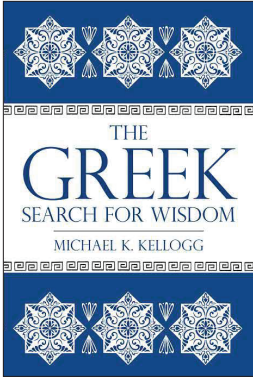


BOOK REVIEWS

MASTERWORKS OF ANCIENT GREECE



Michael K. Kellogg. *The Greek Search for Wisdom*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2012. 341 pp.

In Robert A. Heinlein's short story *By His Bootstraps* (Heinlein 1970), the main character Bob Wilson, who is writing a philosophical dissertation in a locked room, finds himself in the midst of weird events, and, as a result, he travels 30,000 years into the future. He is in a huge palace, part of which is suitable to be inhabited by people, while the rest is described as follows:

Great halls large enough to hold ten thousand people at once – had there been floors for them to stand on. For there frequently were no floors in the accepted meaning of a level or reasonably level platform. [...] He crawled gingerly forward and looked over the edge. The mouth of the passage debouched high up on a wall of the place; below him the wall was cut back so that there was not even a vertical surface for the eye to follow. Far below him, the wall curved back and met its mate of the opposite side – not decently, in a horizontal plane, but at an acute angle. (Heinlein 1970: 75–76)

In this far future, Wilson also meets some people, who lead a rather primitive life in the palace, and who tell him that the palace was built by the High Ones, creatures of unknown origin and fate, who once visited the Earth.

In Greek mythology, Minotaur, a monster with the head of a bull, lives in a labyrinth on Crete Island, and he is killed by the Athenian hero Theseus with the help of Ariadne and a ball of thread given by her (Graves 1957: 336–339).¹ Historically, the labyrinth myth could be based on the palace of Knossos with its maze of halls and corridors, in which the plunderers of Athens roved around; also there was a labyrinth-patterned dancing floor in front of the palace (ibid.: 345–346). The word 'labyrinth' might have been derived from *labrys*, a ritual double-headed axe, the term being neither of Greek nor (most probably) of Indo-European origin (Frisk 1991: 67). The palace in Knossos dates back to the Minoan-Mycenaean era (3rd–2nd millennium BC), with Minoan non-Indo-European culture dominating in the first half. At the end of the Mycenaean era, in the 12th century, the legendary Trojan War presumably took place. So the ancient Greek culture was founded on the ruins of an alien culture, and drew material for its myths from the latter. Also, the ruins of antiquity have contributed to a large extent to the spread of the Renaissance, both directly and figuratively. As a specimen of physical heritage, we could mention the Colosseum in Rome, which was, among other things, also used as a quarry, as after the end of the era of antiquity no proper function was found for the structure. Here we also have to bear in mind that antiquity, which we tend to regard as the cradle of European culture, also presents a case of domesticating the alien,

which never completely succeeds. Occidental culture re-translates antiquity into the present day, both the texts and the culture in general. Beginning from the Renaissance, we can mention here the humanists, and from the recent past also Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, who are renowned even today, in the 21st century.

