Part I: Now and Then: From the Present to the Past and into the Future

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Civilisation or Civilisations? New Contexts for the Ancient Greek Achievement

Abstract: What do we mean by 'civilisation'? The word and many of the associations it carries today are the product of the European Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, which drew on an understanding of the ancient Greek past. But civilisations also exist in the plural. Defined by anthropologists as 'complex societies', very many have existed at different times and in different places in the history of our planet. When ancient Greek civilisation is viewed in that context, its defining characteristics emerge as: 1) continuity to today; 2) worldwide influence; 3) concepts of liberty and the rule of law (*isonomia*) as delineated by Herodotus.

Keywords: Ancient Greece, civilisation, complex societies, Enlightenment, Europe, Herodotus, liberty, rule of law

What do we mean by 'civilisation'? The word comes, via French, from a Latin word meaning 'civic' or 'civil', which in turn derives from the Latin for 'citizen'. In the eighteenth century, the time of the Enlightenment in Europe, those two, closely related, qualities of urban life, and particularly the rights and duties of the citizen, came to be held up as the blueprint for a bright, rational, forward-looking modern world — in effect, the world of the 'West' as we know it today. Cities go back a long way in human history, at least 5,000 years. But the idea of citizenship, including civil rights and civic duties, was spelt out for the first time in the city-states of ancient Greece. The Greek word for a city was (and is) *polis* — the origin of a raft of English words all connected to the same basic idea: politics, politician, politic, polite, police (law and order were in there at the beginning, even if not enforced in quite the ways we're familiar with).

The voluminous French *Encyclopédie*, published between 1751 and 1772, and often taken as a kind of manifesto for the new ideas of the Enlightenment, does not have a separate article on 'civilisation'. But the word does appear three times, most substantively in an article by Louis de Jaucourt, published in 1765, devoted to 'historical lives': there, 'civilisation' is presented as the gift of "the illustrious dead, the sages of antiquity, ... sacred shades, the objects of veneration."[1]

1 Jaucourt 1765 (my translation).

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This makes 'civilisation' sound like an abstract quality, and deeply embedded in Greco-Roman antiquity — always, of course, as viewed through the prism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. Ever since that time, the concept has been loosely expanded to embrace all forms of rational enquiry, especially in the sciences and what we would now call technological innovation, the pursuit of commerce and prosperity, and an elaborate aesthetics governing the arts. 'Civilisation', when we use the word in this abstract, generalised sense today, means a good deal more than just the sum of those keywords. And even during the last three centuries, once the word itself had become current, it has often meant rather different things to different people.

For some, it means the flourishing of the arts, more or less equivalent to human creativity. The classic 1969 BBC TV series and accompanying book by Kenneth Clark, with that one-word title, was a history of the visual arts as they had developed in western Europe since the fall of the Roman empire a millennium and a half ago.[2] But the contradictions at the heart of this understanding of 'civilisation' have long been recognised. Whatever the European thinkers of the Enlightenment may have hoped for, the actions of 'civilised' Europeans, both before and after their time, hardly lived up to them. The American poet Ezra Pound, who had been living in London since before World War I, reflected shortly after it was over that all this destruction had been "For a botched civilization, / For an old bitch gone in the teeth." A few years later, in 1930, the inventor of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, in a book known in English as *Civilization and its Discontents*, suggested that civilisation itself was responsible for the mental distresses that he observed in his patients.[3] More recently, historians such as Niall Ferguson have focused instead on the political, economic, and scientific achievements of the modern 'Western' world. Prehistorians, looking back beyond a time when written records existed, search for its most distant origins in the emergence of the earliest urban societies.[4]

Common to all these different approaches is the assumption that 'civilisation' is an abstract noun in the singular. At its origin and heart lie the enduring cultural achievements of Greek and Roman antiquity. In the modern British school curriculum, 'Classical Civilisation' (where it still exists) is implicitly a tautology. And that is without even considering those parts of the world and those communities where attempts have been made either to hijack the study of the 'classical' past to a far-

2 Clark 1980.

3 Pound 1948, 176; Freud 2002.

4 Ferguson 2011; on prehistory, see e.g. Wengrow 2010.

right, white supremacist agenda, or to reject the subject wholesale in an apparent validation of that attempted appropriation.[5]

