

## **The ancient Greek language: a jar of blessings**

The ancient Greek language was spoken over the greatest part of what we know as Greece, Cyprus, the Greek colonies of Asia Minor, the Black Sea, South Italy /Sicily, and North Africa from the 15th century BC to roughly the 4th century AD. As no great rupture has occurred between ancient and modern Greek, there is more evidence available for the history of Greek than for all other Indo-European languages; its origins are currently estimated as dating to around 1500 BC. Ancient Greek is comprised of a group of dialects, such as the Ionic/Attic, Arcadocypriot, Aeolic and the Doric dialect. To these we must add as a separate dialect the Mycenaean (= the most ancient form of the Greek language). Ancient Greek scientific, historical, literary, philosophical and other texts are written in one of the aforementioned dialects.

Despite local differences on the phonetic, morphological and semantic levels, the ancient Greeks deemed that they spoke a common language. They even argued that the basis of the Greek *genos* was the same blood, same language, a common religion and common customs (Hdt. 8.144).

Ancient Greek literature includes textual monuments of such quality that, over the centuries, they have been seen by the civilised world as creations of high culture. Poets such as the wise Homer, the didactic Hesiod, the cultivated Sappho, the thoughtful Solon, the patriotic Tyrtaios, the skilful Simonides, the aloof Pindar, the eloquent Bacchylides, the majestic Aeschylus, the sweet Sophocles, the subversive Euripides, the ingenious Aristophanes, the learned Callimachus, the charming Theocritus, etc. Historians such as the impressive Herodotus, the truth-loving Thucydides, the moralising Plutarch, etc. Orators such as the elegant Gorgias, the forcible Demosthenes, the able Aeschines, the charismatic Antiphon, the humanitarian Isocrates, the eminent Aelius Aristides, etc. Philosophers such as the brilliant Heraclitus, the pioneer Democritus, the rationalist Anaximander, the munificent Plato, the inexhaustible Aristotle, etc. Scientists, such as the fine doctors Hippocrates and Galen, the inventive Archimedes, the all-knowing Eratosthenes, and others teach, give pleasure, move, offer joy, hone one's intelligence, stimulate the imagination, deepen thought, encourage creative thinking, increase eloquence, strengthen one's consciousness, and promote good judgement; in other words, they develop the reader by shaping his spirit and soul in a good way.

In their written work, they offer a perfect outline of all human characters and behaviours. The just and virtuous life is presented, as is the brave and free spirit. The hunt to conquer or retain power and wealth is condemned when it involves violence, unlawfulness, falsehoods and hypocrisy. Measure in words and deeds and respect for man and the laws are declared. Hubris, envy, arrogance, lust for power, opportunism and demagoguery are condemned. Simplicity, piety, self-sufficiency, bravery, patriotism, competitiveness and the sporting spirit are lauded. The rule of law and happiness are demarcated. The correct policy for governing is defined, because without it the city will be like a ship that is tossed on a stormy sea. Anarchy, bad administration and tyranny are condemned. The questions of freedom and its limits, the uncertainty and ephemerality of human life, the attribution of responsibility to man for the calamities that befall him, and the value of written and unwritten justice are discussed, as is the matter of honour, reverence, shame and disgrace. Fraternal harmony is elevated while brotherly discord is censured. The evils of war are described completely. Love for life, joy and celebration is promoted. Love is commended, passion is frowned upon. Belief in the power of the mind and salvation from superstition are encouraged. Precedence is given to the collective rather than the individual good, to altruism rather than selfishness. An interpretation of nature and the universe is attempted, information is provided on ancient peoples and great civilisations, etc.

The civilisation of ancient Greece stimulated every aspect of Roman civilisation.

After the Dark Ages, the Western European spirit, which was in a state of lethargy, responded to the creative stimulation that came from the discovery of Greek civilisation. This awakening started gradually in around AD 1100, until between 1400 and 1600 Western Europe seized upon the arts and ideals of classical Greece and Rome. Having absorbed them zealously, it was reborn. In this way it was able to shape new thought and art, laying the foundations of modern culture. In the reborn Italy, France, Holland, Germany and England, the ancient Greeks found a new homeland.

In order to describe the contribution of Greek civilisation to that of Europe, we can begin with the alphabet: European alphabets have their origins in the Greek one, either through the Latin alphabet, which is a loan from the Greek, or directly, as with the nations of Eastern Europe.

