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Fair Greece! sad relic of departed worth! Immortal, though no more! though fallen, great! LORD BYRON Childe Harold's Pilgrimage (1812–18), canto 2, stanza 73

Byron was just twenty-five when he wrote *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. He was handsome and dashing, a wealthy lord in the most powerful nation on earth, and already one of England's most famous poets. The world was at his feet. Yet within a decade, he turned his back on it all. He sailed to Greece to join its uprising against the mighty Turkish OTTOMAN EMPIRE (Map 1).

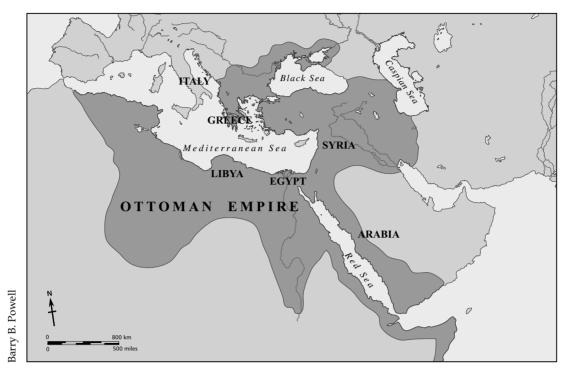
Lord Byron died in 1824, hundreds of miles from home and family, in a terrible siege at a place called MISSOLONGHI in central Greece (Map 3). Why did Byron feel so strongly about Greece that he gave his life for its freedom? Why did thousands of others flock to join him? Why, in our own time, do millions travel to see the ruins that dot Greece's landscape? And why do people spend so much time studying Greek history, culture, and society? In this book, we try to answer these questions.

HISTORICAL SKETCH

In the half-millennium 700 to 200 B.C.,¹ the Greeks engaged in a remarkable experiment. They built societies that were communities of equal citizens who systematically applied their reason to explaining the world. In the process, they created masterpieces of literature

¹In place of the traditional B.C. ("before Christ") and A.D. (Latin "*anno domini*," in the year of the lord), one sometimes finds B.C.E. ("before the common era") and C.E. ("common era"). Because the systems are conventional (Jesus was probably born in 7 B.C.), we have preferred the traditional usage.

From Chapter 1 of *The Greeks: History, Culture, and Society,* Second Edition. Ian Morris, Barry B. Powell. Copyright © 2010 by Pearson Education, Inc. Published by Pearson Prentice Hall. All rights reserved.



MAP 1 The Ottoman Empire. Between A.D. 1300 and 1919, the Ottoman Turkish Empire controlled the eastern and southern territories of the old Roman Empire. Though hated by some, the Ottomans were gifted administrators under whose sway Islamic culture produced some of its finest achievements.

and art. Democracy, philosophy, history writing, and drama began in ancient Greece, and the Greeks developed science, mathematics, and representational art in previously unimagined directions.

Two hundred years ago, Byron died for an idea, a vision of the ancient Greek spirit. His vision was idealized; he and his contemporaries saw in Greek art and literature timeless truths that laid bare the meaning of life. In 1820, on the eve of the Greek uprising against the Turks, his fellow poet John Keats (1795–1821) thought he had grasped the world's ultimate truths by simply gazing at painted Greek vases (Figure 1).

O Attic° shape! Fair attitude! With brede Of marble men and maidens overwrought, With forest branches and the trodden weed; Thou, silent form, dost tease us out of thought As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!° When old age shall this generation waste, Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st, "Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (1820), stanza 5 °*Attic:* From Attica, the countryside around Athens. °*Cold Pastoral*: a scene set in a countryside that shall never change (hence cold, not living)

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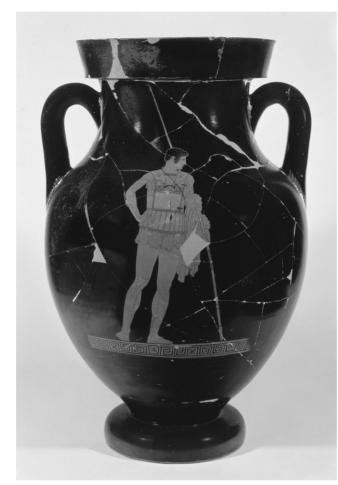


FIGURE 1 No single Greek vase lay behind Keats's poem; he drew inspiration from seeing hundreds of pots in English museums before his death in Rome at the age of just twenty-six. This pot is the kind he had in mind, an Athenian red-figured (because the figures are red colored) amphora ("two-handled" vase), ca. 450 B.C.