A far more significant, and rational, challenge to the Enlightenment construction of civilisation as singular and abstract comes from the disciplines of archaeology, anthropology, the social and political sciences. For at least a century now it has been customary in these discourses to think of 'civilisation' not so much (or not only) in the singular and as a uniquely European creation, but also in the plural and shorn of the ethical and political baggage that comes with its particular manifestation in ancient Greece and Rome. From this perspective, very many different civilisations have existed at different times and in different places in the history of our planet. Acknowledging this was the starting point for a second BBC TV series, *Civilisations*, also focused on the fine arts, that was aired in 2018 and explicitly billed as a remake of the previous one.[6] Historians have long recognised that the Aztecs, the Incas, ancient Egypt, India and China (the last uninterruptedly for 3,000 years) had all created urbanised societies, artistic achievements and monuments of their own which share many of the characteristics of 'civilisation' in the abstract, often existing quite independently of the Greco-Roman world that we habitually call 'classical antiquity'.

Civilisations, in the plural, are defined by archaeologists and anthropologists as 'complex societies'. And once you define them like that, you easily begin to find more and more of them. The archaeologist David Wengrow, in a controversial book jointly written with the anthropologist, the late David Graeber, has argued that 'complex societies' have existed in prehistory and in more recent times that have been organised in ways quite different from those famous examples — and has even questioned the centrality of *cities* at all.[7]

In a modern context, the American political scientist Samuel P. Huntington defined 'a civilization' as "the highest cultural grouping of people and the broadest level of cultural identity people have short of that which distinguishes humans from other species." Huntington's celebrated essay of 1993, 'The clash of civilizations', three years later expanded into the book of the same title, identified no fewer than nine different, competing civilisations in existence at the time.[8]

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5 These subjects are explored more fully in several chapters of the present volume.

6 Beard 2018; Olusoga 2018.

7 Graeber and Wengrow 2021, 432 and *passim*. See also Wengrow 2010 and Tainter 1988, 41: "A civilization is the cultural system of a complex society. The features that popularly define a civilized society — such as great traditions of art and writing — are epiphenomena or covariables of social, political, and economic complexity. Complexity calls these traditions into being. [...] Civilization emerges with complexity, exists because of it, and disappears when complexity does."

8 Huntington 2002, 26–27 (Map 1.3); 43 (quoted).

These rather different, by now very well established but also evolving, ways of thinking about 'civilisations' (in the plural) open up alternative perspectives on the cultural achievement of the ancient Greeks — not necessarily in conflict with the one inherited from the Enlightenment, but enriching it by allowing us to view ancient Greek civilisation within a much broader context. Classicists and ancient historians have been doing this for years, of course, in a whole variety of different ways, perhaps most evidently in the branch of the field now known as Classical Reception. In the remainder of this chapter I propose to set out two potentially new approaches that I have found useful in my own recent and ongoing work.

In my book, *The Greeks: A Global History*, I took advantage of the minimalist, anthropological definition of *a* civilisation — as a 'complex society' — to propose that the history of the Greeks (understood as all those who have spoken and written the Greek *language*) needs to be seen as the story not of a single, foundational civilisation, but rather of a whole series of *different* civilisations, partly interlocking, but partly also constituted and functioning quite independently of one another, over a long period of time: Mycenaean, Archaic, Classical, Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, early modern (including Ottoman) and modern/Western.[9]

That is only one of a number of different possibilities open to the historian. Like any such attempt it rests on conscious choices — in this case to privilege the remarkable longevity of the Greek language through a continuous written record. I did not, at least overtly, in that book make any attempt to evaluate or weigh up the achievements of any one of those multiple Greek civilisations against another. I am not, indeed, sure how one would go about it, without introducing too great an element of subjectivity. But I did want to put Pericles and the building of the Acropolis inside the same covers as the anonymous scribes in the service of the Bronze Age palaces, as Marcus Aurelius and Julian the Apostate, as Byzantine iconoclasm and authors such as Michael Psellos and Anna Komnene — and certainly in the company of the movers and shapers who since 1821 have created the modern Greek nation state as we know it today.

The second perspective I want to discuss in this chapter is more tentative. Essentially it revisits that dichotomy between 'civilisation' in the singular and 'civilisations' in the plural, between an abstract idea and the concrete manifestation of certain types of human society. By all means, when we talk about the civilisation of the ancient Greeks, let us recognise it as one among many — including potential rivals to the 'West' today, as well as vanished civilisations from the past. But, precisely when viewed within that context, are there objectively identifiable characteristics that would justify us in treating *this* particular civilisation as a defining

9 Beaton 2021, 3–5.

instance, in other words, synonymous with the concept of 'civilisation' in the abstract?

I can think of three.

