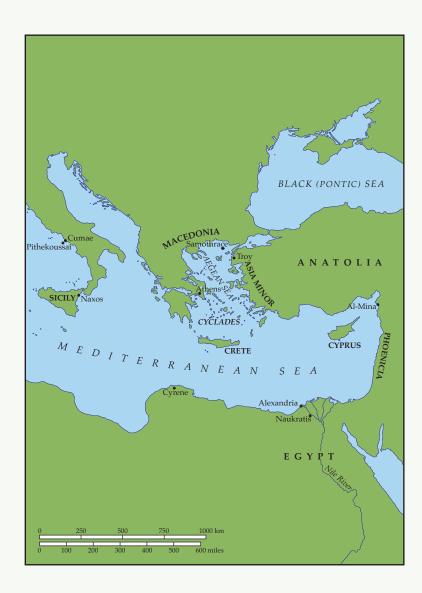


# Introduction



Map of the Mediterranean area



## 2 % THE ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF ANCIENT GREECE

When someone referred to "Greek Art" in the nineteenth century, the meaning was clear: the Classical period of Greek art, *c.* 480–323 BC, usually objects or buildings from Athens. The image that sprang to mind was of marble sculptures and temples, preferably in ruins to convey the romantic notion of a lost past. The passion for antiquity, particularly ancient Greece, inspired innumerable examples of Neoclassical architecture and Neoclassical ornamentation on nearly every continent, Neoclassical painting and sculpture in Europe and North America, enthusiastic borrowing of Greek myth in every artistic medium, including literature, drama, music, and so on. Ancient Greek or classical styles (as opposed to the Classical period) were not only aesthetically favored but also bestowed intellectual cachet (e.g., the façade of the British Museum) or advanced political ideals (e.g., civic buildings and monuments in Washington, DC).

But times have changed, and so have our definitions of Greek art, specifically ancient Greek art (for there is modern and contemporary Greek art, as well). The idea of ancient Greece and its cultural outpouring is very much still with us, but in our multicultural world of global economies, the internet, social networking, and global travel made easily accessible, we have, unwittingly, redefined ancient Greek culture as stretching throughout the region where the ancient Greeks once trod, from Spain to the Hindu Kush, from the earliest Paleolithic "Greeks" to the Byzantine Greeks or even later. What was once clear has become obfuscated because of a plethora of information, as well as the professionalization of the academic fields of art and archaeology and the consequent push to justify budgetary expenditure through publication. What was once of supreme importance to the education of young gentlemen has become the province of anyone and everyone and, ironically, has become obscure and apparently disconnected from the lives of even the well educated.

This book cannot correct this situation and does not aim to do so. But it does try to inform, enliven, and offer new perspectives. Designed for students, the book also aims at the interested layperson, and scholars also may find something of interest here. Many introductory books on Greek art and archaeology already exist, and one justifiably may ask why another is needed or wanted. While this text traces changes in interests, motivations, and appearance of the visual output



### INTRODUCTION % 3

of Greek culture over time, it is chiefly concerned with context and function: the purpose and use of buildings and objects, and how these, as well as city planning, infrastructure, and so on, operated within their time and place. How were these things meant to be perceived, what "messages" did they transmit, and how did the surrounding environment – both physical and sociohistorical – shape their meaning for viewers, visitors, and inhabitants? In the case of the prehistoric period, where far less evidence exists to guide us, we can ask how physical objects and buildings were shaped by, and are products of, the larger Mediterranean milieu, by trade, by settlement in distant places, or by the development of technologies. By necessity, the range of materials discussed and the treatment offered here are selective; I have chosen representative examples, including the "usual suspects," but have endeavored to enliven and enrich this study with anomalies and lesserknown objects and monuments in the hope that these choices will stimulate the reader to "see" more and pursue further study. Text boxes offer amplification of various subjects.