Scala, Art Resource, NY

The poet saw deeply, but thanks to 200 years of scholarship, we now see more deeply still. For Byron and Keats, ancient Greece was a simple and pure world of love and truth. Today we know much more about the Greeks. Theirs was an astonishing culture, but no utopia. The achievements of some Greeks rested on the backbreaking labor of others, often slaves from overseas. Their democracies excluded women. They fought endless wars and committed terrible acts of violence. Yet far from making us turn from the Greeks in revulsion, these discoveries make them more fascinating still. The Greeks lived in a harsh and real world, where they struggled with the same basic problems about freedom, equality, and justice that we face. Their difficulties show us that there are no simple answers.

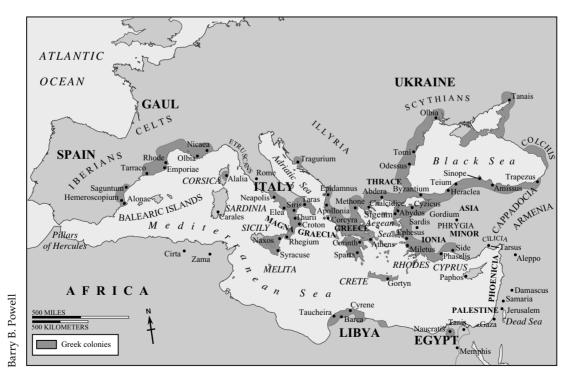
Let us take the story back five thousand years, to a time when great **Bronze Age** civilizations (see Chronological Chart preceding this chapter for this and other historical terms) had arisen in **Mesopotamia** ("the land between the rivers," what is now Iraq) and Egypt.

The Mesopotamian kings claimed that they had special relationships with the gods and that unless they interceded, the gods would not smile on humans. The kings of Egypt went further, claiming that they themselves *were* gods. By 2000 B.C., somewhat similar

societies formed in Greece. Their palaces flourished until 1200 B.C., but then were burned along with cities all over the east Mediterranean. We still do not know why this destruction occurred, but its consequences were momentous. In Mesopotamia and Egypt, the old order of godlike kings revived, but in Greece that way of doing things was over (if it had ever existed). From about 1200 until 800 B.C., writing disappeared from Greece; the country's population shrank and was isolated from the wider world. The present book focuses on the Greek societies that emerged from this **Dark Age** in the eighth century B.C., creating a new Greek world that had little in common with the Bronze Age.

This new world had several radical features. First, most Greeks now organized themselves in small city-states called *poleis* (this is the plural form; the singular is *polis*), not in kingdoms. Second, as population grew in the eighth century, some Greeks sailed off and established new communities around the shores of the MEDITERRANEAN (see Map 2). Third, Greeks came to see their city-states as communities of equal, free males, the basis for and origin of the concept of citizenship. Fourth, they refused to believe that the gods gave any individual or narrow elite a divine right to rule.

These developments presented the Greeks with problems and opportunities absent in other ancient societies. If the gods had not put sacred kings on earth to tell mortals what to do, just what *was* the relationship between mortals and the divine? Most Greeks thought that the gods were powerful and wise, that the world was full of spirits and ghosts, and that a few oracles and priests could give access to the supernatural. This access was open to challenge, however, and oracles and priests could not use it to dominate others. How, then, could mortals really know what was true?



MAP 2 Greek colonies.

These conditions created a fundamental conflict that we call **the Greek problem**, a set of conditions with which Greek thinkers struggled. Without God or gods to rule and to reveal the truth, many Greeks concluded that human reason was the only guide to truth. If no king had special access to truth, then all males must be roughly equally well qualified to discuss it, and the only source of good decisions must be the whole male community. (All Greek states made firm divisions between males and females: When Greeks used expressions like "everyone," "the community," or "the people," they normally meant all freeborn adult males.) By 500 B.C., the theory of equal qualification led to the world's first democracies (democracy comes from the Greek word **dêmokratia** [dē-mo-kra-**tē**-a], meaning "power of the people"), in which all male citizens debated and voted on the major issues.

