

An exhibition at the Field Museum in Chicago

The Greeks: Agamemnon to Alexander the Great

By Leah Jeresova
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The Greeks: Agamemnon to Alexander the Great, *at the Field Museum in Chicago, November 25, 2015–April 10, 2016. The exhibition catalog is edited by Maria Andreadaki-Vlazaki and Anastasia Balaska. Hellenic Republic Ministry of Culture and Sports. Athens, Kapon Editions, 2014.*

The most comprehensive exhibition of Greek art and artifacts ever to tour outside Greece opened at the Field Museum of Chicago on November 25. This highly recommended show will be on view until April 10. From Chicago, it will move to the National Geographic Museum in Washington, D.C. and be on display from May 26 through October 9.

The Greeks were a diverse group of peoples inhabiting mainland Greece and the Greek islands, and, in ancient times, the coast of what is now Turkey. They shared a common language and religion, and many of the same political institutions.

Over the course of the several millennia of their ascendancy, the Greeks passed through a variety of social formations: from early class societies on the basis of the “Neolithic Revolution” in agriculture that began some 10,000 years ago in western Asia to the societies, based to a large degree on slave labor, which provided the material basis for a flowering of Greek culture and politics.

“Classical beauty,” wrote Hegel in his *Aesthetics*, “with its infinite range of content, material, and form is the gift vouchsafed to the Greek people, and we must honour this people for having produced art in its supreme vitality.”

Greek achievements include Homer’s epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*; the classical Greek drama of Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides; the sculpture of Phidias; the foundations of Western philosophy; the political achievement of Athenian democracy; as well as the conquests of Alexander the Great. Hellenic culture had an impact on world history unlike few other civilizations, and to fully understand the development of modern society, it is necessary to study the impressive culture established by the Greeks.

“The Greeks” was organized by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture, Education and Religious Affairs in Athens, in cooperation with curators from the four participating museums. It has already toured in Canada to wide acclaim, appearing at the Montreal Archaeology and History Complex and the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau, Quebec.

“The Greeks” comes at a time when harsh austerity measures have been imposed on the Greek people and the tourism industry has suffered. The Greek government has been driven by the ongoing economic crisis to sponsor a blockbuster exhibition it hopes will attract tourists from North America.

Greece today is a country being bled white by the big European banks. Unemployment stands at over 25 percent, pensions have been slashed, the health care system devastated and homelessness and hunger have increased to levels unheard of since the Second World War.

The pseudo-left government of Syriza (Coalition of the Radical Left) was elected in January 2015 by millions of Greek workers in the hopes it would fight austerity. Syriza quickly betrayed those hopes and made even deeper inroads into the quality of life for millions of Greeks. Its measures have had a devastating impact not only on the health and wellbeing of Greeks, but on the legacy of Greek culture itself. In 2012 museums laid off of 30-50 percent of their staffs, with further cuts in the years following. Greek police have estimated that since austerity measures began in 2009, the theft of antiquities has increased by 30 percent.

In October last year, the Syriza government raised the price of admission to hundreds of museums and historical sites by between 66 and 150 percent.

The exhibition at the Field Museum brings ancient Greek history to life, through some 500 artifacts in all, loaned from 21 museums throughout the country. The curators have organized the contents chronologically and thematically into a “meet the people” experience encompassing six diverse and lively zones.

The Bronze Age (3500-1050 B.C.) is the star attraction of the first half of the exhibition. Civilization advanced rapidly from its Stone Age beginnings, when bronze—an alloy of copper and tin—became the principal material for making tools and weapons.

The Cycladic, Minoan and Mycenaean cultures benefited from their positions on important sea and land routes that allowed them to develop extensive trading networks.

Cycladic civilization flourished at the end of the third millennium B.C. Its sculpture is characterized by an abstract treatment of the human form. Marble statuettes with folded arms and oval, flat heads are typical.

The Minoans developed a sophisticated culture on the island of Crete. Precious metals and other materials were abundant (e.g., tin, copper, silver, gold, ivory). A wealthy ruling class supported the arts. Examples of Kamares ware (pottery) are impressive, with dramatic geometric motifs. A goddess figurine with upraised arms and cylindrical skirt has a bird atop her head, symbolizing divinity.

Mycenaean society developed in southern regions of mainland Greece, with the emergence of large towns anchored by great palaces. Mycenae became a powerful government and cultural center, dominated by a military aristocracy.

The “Mask of Agamemnon,” the mythical king of Mycenae—a victor in the Trojan War—is the stunning centerpiece of the exhibition, towering over the other displays. This breathtaking gold funerary mask, 3,000 years old, was discovered in a royal grave by German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann, who exclaimed: “I have gazed upon the eyes of Agamemnon!” However, the burial had taken place three centuries too early to be that of Agamemnon. A replica is presented here.

Mycenaean metalwork is opulent and exotic. Lions and eagles were

favorite decorative motifs in this warrior culture, symbols of power and valor. A dagger on view featuring a gold inlaid spiral decoration is a masterpiece of Mycenaean craftsmanship.

The first writing systems were syllabary (a set of written characters representing syllables and serving the purpose of an alphabet) scripts on clay tablets. The visitor should not miss a display of tablets with a script known as “Linear B,” an early version of Greek, developed around 1300 B.C., found in Minoan and Mycenaean contexts on Crete and mainland Greece. “Linear B” was deciphered in 1952 by Michael Ventris, an English linguist, thereby demonstrating that the Mycenaeans were one of the first Greek-speaking cultures. A short film illustrates how pictograms—symbolizing wine, olive oil, armor, animals, men or women—were burned into the wet clay.

