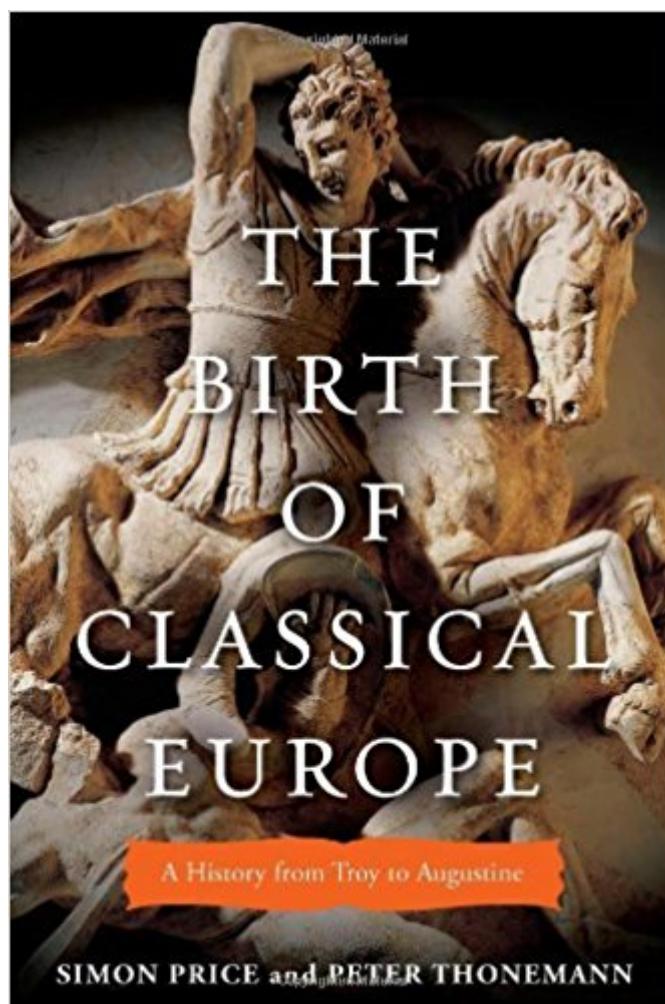


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The Birth Of Classical Europe: A History From Troy To Augustine



Synopsis

An innovative and intriguing look at the foundations of Western civilization from two leading historians. The influence of ancient Greece and Rome can be seen in every aspect of our lives. From calendars to democracy to the very languages we speak, Western civilization owes a debt to these classical societies. Yet the Greeks and Romans did not emerge fully formed; their culture grew from an active engagement with a deeper past, drawing on ancient myths and figures to shape vibrant civilizations. In *The Birth of Classical Europe*, the latest entry in the Penguin History of Europe, historians Simon Price and Peter Thonemann present a fresh perspective on classical culture in a book full of revelations about civilizations we thought we knew. In this impeccably researched and immensely readable history we see the ancient world unfold before us, with its grand cast of characters stretching from the great Greeks of myth to the world-shaping Caesars. A landmark achievement, *The Birth of Classical Europe* provides insight into an epoch that is both incredibly foreign and surprisingly familiar.

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Customer Reviews

Price and Thonemann, both historians of ancient Greece and Rome (Price is currently at Oxford University, Thonemann taught there previously), have created a multidisciplinary study with emphasis on three themes: memory (including the ancient Greeks' and Romans' memory of their own past); communal identity as defined by the ancients; and changing definitions of what constitutes "Classical." The book is saved from excessive, and specialized, detail in its first half by the frequent use of well-placed vignettes that enliven the text with fascinating anecdotal

background. Covering two millennia, the book begins with the myth of Europa, and the authors traverse the distance from the mysterious Minoans to the Greeks, with appropriate attention to Hellenism and on to the Romans of the early Latin kingdom, the republic, and the establishment of the empire. Maps, diagrams, building plans, and illustrations are used effectively, and the narrative becomes truly enjoyable in the book's second half, especially regarding the Roman settlement of Britain. A coda describing the later history of the Roman Empire wisely details the competition among religions and the extraordinary impact of militant belief on politics, culture, and civilization in the West. (Feb.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved.