Other Greeks drew different conclusions from the Greek problem. Some thought that elites should rule; the richest men, with the most respected family connections, could be trained in the skillful exercise of reason on behalf of the whole community. The conflict between mass and elite—democracy and experts—was a driving force in Greek history and one that remains familiar today. What is the place of intellectuals in a democracy? How should wealth be distributed? What do equality and freedom mean?

But while these philosophical debates raged, the Greeks still had to live in the real world. Like us, they had a growing population and conflicting demands on their resources. Leading men in every *polis* competed for power and wealth, and the rich as a group were often at loggerheads with the poor. Neighboring *poleis* fought for land and other resources, sometimes polarizing into great power blocs. The Greeks as a whole fought with powers such as Persia, a mighty empire in western Asia, and Carthage, a powerful trading city in what is now Tunisia. Different *poleis* found different solutions to the problem of working out a civil society independent of rule by gods and their agents, but always did so against the material realities of the southern Balkan Peninsula. Sparta developed a militaristic society, suppressing debate in the interests of security. Athens turned toward democracy and pluralism, glorying in open expression. Syracuse in Sicily alternated between Athenian-style creativity and rule by brutal tyrants.

These diverse responses to the Greek problem produced two results. First, there was constant intercity warfare, as different *poleis* promoted their own interests and their own visions of the good society. In the fifth century B.C., it looked as if Athens might defeat all comers, unite Greece, create a nation-state, and become its capital city. But after Sparta defeated Athens in 404 B.C., the wars only intensified, becoming increasingly expensive and destructive.

The second consequence of living with the Greek problem was more positive. Thinkers needed to explain not only how the universe worked independent of divine whim, but also why there was such variety in it. As early as the sixth century B.C., Greek intellectuals in Ionia on the west coast of Asia Minor (modern Turkey; see map on the inside front cover) developed rational models of the mechanics of the cosmos, accepting that the gods created the universe but assuming that the physical world continued to work because natural forces acted on each other. Their questions initiated Greek science and philosophy. In the fourth century B.C., they led to the epoch-making work of Plato and Aristotle, and in the third century B.C., to the mathematical discoveries of the Sicilian engineer Archimedes (ar-ki-mēd-ēz). Other thinkers extended logical, rational analysis, asking why Greek *poleis* were so different from each other and why Greece as a whole was so different from the Persian Empire and from other foreign peoples. This questioning gave us the writings of

Herodotus and Thucydides, and the origins of history, anthropology, and political science. At the same time, poets and artists struggled to define man's relationship to the gods. At the end of the Dark Age, during the eighth century B.C., Homer sang his *lliad* and *Odyssey*, set in ancient days when men and gods walked together, and Hesiod (**hē**-sē-od) related the gods' own history. In the fifth century B.C., the great tragedians Aeschylus (**ē**-ski-lus), Sophocles (**sof**-o-klēz), and Euripides (**ū**-rip-i-dēz) retold Greek legends to explore profound moral problems, the sculptor Phidias (**fid**-i-as) gave visual expression to new ideas of man's place in the cosmos, and Athens built the Parthenon, one of the world's aesthetic masterpieces.

The upheavals, triumphs, and tragedies of the Greeks in the **Archaic Period** (seventh and sixth centuries B.C.) and **Classical Period** (fifth and fourth centuries B.C.) were driven by the Greek problem—If we cannot rely on the gods to tell us what is true, how do we know what to do? Sudden and unexpected changes began to make the problem irrelevant in the late fourth century B.C. A new king named Philip modernized and centralized Macedon, a large but loosely organized kingdom on the edge of the world of the *poleis*, and used its wealth and manpower to defeat the Greek cities. Conquering Greece was merely a sideshow to Philip, though, who planned to overthrow Persia itself. After his murder in 336 B.C., his dynamic son Alexander did just this.

Philip's and Alexander's conquests seemed superhuman. Both kings certainly saw their own triumphs as godlike, and in 324 B.C., Alexander ordered the *poleis* to worship him as a divinity. The great Greek experiment in founding society on reason was evolving into new forms. In many ways, the third century B.C. was the Greeks' golden age (a description often reserved for fifth-century Athens). The Greeks were more numerous and richer than ever. Their cities spread as far as Afghanistan. Their culture triumphed from the borders of India to the Atlantic, and their scientists and engineers made amazing breakthroughs. Such successes seemed to prove that the Greeks had answered old questions about where truth came from, but in the **Hellenistic Period** (from Alexander's death in 323 B.C. to Cleopatra's death in 30 B.C.) the Greeks had to wonder: How should we live together with the peoples we have conquered? And, as Roman armies cut a bloody path around the Mediterranean after 200 B.C., how should we live in a world with just one superpower?

