

INTRODUCTION

H. A. Shapiro

TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

The ten essays in this volume aim to provide an overview of the culture and society of ancient Greece during the formative years that we conventionally refer to as the Archaic period, from about 800 to 480 BCE. It was in these years that all the elements we think of as making up Greek civilization, from poetry and philosophy to architecture and city planning, were created and experienced their earliest stages of development. This was an exciting period of discovery and experimentation, without which we cannot understand or appreciate the achievements of Classical Greece that have shaped the civilization of the West ever since.

Our word “archaic” derives from the Greek *archaios*, meaning simply “old” or “ancient.” It is, for example, the word that Modern Greek uses to describe what we call Ancient Greece or the Ancient Greek language. There is none of the negative connotation implied in our use of the word “archaic” to describe something that is hopelessly old-fashioned, primitive, or out of date. On the contrary, *archaios* was often a mark of respect, especially in the area of religion, where whatever is older – a temple, say, or a cult statue – is better, more sacred. The Greeks of the Classical period and later did not refer to what we call Archaic Greece by this name, for they did not divide their earlier history into periods as we do. But they did describe as *archaios* certain objects, especially works of art and architecture, that would fall into what we call the Archaic period, and in this sense the choice of the word Archaic is reasonably faithful to the Greeks themselves. Though some scholars have objected to the use of this term as “archaic” (i.e., outmoded), no one has come up with a better alternative.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52929-7 - The Cambridge Companion to Archaic Greece

Edited by H. A. Shapiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO ARCHAIC GREECE

It is much easier to define the end point of the Archaic period than its beginning. Ancient historians all agree that the Persian Wars (comprising two separate campaigns, in 490 and then in 480–79 BCE) mark the boundary between the Archaic period and the Classical. The Persians did not, of course, appear out of nowhere in 490. The Greeks who lived on the eastern shores of the Aegean (what is now the west coast of Turkey) and on the islands just off those shores had lived in the shadow, and in some cases under the domination of the Persian Empire for more than half a century. But it was the crossing of vast Persian armies into mainland Greece, and more specifically the ability of the outnumbered Greeks to fight them off, that proved the watershed event in the formation of a distinctive Greek identity. That so many Greek city-states, heretofore living as autonomous and culturally quite distinct political entities, were able to come together to defeat the invaders was both the culmination of their earliest phase and, ironically, the last great display of Greek unity. For with the birth of the Classical era in the aftermath of the Persian Wars came the start of rivalries among the Greek states that would tear apart this fragile alliance and result in intra-Greek warfare for the next century and a half.

There is no one great event, comparable to the Persian Wars, that can be said to mark the beginning of the Archaic period. There was, instead, a gradual emergence from the dormant and impoverished centuries we traditionally call the Dark Age – though this very notion has been challenged by recent archaeological discoveries. What we can say with certainty is that, in the century between 800 and 700, so many fundamental changes came about – alphabetic writing, monumental architecture, overseas trade, and colonization, to name just a few – that the Greek world of 700 would have been unrecognizable to a man living in 800. For convenience, then, we have set our starting point at 800, though in some areas (see, for example, Chapter 8 on colonization and Chapter 9 on Panhellenic sanctuaries), we must reach back at least to the ninth century to understand the origins of the Archaic period.

The many tales of gods and heroes that we refer to as Greek mythology were, for the Greeks themselves, part of their early history, continuous with and inseparable from what we understand as the “historical” age. This discrepancy between modern and ancient notions of history and myth is especially acute in the Archaic period, when the proximity of gods and heroes was keenly felt and the “rationalizing” tendency of the Classical Greeks was still far away. Thus Hesiod could organize all of human history into his “Five Races of Man,” with his own era of toil and suffering, the Age of Iron, in a direct line from the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52929-7 - The Cambridge Companion to Archaic Greece

Edited by H. A. Shapiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

earlier, happier ages enjoyed by gods and heroes. Aristocratic families in the Archaic period could plausibly claim descent from a particular hero and often, through that hero, from a god or goddess, without raising eyebrows. If we press too hard our modern distinction between what is myth and what is history, we will fail to understand a fundamental quality of Archaic Greek thought.

WHY A COMPANION TO ARCHAIC GREECE?

One of the main purposes of this book is to encourage more serious study of Archaic Greece by undergraduate students in the English-speaking world. Among scholars and advanced students of ancient history, archaeology, Greek literature, and philosophy, there is no shortage of interest in the Archaic period. Indeed, this period has experienced something of a boom in scholarship in recent decades, but the teaching of Archaic Greece has not kept pace with new developments in research. This may be due in part to the view, prevalent since the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, that privileged the Classical period as the “Golden Age” of Greek civilization, the age that produced the greatest art and literature (especially Greek tragedy) and gave the world its first democracy, in Athens. The Archaic period was far less well known, and, though Homer was acknowledged as the starting point of Western literature, his epics were not seen as rooted in a particular time and place and culture, but as timeless works of poetic genius. This is still the way Homer is often read and studied today. The Archaic period also suffers from the lack of a towering figure around whom to build an introductory course. The “Age of Pericles” and the “Age of Alexander” have an immediate appeal. The “Age of Periander” or the “Age of Peisistratos” would be just as fascinating, but they lack name recognition.

