

Book Review

The Greeks: A Global History

Beaton (R.), Pp xii + 588, maps, colour pls.
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Hilary Walters

Retired Teacher, UK
hilarywalters368@gmail.com



This monumental work is a distillation of the life's work of one of the foremost scholars of Greece, ancient and modern. The 460 pages of text follow the Greeks from the volcanic eruption on Thera to Covid. This extraordinarily ambitious undertaking inevitably means a good deal of selectivity, but Beaton's command of the subject is authoritative, enabling a broad overview of events.

Beaton makes clear that this is not a history of 'Greece', indeed there was no such entity until 1821, and even then the boundaries of the state created

by the revolution were very different from what they are today. Nor strictly have there been people called 'Greeks' – at different times they have called themselves 'Achaiwoi', 'Romioi' or 'Hellenes', but never 'Greeks', at least not in their own language. So, this is a history of the speakers of the Greek language, and it is a global history because the Greeks, emerging from the Eastern Mediterranean, have at different times settled in many, often far-flung corners of the globe. The Greek language is one of only three (Chinese and Hebrew being the two others) with an unbroken written tradition of more than 3000 years. Beaton invites us to use this evidence to examine 'how identities are created, perpetuated, and modified or reinvented over time',

helping us to understand the identities competing for influence in the world today.

The first six chapters cover the centuries from the emergence of the Mycenaeans to the battle of Actium, outlining historical events but also discussing literature and the arts. For me the most revealing chapter, Chapter 5 'Cultural Capital', puts into context the literature of Athens in the 4th century and points out the paradox that such a flowering of philosophy and rhetoric takes place when Athens has ceased to have political power. Beaton's focus on the broad sweep of history means that individuals do not always get the coverage we might expect – Plato's achievements are covered on two pages – whereas Isocrates is given more prominence because he 'redefined what it meant to be Greek' – not sharing ethnicity but adopting a way of thinking. Hence Isocrates foresaw the attraction of the Greek language, customs and the Greek way of doing things, which has had such a powerful effect over the centuries.

Chapter 7 covers Greece as part of the pagan Roman empire and continues to illustrate the effect of Greek culture on other nationalities, in this case the ruling Romans. The rise of Christianity is an important section in this chapter, in particular because the oldest Christian texts that we possess, the letters of St Paul, were written in Greek. The chapter concludes with the accession of Constantine and the founding of Constantinople, a city of huge importance for Greeks thereafter.

Chapter 8 'Becoming Christian 337–630' embarks on Beaton's coverage of the Byzantine empire, and so we leave the Classical world as normally studied by classicists in school and university. The waxing and waning of the power of Byzantium, the rise of Islam, the arrival of the Ottoman Turks and the spread of their empire – all these are covered in Beaton's clear and incisive style. By the time we reach Chapter 14 'European State, Global Nation 1833–1974' we have seen the birth of the nation of Greece for the first time. 140 years described in 40 pages will of course mean that events cannot be analysed and explained in detail, but I felt that the civil war of 1945–9 deserved more coverage. The final chapter 'New Ledgers, New Legends 1974–2021' (the title alluding to Chapter 1) brings us up to date with the financial crisis of 2010, the economic impact of Covid and the pressures of the arrival of refugees from the Arab world and elsewhere.

Is this a book for the school library? For those interested in the politics of the eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world, it is hugely informative and helpful. Members of staff would surely read it, and bright sixth formers – classicists, but also those wishing to understand the world today – would benefit from the insights shown here.

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