WHY STUDY THE GREEKS?

These problems interest people today because we share many of them with the ancient Greeks. Around A.D. 1500, at the end of the European Middle Ages, kings in Europe claimed that they ruled through divine right (as had the kings of ancient Mesopotamia), supported by a church that monopolized truth (as the temples guaranteed Mesopotamian kings' power). During the eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, however, philosophers and scientists challenged such beliefs. Like archaic and classical Greeks, they again asked how humans could know the truth and govern themselves well if they could not rely on divinely justified kings and all-knowing priests to tell them what to do. They came to much the same conclusion as the Greeks: Only through the exercise of reason, unhindered by respect for custom and tradition, can you find your way forward.

The American and French revolutions elevated constitutions—written by mortal men—ahead of sacred books. The revolutionaries held, as so many Greeks had believed before, that a state was a community of equal (male) citizens, founded on reason, aiming at the pursuit of happiness. In the nineteenth century, the right of free, equal citizens to rule

themselves—in short, democracy—became a burning social question all over Europe, and, just as in ancient Greece, wide-ranging debates sprang up that revolutionized philosophy, science, history writing, literature, and art. People asked once again how they could make sense of the world through reason and found that the Greeks had already asked these questions a long time ago and had offered compelling answers. The spread of democracy in the twentieth century made the Greek experience to be of global interest, and in the twenty-first century, we find that the Hellenistic Greeks had anticipated two millennia ago our own need to build and live within complex, diverse societies.

The Greeks do not provide a blueprint for how to live, and we learn as much from their failures as from their successes. For example, they recognized that the freedom and equality of male citizens were logically incompatible with the subjection of slaves and women, but they saw no reason to change anything. Between A.D. 1861 and 1865, by contrast, 675,000 Americans died or were maimed fighting one another, largely to decide whether freedom included the right to hold slaves. The Greeks might have recognized America's problem, but its solution would have astonished them.

We might say, then, that the Greeks are *good to think with*. They conducted astonishing experiments in freedom, equality, and rationality that match our own efforts to build a rational and just society.

WHO WERE THE GREEKS?

But who were these people, "the Greeks"? For about two hundred years—since Byron's time—the world has divided itself into nation-states. The theory behind nation-states is simple. Everyone belongs to an ethnic group defined by shared language, culture, and descent from common ancestors. Each group—Germans, Americans, Japanese, and so on—should govern its own destiny by forming a self-determining territorial state. The boundaries of the ethnic nation and the political state should coincide so that we find the Germans in Germany, the French in France, the Chinese in China, and so on.

In practice, though, things are not so simple. At the start of the third millennium A.D., the world is a complex ethnic patchwork. For example, while the largest concentration of Greek-speakers on the planet is in the city of Athens, the second largest is in Melbourne, Australia. You can get as authentic a Greek meal in Chicago as anywhere in the nation-state of Greece. Some Greek citizens feel strongly that the population of southern ALBANIA is ethnically Greek and should be part of the Greek state (Map 3). Other Greeks feel that Greece's frontiers enclose too many ethnic Albanians, who should be made to go away, even if they hold Greek citizenship.

Defining a "people," then, is never easy, but the one-people-one-state equation has dominated modern history. From it came the Holocaust and "ethnic cleansing." The Kurds' longing for a state to go with their ethnicity has destabilized the Middle East since World War I and continues to do so. Ethnic pride has been a major force in turning Afghanistan and Iraq into slaughterhouses and the Balkans into a simmering stew of violent hatred. Faith in the nation-state based on ethnic identity is one of the most powerful forces of modern times.

If we ask what a people was in antiquity, we see that much has changed. The concept of the nation-state simply did not exist in ancient Greece. Greek-speakers, who called themselves **Hellenes** (strangely, the word *Greek* comes from the name the Romans gave them), lived in cities scattered from Spain to UKRAINE (see Map 2). They agreed that their



MAP 3 Modern Greece and the Balkans.