So, a simplistic approach to another culture could involve two possibilities: we can either look for similarities and interpret the alien from our own viewpoint or point out the differences and try to understand them as much as possible. The aforementioned citation from R.A. Heinlein describes an encounter with the alien and abstruse.² Michael K. Kellogg's popular science book entitled *The Greek Search for Wisdom*, on the other hand, focuses on the domestication of ancient Greek culture. This volume covers, in temporal sequence, the following Greek authors and their masterworks: Homer, Hesiod, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Herodotus, Thucydides, Aristophanes, Plato and Aristotle. This list of names indicates that the author focuses on the classical era in ancient Greece (the 5th and 4th centuries BC). The only ones who belong to the archaic, pre-classical era (ca 800–500 BC) are epic poets Homer and Hesiod. Also, the selection of authors is geographically rather limited: except for Homer and Hesiod, only historian Herodotus³ did not come from Athens, although he also frequented this city and befriended Pericles (see pp. 189–191) and Sophocles (pp. 99–126), who were representatives of the classical spirit of Athens. On the one hand, in a certain sense it was the highlight of ancient Greek culture: Kellogg compares the creative outburst of the period in Greece to that of the 16th-century Western Europe, the time of Leonardo, Michelangelo, Raphael, Montaigne, Cervantes and Shakespeare (p. 101). On the other hand, however, the selection of authors can be traced back to the viewpoint of more recent culture. Classical Athens represents the values that the Occident has idealised commencing the Renaissance. However, we cannot overlook Homer and Hesiod, as they were the foundations of the entire ancient Greek culture. Without knowing Homer, we would not be able to interpret the heritage of the classical era. Kellogg represents pure tradition and re-produces the myth underlying European identity. He does not pose a question as to what extent contemporary ideals could have been transmitted to antiquity during the Renaissance or later on, when some of these did not even exist in this form. So, Kellogg speaks neither about the different nor about the alien; yet, now and then, domesticates rather boldly. For example, on page 57 he argues that the beginning of *Theogony* by Hesiod, which describes the emergence of the world from chaos, is, in a certain sense, like an ancient version of Steven Weinberg's book *The First Three Minutes* (Weinberg 1988). Also, according to Kellogg, Euripides's tragedies *Electra* and *Orestes* start in Aeschylus's world and end in that of *Pulp Fiction* (p. 129). Kellogg here discusses allusions and does not identify Hesiod's cosmogony with the modern theory of physics, or Euripides's tragedies with Hollywood cult movies; so such comparisons cannot be regarded as wrong; yet, they mediate the message by which we are direct heirs of antiquity and it is quite easy to skip the 2500 years and cultural differences that separate us from this era.⁴

The compilation principles of the book could be criticised to a certain extent. In the introduction, Michael K. Kellogg says that it was not difficult to select the ten most distinguished authors, as the heritage of lyric poets and pre-Socratics is too fragmentary, Pindar's odes "are an acquired taste" and "Xenophon [...] is not on a par with the others considered here" (p. 23). The latter two argumentations are clearly judgemental.

As concerns the fact that the works of lyric poets have survived only fragmentarily, we cannot, regardless, underestimate their impact on the Greek wisdom, which seems to be the main topic in Kellogg's book. Besides, the works of neither the elegists⁵ nor the iambographers⁶ are dwelt upon in more detail. Also, "[...] the Hellenistic⁷ philosophers, who left only fragments behind, are properly considered only along with their Roman counterparts" (p. 23). The Greek authors of the Roman Empire (beginning the 1st century BC) are not mentioned at all; for example, Plotinus's name cannot be found in the index part at the back of the book (pp. 329–341), although he based his work on classical culture and left a permanent imprint on the more recent Christian tradition.

Although the absence of lyric poets, pre-Socratics and authors from Hellenistic and Roman Empire periods could be justified to a certain extent by focusing on the classical era, the cream of Greek culture, it still remains disputable why Greek rhetoric has been mentioned only fleetingly, although it is one of the intrinsic elements of the classical democratic Athens. Orator Demosthenes is mentioned only transiently in the chapters dedicated to historian Thucydides and comic playwright Aristophanes; yet, the name of Demosthenes's contemporary rival Aeschines is totally missing in Kellogg's book. We could recall here that Demosthenes's public political speeches against Philip II of Macedon, who jeopardised the independence of Athens, are regarded as the highlight of political speech by the same tradition that Kellogg represents. The term 'Philippic' denoting a fierce attacking political speech also derives from Demosthenes.

We have to admit that M.K. Kellogg's work *The Greek Search for Wisdom* can rather be categorised as popular science. For the most part, the author makes no attempts to say something new, but rather tells the story of an era and its culture and draws parallels with the present day. This is also testified by only infrequent references to secondary sources. Hereby the author cites the traditional and foundational treatments, such as Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis* (1973), Werner Jaeger's *Paideia* (1986), Friedrich Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* (1968) and Alfred North Whitehead's *Process and Reality* (1985). Yet, the author also refers to some authoritative more modern treatments, so that at each topic the reader is given allusions of how to proceed. A commendable feature is suggestions for further reading at the end of the book (pp. 291–297), which offers a more detailed overview of secondary sources. However, practically all the sources referred to are English translations. In places, citations in the book are inconsistent.⁸

When speaking about the strong points of Michael K. Kellogg's book, we could first mention its comprehensiveness. If we leave aside the aforementioned criticism about the selection of authors, the book gives an excellent overview of Greek culture in the classical era. The reader is provided with a short biography and a list of the most significant works by all the ten authors. This is followed by a more detailed treatment of selected topics or some books. Kellogg places the writers and their works in a wider historical and cultural context.