At the other end of the chronological spectrum, the study of the Hellenistic period (ca. 323 BCE–31 BCE) has also suffered from the effects of the Enlightenment model, which dismissed everything after the Classical period as a steady decline until the rise of a new Golden Age under the first emperors of Rome. After Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE), we must move all the way down to Cleopatra or Augustus Caesar, three centuries later, to find a figure who is a household name. Yet, like the Archaic period, the Hellenistic has experienced a resurgence of scholarly interest, perhaps because the tremendous wealth of primary sources, especially inscriptions and papyri, allows us to ask and answer questions that are not possible in earlier periods. We may hope that

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52929-7 - The Cambridge Companion to Archaic Greece

Edited by H. A. Shapiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO ARCHAIC GREECE

the recently published *Cambridge Companion to the Hellenistic World* will contribute to a renewed interest in the teaching of Hellenistic history and culture.

The complete overhaul of the study of Archaic Greece in recent years is owed to several factors. First, the accelerating pace of archaeological fieldwork throughout the Greek world tends to impact our understanding of the Archaic period, with its relative dearth of written sources, even more than it does later periods. There is simply more new evidence for Archaic Greece than for Classical Greece, and this makes the study of the earlier age especially appealing. Second, the recognition that the older cultures of the Ancient Near East had a profound impact on the formative period of Greek civilization has opened up new approaches that were barely acknowledged a generation ago. The notion that some kind of “Greek miracle” gave birth to all of Western art, literature, and philosophy in splendid isolation can no longer be sustained, and the idea of an “Orientalizing Revolution” has made the study of Archaic Greece much richer and more sophisticated. Third, after many generations in which the study of Archaic Greece was defined by a set of conventional topics – the “rise of the *polis*,” “hoplite warfare,” “mother city and colony,” “the Greek tyrants,” among them – the scholarship of recent years has brought to the fore long-neglected aspects of life and art. Thus, for example, the traditional study of Archaic poetry by genres (epic, lyric, epinician, etc.) has been enlivened by what one of the contributors to this book, Leslie Kurke, has called “cultural poetics,” setting the poetry into a context of performance and of political and social realities. In the sphere of social and private life, the intensive study of the institution of the symposium, or all-male drinking party, pioneered by the Oxford classicist Oswyn Murray, has added a whole dimension to our understanding of Archaic Greek society that was missing from traditional political and military history.

SOURCES AND EVIDENCE

Despite the seamless continuity, in many respects, from the Archaic period into the Classical, there are some fundamental differences between the two eras and especially in the ways in which we study them today. Herodotus, who was born at about the time the Persian Wars were being fought, is known to us as the Father of History, because in the Archaic period the writing of history as we know it did not yet exist. Indeed, it seems likely that it was the epoch-making Persian

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52929-7 - The Cambridge Companion to Archaic Greece

Edited by H. A. Shapiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

invasions that first inspired the Greeks to want to record their own history systematically. Although many later historians – starting with Herodotus – wrote about the period we call Archaic, there are no eyewitness historians. This is very different from, say, the period of the Peloponnesian War, for which we have two eyewitness accounts (covering different stages of the war) by Thucydides and Xenophon. This does not mean we have no record of events by contemporary writers in the Archaic period. Solon, the Athenian statesman, tells us quite a lot about the reforms he implemented in Athens (see Chapter 1), and Tyrtaeus gives us a vivid picture of warfare in seventh-century Sparta (see Chapter 3). But we must always remember that these men were writing poetry, not history, and interpret their evidence accordingly. There is plenty of historical information contained in the Homeric epics (see Chapter 5), but how do we use it, so long as the debate is unresolved on what period Homer is describing: that of the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1200 BCE), that of his own time (late eight/early seventh century), or some period in between? Hesiod is also more poet than historian, yet his *Works and Days* is an invaluable source on life in Greece in the years around 700.

Although the invention and spread of writing is one of the key criteria by which we define the Archaic period, this does not mean that writing was prolific or in common use at any time. What writing does survive invariably gives us precious information that would be unavailable from other sources: dedications carved on marble votive statues, names of potters and painters scratched or painted on vases, short epigrams carved on funerary monuments, even a few excerpts from early law codes (see Chapter 1). But, valuable as they are, these are tiny snippets compared with the steady stream of documents that were produced in Athens and other cities starting in the mid-fifth century – decrees, magistrates' reports, building accounts, sacrificial calendars, and much more – and turns into a flood once we reach Late Classical and Hellenistic times.