Barry B. Powell

ancestral home, **Hellas**, lay around the Aegean Sea (roughly the area of the modern Greek nation-state plus the west coast of modern Turkey). Yet a Greek from Sicily felt just as Greek as one from Athens.

The notion that all ethnic Greeks should be politically unified had little appeal. The biggest *poleis*, Athens and Sparta, had territories of just 1,000 square miles, while the tiny island of Kea, covering barely one-tenth that area, was divided into three independent *poleis*. Greekness had nothing to do with belonging to a particular political unit.

So what was Greekness? Most modern nations define ethnic identity in terms of common ancestors, language, and culture. Such beliefs are sometimes patently false, and within any nation people may often choose among competing and contradictory stories to suit the needs of the moment. The Athenian Thucydides (thu-**sid**-i-dēz), writing around 400 B.C., described similar behavior in Greece:

As far as I can see, Hellas never did anything in concert before the Trojan War, or was even known as Hellas. No such appellation existed before the time of

Deucalion, the son of Hellên,° but people went by their tribal names, in particular the name "Pelasgian." Then when the sons of Hellên gained power in Phthiotis,° and they entered into alliance with other *poleis*, one by one through this association they began to be known as "Hellenes." But it took a long time before they all took on that name. Homer is the best evidence. Although he lived long after the Trojan War, never does he give them a single name, but reserves "Hellenes" for the followers of Achilles, who came from Phthiotis and were the original Hellenes. Otherwise he uses the names "Danaans" and "Argives" and "Achaeans." Nor does he use the word *barbaroi*,° no doubt because the Hellenes had not yet been set off from the rest of the world by means of a single appellation.

Thucydides 1.2-3

°*Hêllen* (**hel**-ēn): In myth, the male ancestor of all the Hellenes (i.e., the Greeks), who gave his name to Hellas (Greece). °*Phthiotis* (th**ī**-**ō**-tis): An area in central Greece. °*barbaroi:* Greeks called foreigners *barbaroi*, the root of the word "barbarian," because they thought foreign languages sounded like people saying "bar-bar-bar."

Thucydides applied his reason to the text of Homer to draw conclusions about the past: in Homer's day, the Greeks were not a single people. Just a few lines before introducing this model, he had explained that the Athenians claimed a different ancestry from other Greeks. They alone, they said, were *autochthonous* ("born from the soil"): they had always lived in Athens. Yet we know that other Athenians believed that their ancestors had at some time invaded their territory from outside, cohabiting with and then expelling people called the **Pelasgians** ("peoples of the sea"). There were competing stories and only a limited sense of Greekness. Most of the time, ancient Greeks identified primarily with the *polis* they lived in. If you stopped them as they went about their business and asked who they were, they would have said Syracusan, Athenian, Spartan, and so on, but not Hellene.

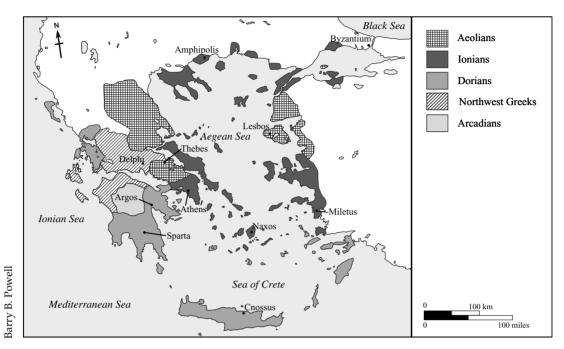
Sometimes, usually during serious wars, groups of *poleis* would recognize a larger identity forged from a common interest. When Athens and Sparta began the terrible Peloponnesian War in 431 B.C., those who considered themselves **Ionians** (descendants of Ion, a legendary ancestor) generally sided with Athens, while those who called themselves **Dorians** supported Sparta (Map 4) (the Dorians claimed descent from Heracles (**her**-a-klēz; = Hercules), who, according to myth, had conquered much of Greece in the distant past).

Occasionally, people could put aside regional and kinship identities to unite as Hellenes. Whether or not Hellên really existed, he became a potent symbol at such moments. In a great crisis in 480 B.C., when Persia invaded Greece and Carthage invaded Sicily, many Greeks ignored their local myths and united around a legendary common heritage as the sons of Hellên. Herodotus (her-o-do-tus), writing probably at Athens around 420 B.C. and describing a critical moment in the war with Persia, spoke of

our common Greekness, tied to a single language and based on shrines and sacrifices we hold in common and customs that come from a like upbringing.