The first is the thread of continuity that runs from classical Greece to classical Rome, to medieval Christendom, via the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Enlightenment and hence to the globalised civilisation of today (to the extent that such can be said to exist). Whether we think of 'European' or 'Western' civilisation as a single evolving process or as a series that we can separate out under a variety of different names (Greek, Roman, medieval, Byzantine, modern European or Western, or even global), the fact is that each stage was built upon the foundations of those that went before; a common thread runs through them all and can be traced all the way from ancient Greece and Rome to today.

Civilisation, in this sense, and in the singular, is one of the most powerful ideas in the world today. It touches us all, at once emotionally and rationally; it touches on our very sense of identity (whoever and wherever we happen to be); it is equally at home in politics and the arts. Civilisation is an idea that transcends differences of ethnicity, geography, language, political system, or religious faith. In the course of its 2,500-year history it has adapted to the most drastic changes imaginable in every one of these. And yet, struggle as we may to pin down exactly what we mean by it at any given moment and in any particular situation, it is immediately recognisable.

The second characteristic, closely linked to the first, is the fact that, for good or ill, no other civilisation has yet left its mark on the entire planet, far transcending the limits of Western political dominance or influence. (Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' may well be becoming more acute and more imminent; but there is no corner of the world where Western-derived technologies, medicines, even the outward trappings of dress and political language, have not penetrated.) However one might try to define 'civilisation' (in this singular sense), there's no getting away from its link with *power*. Without the power to maintain order at home and to defend the homeland from rivals beyond its borders, no political or philosophical ideas, no developed and sophisticated arts, no discoveries in science or inventions in technology are going to gain the widespread and long-lasting recognition and assent that are inseparable from any idea of civilisation. The idea itself may sit uneasily with the realities of political, military, and economic power; but without them it could never have come into existence, or having once done so, have survived long beyond the moment of its birth. Europe's role, during the last five centuries, in exporting its distinctive brand of 'civilisation' has had profound impacts all over the

globe. This is something that needs to be recognised and understood, a cause not well served by either triumphalism or moral hand-wringing.[10]

The third characteristic is a little more complicated. Here I cannot deny that an element of subjectivity is bound to creep in — the subjectivity both of the original sources and of anyone who reads them in the context of our own times. But what I am looking for is an idea, or a set of ideas, that has retained its hold on the imagination of generations, ever since it first came to be formulated in words that we can still read. This brings me to two short passages from the 'father of history', Herodotus, that I suggest help to define the civilisation that began with the Greeks in the fifth century BCE and in its current form we call 'European' or 'Western' today.

It all begins with the Persian Wars, and the way that the Greeks began to redefine themselves in their aftermath. Herodotus memorably sets out to record the deeds of men on both sides, and (even more important), the *causes* of their actions. Why had the Greeks (some of them) resisted the Persian invaders? In one of many imaginary speeches that enliven his narrative, a pair of Spartans confront a Persian dignitary and give this explanation of their countrymen's motives:

> What it is to be a slave you well know from experience, but you have never experienced liberty, to find out whether it tastes sweet or not. If you *were* to experience it, you would be urging us to fight for it not just with spears, but also with axes.[11]

Herodotus must have grown up literally alongside the new concept of liberty, or political freedom (*eleutheria*). The word seems to have become current among the Greeks very shortly after the final battle of Plataea in 479 BCE.[12] But liberty, as Herodotus and his contemporaries understood it, was not absolute or unbounded. Another of those imaginary speeches, this time addressed to King Xerxes himself, explains why: "Enjoying liberty, the Greeks are not in every respect free: they are subject to law, which they hold in far greater awe than your subjects do you."[13] In this way the political freedom that the Greeks had fought to defend in the Persian Wars became inseparably embedded in an older concept, fundamental to the Greek *polis*, namely the rule of law, or *isonomia*.

So my third defining characteristic of ancient Greek civilisation, which links it directly to the civilisation we call Western today, and which I would argue defines

10 The positive case is made by Ferguson 2011, xxvi and *passim*; MacLennan 2018, xii and *passim*. For the opposite trend among recent historians, see, for example, Elkins 2022.

11 Hdt. 7.135 (my translation).

12 Raaflaub 2004, 60, 79, 86, 256. The earliest use of word may be in Pindar, *Pyth.* 1.71–80, probably written in 478 BCE.

13 Hdt. 7.104 (my translation).

the very *idea* of civilisation in the abstract, is the articulation of a concept of political freedom, based upon the rule of law. And in that idea, and in its extraordinary durability across the centuries, must surely lie something, at least, of the 'future of the past', or the reason *Why Classical Studies still matter*, which is the subject of this volume.

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