If literary and epigraphical documents for the Archaic period are scanty, what do we have to go on? The archaeological record for the Archaic period is extremely rich – in some respects, surprisingly, even richer than for later periods. For example, the intense building activity in the Panhellenic sanctuaries of Delphi and Olympia during Archaic times (described in Chapter 9) was never matched again. The monumental funeral vases of the later eighth century (see Chapter 10) dwarf any pottery made later in Greece, and the marble *kouroi* and *korai* that populate Archaic sanctuaries and cemeteries (see Chapter 10) essentially

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52929-7 - The Cambridge Companion to Archaic Greece

Edited by H. A. Shapiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO ARCHAIC GREECE

died out after the early fifth century. Of course Classical Greek art is very rich too, but there is no form of art or architecture that does not have well-preserved examples in the Archaic period, except perhaps the art of large-scale fresco painting, which is virtually all lost (except in Macedonia) anyway. The study of Archaic Greek art has one more big advantage: whereas the great masters of Classical sculpture are known to us almost entirely through Roman copies of lost originals, in Archaic sculpture everything is an original.

For the student of ancient Greece, the geographical definition of what we call the Greek World is continually expanding and contracting as we move through time. Like an hourglass, it is narrowest at the midpoint. That is, for the High Classical period of the fifth century, we tend to focus almost exclusively on the city of Athens, simply because the surviving material – from buildings, inscriptions, and vases to drama and philosophy and historiography – is so overwhelmingly rich. There was no “Athens” of the Archaic period, that is, no one *polis* that was both a dominant military/political power in the Aegean and a cultural capital. There is, of course, an Archaic Athens, but it is only one of many prosperous centers, and in fact the literary output of Archaic Athens is astonishingly slight. To find the cutting edge of Archaic Greek culture we must look to Miletus for philosophy, to other Ionian cities and the islands for poetry, to Euboea for trade and colonization, to Corinth for vase-painting (until eclipsed by Athens ca. 550), and to south Italy and Sicily for architecture and architectural sculpture. In other words, the history and culture of Archaic Greece is a regional history, with flashes of brilliance all over the Aegean and beyond. It is also a period of great mobility, and, without a single great center to serve as a magnet, as Athens did later on, the movement was in all directions. A poet from Asia Minor could settle in Sparta (Alcman), another in Athens (Anacreon), whereas a philosopher from the island of Samos could end up in south Italy (Pythagoras) and a trader from Corinth in Rome (Demaratus). It is not until the conquests of Alexander the Great that the Greek world again opens up into a series of regional histories through the Hellenistic period, this time dwarfing the geographical limits of preceding ages.

THE ELEMENTS OF ARCHAIC GREECE

Each chapter in this book synthesizes the results of the latest research on an aspect of the Archaic period and offers a fresh approach to long-studied questions. In many instances, the author of the chapter has

INTRODUCTION

made significant contributions in the specialized literature to shaping the way the subject is approached today. What all chapters have in common is that they demonstrate the need for combining different kinds of evidence, primary source material, and theoretical models in trying to understand the complex and ever-changing world of Archaic Greece.

The study of Classical Antiquity has traditionally drawn on four fairly distinct disciplines: language and literature (philology); history; philosophy; and archaeology and art. The authors of this volume would each probably identify themselves with one of these four subdisciplines, yet each is keenly aware of the need to break down disciplinary boundaries in order to achieve a fuller understanding of the remote past. The chapters are here grouped into three sections of unequal size, on history, literature/philosophy, and art and material culture, but different groupings would have been possible and they may be read in any order. Fully half of the ten chapters would most likely fall under the broad heading of “history,” but together they demonstrate how that term has come to embrace much more than the conventions of Greek political and military history. Even those subjects are now benefiting from new approaches. Thus Peter Krentz’s chapter on warfare in the Archaic period draws on both poetry and artistic sources to explore the social values that were expressed in the pervasive institution of war. Political history used to mean the history of the *polis*, or city-state, but Jonathan Hall shows that the *polis* is but one definition of Greek identity – albeit a crucial one – that must be set alongside the issue of ethnicity and examined on a regional basis to avoid generalization and oversimplification.