In the case of Homer, Kellogg dwells upon *The Iliad* and its characters – Achilles, Patroklos, Hector and Priam – as well as hero ethics, the role of gods and so-called terrible beauty.⁹ The other epic poem by Homer, *The Odyssey*, is mentioned only fleetingly. In the case of Hesiod, the significant topics to be discussed are conscious authorship, changing roles of gods in comparison to Homer¹⁰, and farmer's ethics. Here Kellogg focuses on *Works and Days*. The following chapters are dedicated to three famous Greek tragedians: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. In the chapter about Aeschylus, the

topics under discussion include Persian wars and democracy in Athens; here Kellogg also dwells on *Oresteia*, the only survived antique trilogy of tragedies. The chapter about Sophocles focuses¹¹ on the tragedies concerned with the Theban rulers: *Antigone*, *King Oedipus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Euripides's plays *Electra* and *Orestes* are compared to Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, as they are based on the same myths and feature the same characters. In more detail Kellogg discusses Euripides's *Medea* and *The Bacchae*. A recurrent topic for all the three tragedians is attitude towards the gods and its evolution throughout times; this is what people's own position is based on, which from Kellogg's point of view seems to be even more important.

The following two chapters are dedicated to the so-called first historians, Herodotus and Thucydides. Herodotus is mentioned by the title "The Father of History", conferred by Cicero, but here Kellogg also recalls the derogatory attitude of his critics in Early Modern Times, who branded him "The Father of Lies". Herodotus's travels, his attitude towards myths and his moral principles are also discussed here. The connecting element of his voluminous history study, *The Histories*, is the Persian Empire; on the one hand, the work describes the countries and peoples that the Persians occupied, while on the other, the background is constituted by the Greek-Persian Wars. In the chapter about Herodotus, M.K. Kellogg focuses mainly on Persian danger, the famous conflicts on the Plain of Marathon and at the pass of Thermopylae, on the Salamis Sea Battle, and repelling of the Persian attack near Plataea. Thucydides's *History* starts from where Herodotus's chronicles left off, and focuses on the Peloponnesian War. Here Kellogg discusses the following topics: growth in the power of Athens, conflict with Sparta, the plague, Athenian tragic campaign in Sicily, and the consequences of the war. A separate mention is made about the commanders – Pericles, Cleon and Brasidas, as well as Demosthenes.

The following chapter is dedicated to Aristophanes, the most renowned¹² representative of the Old Attic Comedy. First, Kellogg gives an overview of the Old Attic Comedy in general as well as the performances, which is followed by more detailed introductions of Aristophanes's so-called peace plays, *The Acharnians*, *Peace*, and *Lysistrata*, which feature a certain reaction to the Peloponnesian War that impoverished Athens. These are followed by discussions of *The Birds*, *Plutus*, and *The Assemblywomen*¹³, which describe social utopias. A separate subchapter is dedicated to *The Clouds*, which lampoons philosophy, sophistry and mainly Socrates, and *The Frogs*, which ridicules tragedians.

The last two chapters of M.K. Kellogg's book are dedicated to philosophers Plato and Aristotle. In the case of Plato, the focus is only on his *Symposium*. The speeches in the praise of love are grouped as follows: Phaedrus, Pausanias and Eryximachus; Aristophanes and Agathon; Socrates and Diotima; Alcibiades. Diotima's speech enables Kellogg to also touch upon Plato's theory of Forms. In Aristotle's philosophy, M.K. Kellogg focuses on ethics, moderation, and recommendable way of life in this regard. More detailed are discussions of man as a "political"¹⁴ creature and Aristotle's theory of politics.