Both Price and Thonemann have taught classical history at Oxford. Their relatively compact examination of ancient Greek and Roman development covers a millennium and a half. But the book is not an introductory survey aimed at general readers. Rather, the authors have written an engrossing, original, frequently provocative reinterpretation of the Western heritage. Relying heavily on archaeological evidence, Price and Thonemann consider the Minoans as essential rather than peripheral to the development of Hellenic civilization. They eloquently illustrate that the "miracle" of the achievements of that civilization owed much to earlier Mediterranean civilizations, especially those of Egypt and Phoenicia. They skillfully illustrate the extent and limitations of "Romanization" under the imperium. A recurrent theme is the powerful influence of memory. Despite the paucity of evidence, both Greeks and Romans often sought to identify with the legacy of the Trojan War. For both scholars and amateur historians, this work will have great value. --Jay Freeman

How do we know what we know about the Ancient World? The authors of this terrific history are willing to reveal the translation process from findings to speculations. Archeological evidence is interpreted and at times reinterpreted to explain what we think we know about what happened between two and four thousand years ago in Europe. The data used is current and findings from just the past few years are referenced to support various hypotheses. Nonetheless this book isn't an archeological dig but a full scale history. Finding a history that covers both Greece and Rome (with side trips to the Near East and Africa) can be difficult, but finding one that does a good job in under 400 pages is an accomplishment indeed. Although much is covered, the writing never feels like a skim. In fact, if a caveat can be made, it's that the writing at times can be too dense. Saying that, it is always clear and jargon-free. Another strength is the wealth of maps and charts that clarify the text, and the aptly chosen color plates, the latter used more sparingly. Many ideas are controversial

which has lead some reviewers to direct this book to the specialists. Controversial ideas are presented as such and the data for and against are easily followed (the African influence on Ancient Greece, whether flipping the evidence supports either Greek or Phoenician presence in the colony of Al Mina in the Levant, for example). This volume continues the outstanding precedence of the Penguin History of Europe series that have previously produced excellent single author volumes to satisfy the academic as well as the general reader. This is probably the best and most up-to-date single volume text covering both Greek and Roman history currently in print.

Unlike any of my friends or family I am a fan of dry textbooks. While I appreciate a lively and /or compelling narrative I also enjoy crisp and concise neutrality. This book was a major disappointment in that it provided neither. To be certain the academic rigor and detail were all there, but the overall organization and presentation of ideas and facts was an atrocious hodgepodge that was in fact harder for me to read than *Ulysses* by James Joyce. I am a life-long fan of history and so it saddens me to see so many learned academics writing such disjointed and discouraging prose that only serves to convince the masses that history is an unintelligible and hence unimportant subject. I think it should be incumbent upon all academics to subject their rigorous scholarship to a second layer of scrutiny where exposition is concerned.

There are thousands of books about the classical world so one might ask if we really need another. The answer is yes we do. Our understanding of the past is constantly changing as new information is discovered. New writers have new ways of looking at old subjects. Most of all as the world we live in changes we need new books to help us connect with a past that is constantly moving. *The Birth of Classical Europe* is a wonderful introduction to the ancient world. The authors focus on Greek history and then move on to Rome. They do not spend a lot of time on the civilizations of Mesopotamia, the Ancient Near East, and Egypt. That is not because of any Eurocentric prejudice, but rather they focus their story on one specific region. They spend a lot of time on Minoan and Mycenaean cultures. Using archeological discoveries from the last 20 years they build up a picture of the ancient world that is a little less catastrophic than the previous pictures that we have had. They argue more for a story of a sequence migrations that ends with assimilation. This is a little less sudden than the image of hordes of invaders wiping out the natives and resettling the region. The authors spend a lot of time with ancient authors and recognize the value of the ancient sources. They do not accept the ancient stories at face value, that would of course be a mistake. Instead they look at the archeology and see how that illuminates the stories. Often credible theories of the

past can be built when one uses this method. This book is not meant to be a comprehensive history of the ancient world. Instead it is an introduction to the period. As the first volume of The Penguin History of Europe its purpose is to give the reader an understanding of the foundations of European civilization. The book is designed for the general reader. If you are not well read in the period you can pick this book up and learn a lot. I consider myself to be moderately well read in the period and I learned a lot. The Further Reading section at the end has a wonderful list of books, both scholarly and general reader, that should keep the person interested in the period satisfied for a long time to come. I highly recommend this book for anyone who would like to learn about the ancient world. This can be read as a general reader book and could also be used as a high school level textbook for home schoolers or others interested in providing young people with well written book that is informative and enjoyable.

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