The Greeks saw their own culture as being first and foremost about individuals rather than institutions. In Archaic Greece the individuals we hear most about fall into two overlapping categories, tyrants and lawgivers. In his chapter, Victor Parker shows how these two make an “odd couple” and yet can illuminate the whole period by being studied in tandem. For many historians, Archaic Greece is the “Age of Colonization,” for this phenomenon was so widespread and the duration of the colonization movement is almost exactly coextensive with the conventional dating of the Archaic period on other grounds. With the rise of twentieth century archaeology, the study of Greek colonization has gone from a game of historical speculation based on a modicum of information in Herodotus and Thucydides combined with a welter of quasi-legendary heroes, founders, and stories to a fully rounded picture, in which history is written largely out of material culture. Carla Antonaccio, herself an archaeologist as well as a historian, shows how

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52929-7 - The Cambridge Companion to Archaic Greece

Edited by H. A. Shapiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO ARCHAIC GREECE

the next step is to explore the different models of interaction between Greek colonists and native populations that emerge from the material evidence.

Deborah Kamen presents the kind of social and family history that was largely absent from the study of Ancient Greece until recent years. Though the study of women and gender is no longer as new or radical a subfield of Classics as it once was, the focus in Greece still tends to be on the Classical period, when we have such rich source material as tragedy and comedy or the imagery of Athenian vases. But Kamen here demonstrates that all the institutions and beliefs pertaining to the life-cycle, for both women and men, have their origins in the Archaic period.

The remaining five chapters of this book take in areas that are equally diverse, from philosophy and religion to poetry and art. No study of Archaic Greece, indeed of Greece at all, can get around the figure of Homer. In Jonathan Ready's chapter, Homer is considered alongside the second great early epic poet, Hesiod. Together they shaped more than a literary genre, indeed the whole belief system of all later Greeks. No topic in Greek literature is more hotly debated at the present time than the origins of the poetry we call Homer's and how it was transmitted to us, and Ready presents a balanced account of the state of the question. If Homer remains an elusive individual, and Hesiod only slightly less so, the lyric poets of the seventh and sixth centuries are just the opposite: the first vivid, idiosyncratic characters in the history of poetry. Leslie Kurke considers how these personalities emerge even more clearly when we can reconstruct the settings in which their verse was performed. This is especially crucial for the first distinctively female voice preserved to us, that of Sappho of Lesbos.

Andrea Nightingale, in her chapter on early Greek philosophy, demystifies the debate about rational versus nonrational thought, or mythic thought versus philosophy in early Greece, by showing that the figures we call the pre-Socratic philosophers, as much as their contemporaries the poets, were citizens of various cities around the Greek world, exposed to the cultural cross-currents of the age, and integral to the lives of those cities. They were not solitary thinkers, nor the head-in-the-clouds philosopher type that was already caricatured in Classical Athens. Their concerns were as much religion and theology as the moral and ethical issues we think of as the province of philosophy. That they usually wrote in the same forms of verse as the poets is further evidence that the two groups cannot be artificially separated.

The visual arts are too often marginalized in general studies of Greek history and culture, or treated as mere illustration. In his chapter,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52929-7 - The Cambridge Companion to Archaic Greece

Edited by H. A. Shapiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

Jeffrey Hurwit analyzes the representation of the human figure in sculpture and painting as part of a broader theme that cuts across much of this book, the self-fashioning of the individual in Archaic Greece.

Last, themes of religion, identity, and material culture come together in Richard Neer's chapter on the Panhellenic sanctuaries during the Archaic period. For all the tremendous diversity of the Greek *poleis*, they were acutely conscious of their shared Greekness, and nothing expressed this better than the great sanctuaries where they came together, whether to worship, to compete in athletic contests, or to glorify themselves and their cities through expensive dedications. In many ways, the great era of the Panhellenic sanctuaries was the Archaic, even though they continued to operate throughout Antiquity, and Neer shows how these sacred spaces were essential to the formation of a Greek identity.

This volume does not pretend to be an exhaustive or systematic survey of Archaic Greece. There are several topics that might easily have formed the basis of additional chapters but for various reasons have not been treated in this way. Religion, for example, is a fundamental aspect of Archaic Greek culture and society, so fundamental in fact that it permeates every subject discussed in this book, from law and warfare to poetry and architecture. Instead of in a separate chapter, religion is treated in each of its many contexts, and for a survey of Greek myth and religion the reader is referred to any of several handbooks in this field. Likewise, the economic life of Archaic Greece is not dealt with in a chapter, because the evidence is extremely sparse and can only be discerned in a few specific instances, such as the crisis in Athens at the time of Solon (see chapter 1). The one economic issue that deserves fuller treatment is the invention of coinage in Archaic Greece and its implications for social life, a subject brilliantly explored by Leslie Kurke in her recent book *Coins, Bodies, Games and Gold: The Politics of Meaning in Archaic Greece*. Yet another subject of current interest is the genesis of sports and athletic competition in the Archaic period. This is touched on in the discussions of the Panhellenic sanctuaries where the games took place (see Chapter 9) and of the victors for whom poems were written (see Chapter 6).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-52929-7 - The Cambridge Companion to Archaic Greece

Edited by H. A. Shapiro

Excerpt

[More information](#)
