

**James Renshaw, *In Search of the Greeks*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn., London–New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015, VI + 442 pp., ISBN 978-1-4725-3026-4, £19.79.**

We all live in the era of the digital revolution. Even those who teach classics are not safe from the wind (or whirlwind rather) of change, as sooner or later they have to embrace future opportunities and challenges and enter entirely new, uncharted terrain. No one knows for sure what “handbooks” of ancient history will be like in a decade or so. But it is beyond doubt that they will be different than the age-old, traditional, paper handbooks, and that one has to look around for new approaches and concepts. In his *In Search of the Greeks*, James RENSRAW [= R.] has taken such pursuits one step further. Clearly, the author is perfectly fitted by his academic background (Oxford graduate 1993–1997), his long, professional career as a teacher of classics in a number of secondary schools in India (Kodaikanal International School), Australia (Sydney Grammar School), Britain (long term employment at St Paul School in London, where he was appointed Head of Classics in Colet Court), and his current editorial engagements at Bloomsbury, notably overseeing the series OCR Classical Civilisation and Ancient History. A few years back, R. produced a parallel handbook for Roman history, *In Search of the Romans* (Bloomsbury, 2012; a new, revised edition is scheduled for 2018), and co-authored teaching guides for teachers of classics. We are dealing not only with an influential writer and editor, but also with someone who has plenty of teaching experience in different environments and at varying levels.

The first edition of *In Search of the Greeks* was published in 2008 by Bristol Classical Press. The present, second edition was substantially revised (most notably an extensive chapter 1 being a totally new addition), to provide a course in ancient history for British secondary schools, culminating in the GCSE exams. The first chapter (as much as – and only – 82 pages long) presents a general introduction to the history of ancient Greece. In fact, it is something of a compendium in the form of a chronological survey of the most important facts and events, starting with the rise of the Minoan civilisation and coming to a close with the Byzantine era. This is followed by several chapters where, free of timeline limitations, R. discusses various aspects of Greek antiquity (combining the synchronic and diachronic perspectives). Most of them cover the Greeks’ major achievements in the history of culture: religion, sport and games, drama and theatrical performances. The second part of the book is dedicated to social history, where Athenian democracy and Spartan monarchy duly prevail.

No doubt, R.’s writing is competent and informative. He is apparently up-to-date with modern research, reducing misconceptions (e.g. discoveries made in Lefkandi on Eubea induce him to reject the concept of the Dark Ages) and avoiding serious errors (on p. 220, however, the captions of the image of a *kylix* says that it presents a mother with a child in a high chair – in fact, the child is sitting on a chamber pot). Apart from the lucid structure of exposition, the reader is helped by inserted boxes with additional comments and explanations, sets of issues and questions for independent study/repetition (“Review and Reflect”), citations, bibliographical suggestions, and appendices on Greek currency, musical instruments and calendar year. At the end, a chronological table and a dictionary are appended. This book was elegantly printed, on a beautiful paper, with a wide selection of black and white and colour illustrations, photos, plans, graphs and maps. It is accompanied by two dedicated websites which contain some additional material (mainly photos): [www.insearchofthegreeks.com](http://www.insearchofthegreeks.com) and [www.facebook.com/InSearchOfTheGreeksAndRomans](http://www.facebook.com/InSearchOfTheGreeksAndRomans).

One can certainly appreciate being served by this beautiful, almost luxurious, manageable and up-to-date handbook. At the same time, flipping through the pages, the reader cannot help but ask questions about teaching classics nowadays. Aiming for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, what will the best concept of a handbook be like? What image of antiquity should the pupils and students get from us? These are matters of life and death for the future of classics. The field is not only difficult and demanding

*per se*, and always a challenge to teach, but it is also threatened with extinction. How to make classical studies appeal to many of the general public?

On a basic level, R.'s handbook is doomed by its uncompromising selection. Every handbook is about selection, but also about a cautious, comprehensive overview of the field and balanced proportions of the material included in it. In *In Search of the Greeks* we will not find much about art and architecture. The author admits that this was his conscious decision, due to space limitations, and readily recommends a separate handbook by S. WOODFORD. He does not recommend, however, anything else for other neglected areas, most importantly the Hellenistic and Graeco-Roman periods. The classical age (5<sup>th</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries BC) gets preferential treatment, whereas classical Athens and Sparta are paraded as paragons of ancient civilisation. The criteria seem rather far-fetched, and consistency is not always ensured. While discriminating against some fundamental areas, R. dwells at length on numerous accidental points (e.g. p. 137, an extensive overview of excavations in Olympia – including specific dates!). In the chapter dealing with religion, we may find details of temple planning, but not a word about Orphism or magic, which for the last three or four decades or so have been the two most intensely studied and debated areas of ancient Greek religion – in class, such topics may easily draw interest on their own! Discussing the evolution of Greek social life, he will voluminously introduce wedding *epaulia*, but virtually ignore “homosexuality”. *Nota bene* the question of “homosexuality” appears just once, in a short notice apropos Sappho’s lesbian inclinations. Then it reappears *ex abrupto* in the chapter on Sparta, on p. 374: “bisexuality was the norm for men in the Greek world” (*sic!*). This incorrect – in a number of ways – statement, without any substantiation or background information, will likely perplex the readers. Without properly tackling “homosexuality” (avoiding anachronistic assumptions in the first place), they will not understand what the ancient Greeks were about. However you define it, it was not a marginal phenomenon. Not only was the peculiar way of life in Sparta determined by such practices, but also ancient art, religion and mythology, as well as aristocratic way of life dedicated to athletic exercises and symposia. In spite of all this, R. prefers to emphasise so many other aspects of ancient civilisation, leaving us helpless in front of a puzzling domination of a single “bisexual” orientation in antiquity.

Thus, this arbitrary selectiveness, together with complex cross-references and separate appendices, makes the arrangement of this book slightly confusing. Even if the running text is diversified by a range of additional elements, and the related website is up there, constantly updated, there is something strikingly traditional, even old-fashioned about the content and formal features of this book. Extended narrative runs alongside iconographical elements with not much interaction on the way. Only a handful of questions at the end of individual chapters contributes to the reader’s engagement with the texts. At the end of the paper era, teaching classics this way gives the impression of having been done by someone with a latent wish to preserve the *status quo*. Still, many young people will profit from this volume, not only those educated in British secondary schools that still pursue traditional classical studies, but also a broader audience amongst students and scholars.

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