Although we regard much of the material production (sculpture, architecture, vase painting) of ancient Greece as "art," this term is an anachronism; until the Hellenistic period, sculpture and architecture were entirely functional: sculpture served religious purposes — as votives, cult statues, and tombstones — and architecture was religious, civic, or domestic no matter how aesthetically pleasing it was and is. Vase painting is a trickier category: the vessels themselves were functional, actually used for dining, drinking, and storage, and/or as grave gifts. But decoration is often not clearly linked to use and is entirely non-functional; one might call it "decorative," but the content of the imagery often has cultural meaning that can be extracted with careful study. Small, portable, private objects of costly materials — carved gemstones, gold jewelry, cameos, for example — also existed, but some of these, such as amulets, also had a religious or, at least, magical purpose.

Likewise, the modern idea of artist is largely inapplicable to the ancient Greek world, and the idea of artist as creative genius was conceived during the Renaissance in Europe. Ancient sculptors, painters, gem carvers, and architects might be more accurately described as having the status of "craftsmen" in the modern sense of the word; they created works of *techne*, of artful skill. In addition, our modern



## 4 % THE ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF ANCIENT GREECE

divisions of sculptors, architects, and so on are probably inaccurate with respect to ancient categories of craftsmen, who are more likely to have been divided by medium: stone masons who could work on sculpture or on architecture, which often was treated as sculpture; ceramicists who made pots and sculpture; metalworkers who created sculpture, perhaps coins and armor, as well, and so on.

Ancient Greek written sources never discuss vase painters (the only mention of vase painters is by the second-century AD writer Pollux 7.108) so everything we know about them must be deduced from the vases themselves, some of which show potters and painters at work. Rivalries clearly existed as we know from *dipinti* on vases, and painters and potters both sign their works – at least that is how we usually interpret the two verbs used in such signatures:  $\gamma\rho\alpha\omega$  (to write or draw) and  $\pi\omega\omega$  (to make or shape). There is one instance known to us when a vase painter received the benefit of citizenship in return for a public commission.

Sculptors signed their works starting from an early date, and these signatures usually appear on the base supporting a free-standing sculpture. Our evidence for sculptors increases as time progresses, as seems to be the case with the status of sculptors. Ancient writers mention prominent sculptors and architects, their works, sometimes public reaction to them, or the reputation of these craftsmen, some of whom received tremendous honors from their hometowns (for example, Damophon of Messene was accorded heroic worship), although such instances of exalted honors are relatively rare. Some were wealthy enough to make dedications of vases and sculpture, even large-scale sculpture, as we know from dedicatory inscriptions. And a few were extraordinarily rich: Kephisodotos the Younger, son of the famous fourth-century BC sculptor Praxiteles, took on the liturgy of a trireme – the full equipping of a warship – for Athens thrice in ten years! Sculptors in the fourth century BC began to work on speculation, i.e., making works first, then finding a buyer, rather than working exclusively on commission, and this yielded greater autonomy and price control for the sculptors. Ancient written sources mention more and more treatises written by sculptors and architects from that century onward, though we certainly know of earlier such writings (only one survives).

Architects and wall painters were usually employed by a polis or sanctuary. These were business transactions with contracts, deadlines, financial penalties for tardiness or unsatisfactory work; their work was



## INTRODUCTION % 5

evaluated, and accounts were scrutinized, as we know from ancient building accounts inscribed on stone, which served as copies of archival material. Later Roman writers mention the renowned wall painter Polygnotos, who was celebrated for his civic benefactions and praised for his refusal of payment rather than for his painterly skill.

