

Title 'What Have the (Ancient) Greeks Ever Done for Us? Hellenic Legacy in 21-st Century Context'

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1. Huge thanks to the organisers (Carmen Soares et al.) for making this extraordinary online conference possible, and to my old and dear friend Tom Figueira for suggesting this talk and for agreeing to chair it. Portugal is often referred to, fondly, as Britain's oldest ally – in these sad days of global ethno-nationalism and local Brexit, that is something surely to cling on to.

2. Finally, not least, thanks to you my virtual – and to me invisible – audience: it's a great pleasure, if a sadly remote one, to be addressing you.

3. I am going to kick things off with a relatively brief surface survey of 'What Have the Greeks ever Done for Us?'. This is in order to try to explain – laconically - why we still can and do ask questions about 'Classics and the Contemporary World', and why and how we can – so I shall argue – learn from the ancient Hellenic past. Subject to this general proviso (a quotation from the novelist LP Hartley): 'The past is a foreign country, they did things differently there'.

4. I am taking as my acronymic guide the initial letters of a building that means rather a lot to me personally, for various both academic and non-academic reasons: the P-A-R-T-H-E-N-O-N.

P – for Philosophy and philosophies.

A - Alphabet

R - Romans

T - Theatre

H – Herodotus/History

E - Eratosthenes

N – New Testament

O - Oceanos

N - Nicomachean Ethics.

5. Conclusion: I conclude first on a note of difference.

The Parthenon was – and even its current ruinous state still is - a wondrous work of art in itself, full of subtle mathematical harmonies and adorned with brilliantly realized monumental sculptures both in the round and in relief, voted for as a specifically democratic structure. As such, it can serve as both a model and as an inspiration, or, as Thucydides (who was in his early 20s when it was completed in 432 BCE) might have said, 'a possession for all time'.

BUT at the same time it was and is a monument to a democracy that is not ours, to an imperialism that even contemporaries found galling, to a polytheistic religion very different from any modern monotheism, and, not least, to a society filled with a superabundance of chattel slaves, some of whom helped build the Parthenon. It is a truly classic case, in other words, of that very Greek phenomenon, antithesis – on the one hand, on the other.

As for my highly selective subject categories of Hellenic legacy discussed above, philosophy, critical thinking, science, alphabetic writing, literary criticism, theatre – and – not least – virtue ethics, all those we owe ultimately to the ancient – that is, pagan, pre-Christian, polytheistic – Hellenes. On the other hand, the New Testament and the Christian bible in its Hellenic, Septuagint form we owe ultimately to the fact that Alexander of Macedon conquered the entire Middle East, which in turn meant that the entire eastern half of the Roman Empire was predominantly Greek-speaking. And it is to those Romans who saw themselves as heirs to Hellenic culture and civilization and so preserved and passed it on to the Byzantines (who also called themselves ‘Romans’) that we owe the fact that ... I have been giving you this talk today. If you have been, thank you for listening.