With the collapse of Mycenaean civilization, the Greeks lost their writing system and it was not until the Eighth Century B.C. that they borrowed an alphabet from the Phoenicians—another great seafaring people—and adapted it to the Greek language. A prime requirement in choosing an alphabet was its ability to transcribe complex epic poetry from the oral tradition.

Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, epics written in the Eighth century B.C., depict events occurring at the dawn of the turbulent Iron Age, in tribal kingdoms along the periphery of mainland Greece. These epic poems, one of the foundations of Western literature, have a universal theme: the struggles of human beings with nature (which appear in the ancient world as fate) and with each other. Most scholars believe that the tales existed within an oral tradition, some 500 to 700 years before Homer wrote them down.

In the *Iliad*, Homer tells the story of the Trojan War. A famous scene from the *Iliad* painted on a clay vase of the late sixth century B.C. depicts the Greek warrior Achilles avenging the death of his close friend Patroclus, who had been killed by Hector—a prince of Troy. Achilles kills Hector in revenge and drags his body along the ground, tied to a chariot.

A chilling reconstruction of a Homeric funeral pyre is on view from Eleutherna in Crete. The warrior hero has been cremated, but his enemy captive has been decapitated, trapped between the worlds of the living and the dead. These funerary rituals were described in the *Iliad*.

A helmet made from the tusks of wild boars, of the type worn by Odysseus in the *Iliad*, is displayed, with an inlay made from hippopotamus ivory.

In the *Odyssey* Homer tells the story of the return voyage of Odysseus, a leading Greek general, from the Trojan War. Artifacts on display include a clay vase fragment showing the blinding of Polyphemus, a man-eating Cyclops, and a vase painting showing Odysseus enchanted by the music and voices of the seductive Sirens—both referring to episodes in the *Odyssey*.

A selection of bronze and gold helmets (10 in all) buried with Bottiaean tribal ruler-warriors shows us the face of war in the Archaic period (seventh to sixth century B.C.). The viewer should note the decorative gold mouthpieces, gilded swords, javelins and other weaponry. The Bottiaeans inhabited Central Macedonia.

By the eighth century B.C., the *polis* (autonomous city-state) had become the basic political unit of Greek civilization. These societies evolved through various forms of government—ruled by aristocracies, oligarchies, tyrannies and, finally, democracies. In the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., Athens was the most powerful *polis* in Greece. All of these societies had an economic basis in agriculture, especially the cultivation of wheat, wine and olive oil, farmed by a mixture of free peasant and slave labor.

In 480 B.C. at the Battle of Thermopylae, the Spartans under King Leonidas staged a heroic resistance and experienced a bitter defeat at the hands of the Persian Empire, which had attempted to bring the Greek city-states under its sway. Athenian victories over the Persians soon paved

the way for Athenian dominance in the Classical Period. A marble statue of Leonidas from the Acropolis of Sparta is prominently displayed.

The Classical Period in Athens represents what archaeologists refer to as an authoritative cultural standard, characterized by developments in philosophy, literature, the arts and sciences and democracy.

Athens was one of the world’s first democracies. Citizens (most free adult men, including both rich and poor) were expected to serve on juries and participate in civic life. A number of small objects used by the courts are displayed, including a *pinakion* (juror’s identification ticket); ballots (round bronze disks), for acquittal or conviction of the accused; court tokens used for paying juror’s fees; and wage tokens used to pay salaries of citizens who were chosen by lot to serve a public function.

The spirit of civic competition was evident in the inter-city Olympic Games held every four years. The graphic identification of this in the exhibition is a relief in marble, showing an athlete crowning himself from 460 B.C., considered a metaphor for democracy.

A copy of the famous Stele of Democracy (Law Against Tyranny) is on view—a decree from 337/336 B.C., which depicts the figure of Democracy crowning the enthroned Demos (the people).

With the victory of King Philip II over the Athenians in 338 B.C., Greek power shifted north to Macedonia. Philip was a patron of the arts and culture, and the portion of the show treating this period contains several of the most dramatic artifacts in the exhibition.

A marble statuette of Alexander the Great, achieving immortality as the woodland god Pan with horns, from the early Hellenistic Period (the period associated with the Greeks after Alexander’s conquests), is the finest piece of sculpture in the exhibition. Pan is usually depicted as a grotesque creature, part goat. But here, Alexander is the ideal of male beauty.

A spectacular gold enamel myrtle wreath, worn by Queen Meda, wife of Philip II, is described in the catalog as “one of the most remarkable gold objects of the ancient world.” The myrtle plant is associated with the goddess of love and beauty, Aphrodite.

The exhibition concludes with the death of Alexander the Great and the spread of Hellenism throughout Asia Minor, the Near East, Egypt and India. Hellenistic civilization thrived in the third and second centuries B.C., until it was overwhelmed by Roman power.

After its loss of political dominance, Athens remained an important cultural center. Its schools of philosophy attracted students from throughout the Mediterranean region. Finally, the Byzantine (East Roman) Emperor Justinian, deeming the pagan teaching of philosophy too threatening to Christianity, forbade the teaching of philosophy in Athens in 529 A.D.

The ancient Greek myth of Prometheus, the titan who stole fire from the gods and gave it to mankind, a revolutionary act, was Karl Marx’s favorite. In *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus, the father of dramatic tragedy, fire is the key to wisdom, ensuring humanity’s survival and the development of arts and industry. The brilliant craftsmanship and imaginative genius of the artifacts on display at the Field Museum bring out the reality the myth speaks to.

From the introductory film to the closing wall texts, the exhibition comments eloquently on the legacy of “eternal Greece,” which lives on within human culture as a whole.

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