The ancient Greek language had a great influence on the major European languages. Either through Latin or directly, a large part of the wealth of the Greek

language was transferred to Europe. The other European nations borrowed the main terms used in science, literature and the arts from Greek. From this perspective, ancient Greek is not a dead language. For example, the word ἐκκλησία in the classical period meant the ‘*ekklesia* of the *demos*’, the gathering of the Athenian citizens on the Pnyx, in order to decide upon the affairs of the city. In the *New Testament*, the word was used to signify the ‘community of Christians’. The neo-Latin forms *iglesia*, *église*, *chiesa*, etc. were derived from the Latin *ecclesia*.

The adjective κυριακόν (i.e. δῶμα), meaning ‘house of God’, was transferred to the German languages via the Goths. This is a term that was used in the time of Constantine the Great. From the Greek noun *kyriakon* came the German *Kirche*, the Dutch *Kerk*, the English *Church*, etc.

Plato (*Theaet.* 182a) used the term ποιότης apologetically, in case it sounded strange. Aristotle accepted it as a technical term and Cicero rendered it into Latin as *qualitas*, from which came the Italian *qualità*, the French *qualité*, the German *Qualität*, the English *quality*, etc.

The well-known Hellenist Francisco Adrados has noted an abundance of Greek words in the vocabularies of the main European languages, so much so as to be able to talk about a living and continuously evolving base that makes the main European languages almost a kind of semi-Greek or crypto-Greek (2000 trans. Lecumberri, 22, 447 ff.)

The Sophists of the 5th century BC engaged in the study of language, while the Stoic philosophers were considered the inventors of grammar. Although from the 4th century BC the Indians had developed a grammar, describing Sanskrit in detail, their work had no influence in the West. In contrast, *Τέχνη γραμματική* by Dionysius Thrax (= *The Art of Grammar*, 2nd century BC) was translated and had an influence on the peoples of the East, and was the basis for language teaching in Byzantium. Through Latin grammar, it exercised a long-lasting influence on Europe from the Renaissance until the 18th century.

The study of rhetoric was ushered in by the Sicilian Gorgias and was transplanted to Rome by Cicero and Quintilian. It reappeared in the 11th century, since when the whole of Europe has adopted the principles of the art of rhetoric as established by Gorgias, Isocrates and Aristotle.

The dialectical method developed by Plato in order to seek the truth found some amazing mimics in Rome (Cicero, Augustine of Hippo), while it also enjoyed great success in the modern era, starting with the platonists of the Renaissance.

The historical method was shaped in ancient Greece. Ancient Greek politics, history, biography, ethnography and chronicles established the foundations of modern European historiography.

Ancient Greek literature has been seen as having a great value as, among other things, it portrays ethical and spiritual values that have survived the test of time. All the great authors of the West, from Petrarch, to Goethe, Schiller, Strindberg, Pirandello, Ezra Pound, Eliot, Beckett, etc. have drawn from the springs of ancient Greek literature. With his musical dramas, Richard Wagner sought a return to ancient Greek drama.

Aristotle's *Politics*, a systematic study of political philosophy, have been read widely since their discovery by the Italians and French in the 13th century. In the Late Middle Ages, the *Politics* became an important weapon in the hands of the Italians and Swiss in their struggles for independence. Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Politics* continue to have an immediate impact on contemporary political philosophy, including Marxism.

The Hippocratic works and Galen were studied in European medical schools until the late 18th century, while the descriptive zoology of Aristotle was still studied until the late 19th century.

The Greeks even conceived of the idea of the scholarly research centre, with the creation of the *Academy*, the *Lyceum* and the *Museum* of Alexandria.

Finally, the founders of modern science, such as Nicolaus Copernicus, Andreas Vesalius, Giordano Bruno, Galileo Galilei, Isaac Newton and others, acquired from their studies of ancient Greek texts not only specialist knowledge, but they learnt, above all, what true science is.

Unfortunately, after the Second World War, the focus of education shifted for utilitarian reasons. Absolute specialisation, with the acquisition of primarily practical knowledge and the turn to pure technology, have supplanted classical letters. Yet, man is a whole comprised of spirit and matter. For a balanced life, practical knowledge is needed, feats of technology as well as a humanistic education. Every scientist, author, artist, technician, businessman or professional will find, if he or she turns to the ancient Greek texts, a set of fundamental principles and values concerning the art,

knowledge, and human life. They will gain a knowledge that will be beneficial in their professional and their personal lives. One's wealth (material, mental, spiritual) will certainly increase. As Aristotle says 'all men naturally desire knowledge' (*Metaph.* 980a22 πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει). Money makers too are individuals with an innate desire to learn; if they decide to make an acquaintance with ancient Greek literature part of their busy schedules, then their profit will be a gateway to knowledge and joy.

I wish you the warmest greetings and success in everything good that you attempt in 2017!

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