Ancient Greece was a culture highly sensitive to visual stimuli in the form of buildings, sculpture, etc. and to some degree, highly dependent upon these physical means to shape the environment and to define and give significance to space. In these ways, ancient Greece is very much like the modern western world, but even more so: we are bombarded by visual stimuli – all kinds of stimuli, in fact – that were never available in the ancient world: books, newspapers, magazines, film, television, computers, video games, advertising, and so on. In urban centers, there is little empty space either in the built environment or on blank surfaces, such as walls or the sides of buses or streetcars. Everywhere we look, there is something manmade to see, read, watch. Our problem most often is distraction – too much stimulation, too much to see and hear, too much to absorb. This was not usually the case for ancient Greeks, whose visual stimuli were far more limited and consequently, far more observed, discussed, and impressive, literally speaking. When mass spectacles, such as the Olympic games or a religious procession, occurred, they surely were sensational and visually arresting. One can imagine masses of people on foot, traveling in the hot, dry summer through miles and miles of rural landscape, some of it cultivated, and mostly monochromatic, toward a sanctuary like Olympia: from a distance, they could espy the sun glinting off gilt statues placed atop high columns, and as they neared, a vast complex of brilliantly colored buildings appeared. Within the sanctuary was a dazzling array of objects made of costly and rare materials – ivory, gold, silver, jewels, textiles, bronze – not to mention the hundreds of lustrous bronze and brightly painted marble and terracotta sculptures. Inscriptions everywhere – on statue bases, temple façades, altars, objects themselves – were meant to be read aloud in praise of deities, cities, and mortals. In sharp contrast to what people, particularly rural inhabitants, encountered in their daily lives, these colorful, sumptuously decorated sanctuaries must have been intoxicating, mesmerizing, otherworldly spectacles. So when considering the Greek manmade world, the impact of even small details must be borne in mind. They "saw" with fresh eyes and rapt attention a great deal of the time;



### 6 % THE ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF ANCIENT GREECE

we do not. And because so much of Greek sculpture and architecture is devoted to religion, this viewing was imbued with a special vibrancy.

The study of the physical remains of the ancient Greeks is much more than the study of objects, what some scholars deem "art history." Another group of scholars focus on what they define as "archaeology," such as the organization of land and use of terrain for agriculture, settlements, fortifications, burial, and religion, and the products and tools of trade, studies that are rooted in excavation, underwater archaeology, surface survey, or that employ technology, such as radiocarbon dating, aerial photography mapping, dendrochronology, magnetometer survey, remote sensing, resistivity survey, archaeozoology, osteoarchaeology, archaeobotany, to name just a few. Such techniques are especially (though by no means exclusively) useful in periods when written documentation is lacking or highly limited.

Many scholars draw a sharp distinction between those studying objects, art historians, and those doing "archaeology," archaeologists, with the latter often regarding the former with condescension, even disdain; this may be because they mistakenly consider art history as the study of style or of individual objects when, in fact, art history is much broader than this. Similarly, art historians often find the archaeologists' approach to be bloodless and lacking human interest. But the modern division of the study of Greek culture into art and archaeology – in spite of this book's title – is misguided and misleading: "classical archaeology" in its original nineteenth-century sense (particularly among Germans, who were pivotal in the development and study of Greek culture) encompasses all areas concerning Greek and Roman physical remains in an effort to understand and "reconstruct" Greek and Roman culture in all its dimensions: religion, politics, history, aesthetics, social relations, labor, agriculture, and so on. This book seeks to revive this vision and to promote a greater unity of approaches in the united effort to understand the ancient Greek world. Thus, it investigates Greek culture through its physical remains, both those deemed "art" and those that are deemed pragmatic or immobile. The questions asked of the evidence can differ, but the goal remains the same. Because of the volume's chronological arrangement, the earlier portions will deal more heavily with questions that can be answered through technical means, while the latter portion focuses on different types of evidence and questions.

It is important to state at the outset that I use the terms Greece and Greek entirely anachronistically in most of this book. The ancient



INTRODUCTION % 7

Greeks never thought of themselves as Greeks but rather as Hellenes, and the region of the world where they resided was Hellas. Ancient Hellas was not a unified nation (nationhood is a nineteenth-century AD invention), but a series of poleis that shared a similar "culture," and were sometimes allied into federations or leagues by common interests or common enemies; I am keenly aware of the ambiguous nature of the term "culture," but simplifying here for the sake of brevity, by "culture" I mean religious practices, burial practices, and language (although there were regional dialects).