The above description gives the reader an idea of the core of Kellogg's book, which is the human being¹⁵. It becomes most explicit in the chapters about philosophers. In the case of Plato, the analysis focuses on one of his middle dialogues about love. Undoubtedly, *The Symposium* is also an essential dialogue; yet, some others missing in Kellogg's book are just as important or even more so from the point of view of his theory of Forms. Focus on Aristotle's ethics and politics is also one-sided, as the philosopher's writings

on metaphysics and logic¹⁶ as well as works dedicated to nature and literary criticism¹⁷ have been practically overlooked. Yet, the latter have exerted a strong impact on the more recent tradition. But as concerns the human being, for Kellogg it is a constant that connects us to other cultures and eras.¹⁸

In conclusion we could say that Michael K. Kellogg's book, *The Greek Search for Wisdom*, is a gripping summary of the Greek authors of the classical era as well as their works, providing also a historic and cultural background of the era. The book revives the era of antiquity for the reader. Yet, the reader should bear in mind that the overview is not comprehensive, but constitutes a limited selection of authors and topics. Also, we have to be aware that there is a gap between the familiar and the alien, which was referred to in the beginning. Only after we have acknowledged it, we can start mapping unknown lands.

Neeme Närinä

Notes

- ¹ M.K. Kellogg also recommends his book (p. 291).
- ² As the palace also has rooms for people, it also has a familiar element.
- ³ Herodotus was born in Halicarnassus, Asia Minor.
- ⁴ Comparisons with the works of William Shakespeare are frequent (about Homer in more detail on p. 46, about Euripides on p. 129) and the Old Testament (e.g. on p. 124 the banished Oedipus in Sophocles's play *Oedipus at Colonus* is compared to Job in the Old Testament). From the viewpoint of antiquity, such comparisons are certainly anachronistic; yet, they help to make the texts of antique authors more reader-friendly.
- ⁵ Theognis, Solon and Mimnermus could be mentioned among the most renowned ones.
- ⁶ E.g. Hipponax and Archilochus. In the case of the iamb, a separate discourse could be seen, which existed in a certain form also during the classical period (see Steinrück 2009).
- ⁷ The beginning of the Hellenistic era is marked by the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC, and the end by the Battle of Actium in 31 BC.
- ⁸ On pp. 122–123, the author claims, unreferenced, that according to Aristotle, tragedy was supposed to make people sympathise with the hero's sufferings and understand the vulnerability of the human "in a universe whose purpose and meaning we cannot fully grasp", whereas on pages 127 and 129 there are references to Aristotle's *Poetics*. On p. 114 the author quotes Hegel through George Steiner (1984: 4).
- ⁹ The expression 'terrible beauty' can be found only in Robert Fagles's translation cited by M.K. Kellogg. Kellogg uses this expression to characterise the entire epic poem. Also we have to note that in Kellogg's citations the numbers of verses in *The Iliad* do not correspond to those in the more wide-spread publications (Kellogg refers here to verses 3.187–190, whereas in the more wide-spread publications these are 3.156–160).

- ¹⁰ Mainly in Hesiod's *Theogony*.
- ¹¹ The content and themes of other plays by Sophocles are also briefly presented.
- ¹² Actually, Aristophanes is the only author in the Old Attic Comedy whose several works have survived virtually complete.
- ¹³ Kellogg sees it as a parody of state organisation in Plato's *The Republic*.
- ¹⁴ Here the relationship is, above all, to polis (Greek city-state), not politics in the modern sense of the word.
- ¹⁵ In this respect, this book could be compared to Jean-Pierre Vernant's excellent collection *The Greeks* (Vernant 1995).
- ¹⁶ In *Metaphysics* and *Organon*, respectively.
- ¹⁷ About natural sciences, e.g., in the *History of Animals*, and *Parts of Animals*; about literary criticism in *Rhetoric* and *Poetics*.
- ¹⁸ On pp. 43–46 Kellogg suggests that Greek gods could have been merely metaphoric aspects of the human *psyche*, i.e., general human archetypes.

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