Herodotus 8.144

Blood, language, religion, and customs are the foundations of modern nation-states. Greeks often felt distinct from peoples around them who did not speak their language or live like them, and wars with Persia and Carthage highlighted these distinctions. But they never translated this sense of Greekness into political unity, and after 300 B.C., the distinction



MAP 4 Distribution of Greek ethnic groups during the Classical Period. The groups were the Aeolians, lonians, Dorians, Northwest Greeks, and Arcadians, and each group shared a dialect.

between Greek and foreigner partly broke down. Thousands emigrated from Greece to the Near East (now called the Middle East) and Egypt, though few learned the languages of the peoples they settled among. By contrast, native-born Egyptians, Syrians, and others learned Greek, took Greek names, spoke and wrote in Greek, wore Greek clothes, and acted in Greek ways. Who was to say, or know, after a few generations had passed, that one family was more "Greek" than another? By the time Rome conquered the eastern Mediterranean in the second and first centuries B.C., Greekness was widely diffused and was taking on new meanings.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK: HISTORY, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY

In this text, we tell the Greeks' story. The subtitle of our text—*History, Culture, and Society*—sums up our method. First, our format is narrative history, focusing on the halfmillennium 700 to 200 B.C. Only by seeing individuals, events, and intellectual discovery in context can we understand them. Second, in the course of our narrative history, we emphasize Greek culture, which makes this small, far-off land so important. We describe literature, art, philosophy, and beliefs and place them in their historical context. Third, as our narrative unfolds, we explain Greek culture by looking at the larger Greek society, the institutions and economics of each period along with the Greeks' endless wars and their clashes with other powers. Out of these many conflicts—between rich and poor; free and slave; male and female; Athenians and Spartans; and Greeks, Persians, Carthaginians, Macedonians, and Romans—a remarkable culture grew, triumphed, and disintegrated.

Key Terms

- Attic Bronze Age Mesopotamia Dark Age *polis* the Greek problem
- *dêmokratia* Archaic Period Classical Period Hellenistic Period Hellenes
- Hellas autochthonous Pelasgians Ionians Dorians

Further Reading

BYRON AND THE GREEKS

St. Clair, Roger, *That Greece Might Still Be Free* (London, 1972). Vivid account of the Greek War of Independence and the Romantics who joined it. A great read.

GENERAL REVIEWS OF GREEK HISTORY

- *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 2nd ed., vol. III–VII (Cambridge, UK, 1982–94). Massive compendium of facts, focusing on political narrative history, but with some economic, social, and cultural coverage. Not an easy read, but it is the basic resource for serious scholars.
- Camp, John, and Elizabeth Fisher, *The World of the Ancient Greeks* (London, 2002). Brief text by two archaeologists, with beautiful illustrations.
- Cartledge, Paul, ed., *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Greek Civilization* (Cambridge, UK, 1998). Essays on various aspects of Greek culture by nine leading specialists, with excellent illustrations. It does not give a continuous narrative of Greek history, but, like Sparkes's book (see below), makes a useful supplement to the other works in this list.

- Freeman, Charles, *The Greek Achievement* (London, 1999). Readable survey by a journalist-turned historian.
- Pomeroy, Sarah, Stanley Burstein, Walter Donlan, and Jennifer Roberts, *Ancient Greece: A Political*, *Social, and Cultural History*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2007). Excellent survey concentrating on political history, but taking a serious look at social trends too.
- Sparkes, Brian, ed., *Greek Civilization* (Oxford, 1998). A collection of nineteen essays on the Greeks, including a useful section of four essays taking the story from the end of the Roman Empire through the twentieth century A.D.

ETHNICITY

- Hall, Jonathan, *Hellenicity: Between Ethnicity and Culture* (Chicago, 2002). Sophisticated discussion of the evolution of Greek ethnicity.
- Malkin, Irad, ed., Ancient Perceptions of Greek Ethnicity (Cambridge, MA, 2001). Wide-ranging essays on how the Greeks perceived themselves in antiquity.

For Review Purpose Only