not overlook. My third chapter is concerned with those constraints, and above all with the human constraints imposed by the life expectancies and reproductive régimes of Greek men and women. Expectation of life at birth was short, and agricultural productivity was subject to extreme fluctuations as a result of climatic factors out of human control; one of the main debates among historians of ancient Greece has been about the extent to which the Greeks succeeded in insulating themselves against such natural factors. Just how well connected were the Greeks to other parts of the Mediterranean? What were the circumstances in which, and the expectations with which, they moved around that sea and settled in Sicily and Italy, in North Africa and around the shores of the Black Sea?

Natural, environmental and geographical constraints and opportunities only exist in relation to the attempts of living organisms to perform tasks. Aristotle in *Politics* famously stated that the polis existed not for life but for the good life. The fourth chapter looks at the ways in which the human actors in this world organised themselves into and as communities for purposes not simply of survival but survival in distinct forms. It looks at the evidence for tensions within communities and for their resolution variously through the development of conventions (law) and through the submission of the community to the charms and power of the charismatic individual.

Communities organised themselves not simply in the face of competing individuals within the community, and of their own and their environment's natural constraints, but in the face of competition with other communities. Chapter 5 looks at the ways

in which conflicts between Greek cities were played out and at the extent to which those ways were challenged and changed by the advent of a threat that came not from another Greek community but from an outside power, the Persian empire. Living under a threat can transform a community even more than conquest itself would. The Persian threat profoundly changed the Greek world by forcing cities to join together in groups in order to resist and repel the danger. Chapter 6 looks at the changed dynamics of the fifth-century Greek world after the great Persian Wars of 480–479 BC, and argues for links between freedom and oppression not only at the level of the Greek city, where freedom from Persia came at the price of oppression by Athens or Sparta, but within the city, where the political freedoms of the citizen were not independent of the existence of widespread slavery.

Athens emerges both as the city which develops the most sophisticated means of oppressing other cities in the interests of continued resistance to Persia, and as a city whose political as well as economic life was heavily dependent on the use of non-Greeks as slave labour. But Athens was also the city in which the most extraordinary flowering of cultural life occurred, in literature, with tragic and comic drama, in philosophy, with the teaching of Socrates and the philosophical schools of Plato and Aristotle, and in the visual arts, with the sculptures of the Parthenon in the fifth century and the work of Praxiteles in the fourth. Chapter 7 stresses how diverse the experience of life was in different Greek cities, in terms of political or religious rituals and institutions and in terms of even basic modes of cultural expression (locally variant alphabets), and looks at the various ways in which the culture of the Greek city became more homogeneous over time.

The final chapter traces the political history of the fourth century down to and including the conquests of Alexander which created the basis for a Greek world that was geographically still more widespread but culturally more unified. The Macedonian conquest of Greece put an end to the oppression of one Greek city by another, both because of Macedon's overwhelming military

power and because Macedonian conquests outside Greece removed the potential for using international power politics to cajole cities into preferring subordination to the known quantity of another Greek city, rather than to the uncertain quantity of a foreign power. But for many Greek cities loss of an independent foreign policy was nothing new, and the characteristic life of the Greek city-state continued long after Philip of Macedon's establishment of the League of Corinth in 338 BC.

This book is intended as a map of Greek history and of the issues that exercise scholars who study it. As a map its primary concern is with the user's orientation: it attempts not merely to give a view of Greek history, but to enable users to find their own way through Greek history. History is not something that has happened, but something which one makes for oneself. Because this is a map for use, I have concentrated on those areas where readers can readily launch themselves into Greek history with relative ease, that is areas where ancient literary source material is relatively easily accessible and can be made historical sense of with fairly minimal guidance. This has meant more concentration on Athens and Sparta and less concentration on Greek history after the end of the fourth century than a broad and equal survey would have afforded.

Like all maps, this map indicates only a limited number of dimensions and deliberately does not attempt to show everything. The Further Reading is intended to point the reader to places where the matters investigated here can be followed up with profit. It makes no attempt itself to constitute a bibliography of Greek history, but aims simply to put the reader in the way of works upon which I have myself drawn or which I have found useful in thinking about the topics discussed.

As archaeologists know to their costs, a variety of different structures may be built on identical foundations. If readers find themselves both enabled and challenged to build upon these foundations in a variety of different ways those foundations will have served their purpose.





**FIGURES 1 and 2** Calyx Crater by Euphronios: Berlin Staatliche Museen F2180, from Capua, J.D. Beazley *Attic Red-figure Vases*, 2nd edition (Oxford, 1963) 13.1. Courtesy of Staatliche Museen, Berlin.