The land that constituted ancient Hellas varied over time: the physical extent of the Bronze Age cultures is discussed in Chapter 1. After this time, ancient Hellas included the area of modern Greece (mainland and islands), parts of the Balkans, the western coast of modern Turkey (Asia Minor), and by the eighth century BC, colonies in south Italy and Sicily. Colonies existed elsewhere in the Mediterranean, as discussed in the text, but tended to be singular in a region dominated by another culture. The area corresponding to modern Greece has geography and topography that made agriculture and animal husbandry challenging for the ancient inhabitants. It is a mountainous country with very hot, dry summers, mild winters, and relatively little rain, which yields scrubby vegetation in the lowlands and covered mountainous areas; forests were – and are – common in the north, although for architectural construction suitable wood, especially cedar from the area of modern Lebanon, was often imported in the historical period. This is a terrain ideally suited to sure-footed goats and inhospitable to cattle. Areas around well-watered rivers are green, even lush in some places, where frogs, turtles, snakes, and mosquitoes flourish. The mountains and islands posed an impediment for travel and communications, but the islands, together with the coastline of the mainland, naturally promoted the development of seafaring early on, and the mountains offered natural borders between territories. Marble of various colors and granular quality and various kinds of limestone were – and are – abundant, and silver was accessible in some locations, such as Laurion in Attika. Greece is – and was – an earthquake zone, and we have abundant archaeological and written evidence attesting to earthquakes in the ancient period.

Where to begin this narrative (and it *is* a narrative), and where to end? There was human settlement in the area we now call Greece already in the Paleolithic period, and people have always occupied this



## 8 % THE ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY OF ANCIENT GREECE



Map of Bronze Age Greece

same region since then. But prehistoric culture in Greece, that is, those cultures that existed before *c*. 1100 BC, really begins in the Neolithic period when we see organized trade, and settlements and fortifications in several areas. Ancient Greek culture experienced changes after the Romans asserted full control and redistributed the region into several provinces of the empire. With the introduction of Christianity and the split into western and eastern portions of the Roman empire, the latter of which became the Byzantine empire, we are dealing with a very different culture – form of governance, role of religion, burial customs, etc. So this book concentrates on the period from the Bronze Age (post-Neolithic) until the conquest by the Romans, with some overlap at the far end of this chronological spectrum.



INTRODUCTION % 9

Those familiar with the field know this span of time includes an overwhelming amount of material, especially if one considers the geography of ancient Greece in its broadest extent. Ironically, however, most of Greek art and archaeology is lost to us or has never been found. Not only was much destroyed in antiquity by warfare, pillaging, and natural disaster, but the post-antique period saw massive destruction of monuments and objects by Christians determined to eradicate the pagan past by destroying, rebuilding, or converting buildings, then later by armies traversing these regions and either destroying or pillaging (the use of the Parthenon metopes for target practice is a wellknown example), and by the removal of objects for royal, civic, and personal collections, building, and warfare in more modern periods. The destruction continues now: from air pollution, vandalism, lack of conservation and neglect, new construction, illegal "excavation" and collecting, and, in some parts of the ancient Greek world, by warfare. How much is lost? We will never know it all, but many sculptures, buildings, wall paintings, and cities mentioned in extant ancient written sources (which themselves constitute a small fraction of what once existed) no longer survive. For archaeologists, the limits of our knowledge are humbling, sometimes truly depressing, especially as we witness more and more slipping away, but this quest for the past is also thrilling and endlessly fascinating.

Were I writing this book a century ago or a century hence, my focus surely would be very different, and I am aware that my interpretation is shaped by my own time and place. But the resilience of ancient Greek culture, its ability to speak to us still – in spite of efforts to silence it and its seeming disconnectedness from our contemporary existence – is a marvelous testament to its centrality to western culture throughout its history. Contemporary students may find that ancient Greek culture is remote and hard to comprehend, and this is partially true. The ancient Greeks are not like us in most respects; their beliefs, their values, their cultural priorities, their religious practices are largely alien. Nonetheless, ancient Greek culture is, in fact, deeply, sometimes strangely, familiar in some ways: the architectural visual vocabulary is immediately recognizable, the names of gods and heroes – even some myths – are known, and the Classical sculptural style from the Classical period – its seeming naturalism – is easily identifiable. We may no longer prize education about the ancient Greek world as we once did, but we cannot eradicate it from our cultural consciousness. The ancient Greeks are here to stay.

## **C**AMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press 978-1-107-00123-7 - The Art and Archaeology of Ancient Greece Judith M. Barringer Excerpt More information

