

The question of life in the ancient world

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Michael Scott. Credit: M Scott

There's a general feeling that we don't get the Greeks – ancient or modern. Many, including heads of state like Angela Merkel, visibly shake their head in exasperation, rightly or wrongly, at the Greek response to the(ir) economic crisis. And most newspaper articles either start or round up their coverage of the modern situation with some expression of nostalgic comparison to the glory days of ancient Greece. But to what exactly are we referring? Just what was life like in ancient Greece?

It sounds a simple question, one which scholars around the world have been working on in various ways for hundreds of years. Surely, we should have a pretty good answer by now. And yet, the moment you scratch beneath the surface of the traditional comparison, the issue becomes more confusing. Compare, for a moment, the Romans. Most people, I would argue, have a pretty good picture in their heads about

what the Romans were like. But the Greeks? If the heavily divided reactions to portrayals of ancient Greece in recent Hollywood movies are anything to go by (remember the furor around Oliver Stone's *Alexander* in comparison to the more general triumph of *Gladiator*), we are much more divided over how to imagine the ancient Greeks than we might initially think. In short, while we know we owe them a lot, we struggle to agree on what they were really like.

In part, that continuing uncertainty and conflict over what life was like in the ancient Greek world is a product of the very fact that we have been so interested and absorbed in the question. Since the 15th century, at the moment when people began to become interested in the surviving ruins of ancient Greece (as opposed to only its surviving literature), what life in ancient Greece was like has been an increasingly busy battleground not just for academics interested in the ancient world, but for artists, collectors, writers, politicians and philosophers to name but a few. For much of that time, ancient Greece has been held up as an ideal, and as such, something in which much of Western Europe has a heavy stake. But an ideal of what? In part because so little was known about the realities of ancient Greece in the 15th-17th centuries, the articulation of ancient Greece as an ideal rested upon modern re-imaginings of the pictures conjured up by ancient literature, populated with increasing numbers of pieces of ancient 'art' and architecture as they came to light, which were then 'fitted in' to that model. It was in effect something of a blank canvas, an 'ideal' ancient world which in fact could be fashioned to look like whatever the modern world wanted their 'ideal' to be.

As a result, our picture of life in ancient Greece not only became a fundamental part of the geology of the mental landscape of Western Europe, but also, more importantly, was fundamentally fashioned by the events, needs and ideas of that world. And as those events, needs and ideas have changed and been debated in our world over the centuries since, so too has the resulting – often conflicted – picture of ancient

Greece. At times it has been a place of ideal grandeur, at others primitive reality. Sometimes the epitome of noble simplicity and at other times one of savage cruelty. A perpetual holiday realm, a foreign distant never-never land, a 'twin' of the modern era, a waste of space – ancient Greece has been all of these things and more to us over the centuries.

Nor has the growing 'academic' study of ancient Greece and particularly that of archaeology – itself born from and motivated by the perception of Greece as an ideal – been able to settle that debate. Sometimes, early Greek sculpture was brutally transfigured to ensure it fitted with modern morality (like the hacking off genitals and the covering up of nudity). At other times, it has fired up the debate even further, for example when the detailed study of the Parthenon marbles led many scholars to deny they were Greek at all, so far did they diverge from what was thought to be 'the' nature of ancient Greek art and ancient Greece. Today's scholarship continues to complicate the debate by making clear just how much Greece was not a monolithic unchanging entity in the ancient world either, but rather a flexible grouping of peoples with sometimes very different ideals, forces and attitudes, all responding to a harsh and constantly changing world.

The result of all this is two-fold. First, it makes the question 'who were the ancient Greeks?' far more interesting: we need to think not only about the complexities of their ancient reality, but also about how they have been represented over the centuries. Second, it means that studying the ancient Greeks actually offers us a mirror with which to study ourselves. How we have chosen to envisage them at any one time tells us as much about us as it does about them. And as the Greeks come to the fore once again as the barometer of the world financial crisis, coupled with nostalgic longings for 'the good old days' of ancient Greece, at the same time as the Olympics, with its own ancient Greek heritage, hits London in 2012, it seems clear that the question 'what was life like in the ancient world' has a long life of its own still to live.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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