Greece and Rome: The Molds of Western Civilization

Books with copious, high-quality illustrations, all or part of them in color, often in large format, have become commonplace in the past 10 or 15 years. Many of these have been little more than collections of photographs, welcome for their quality and completeness. But the public is now sated with fine photographic reproductions of the art of all ages; in fact, an ennui has developed from seeing the same photographs, particularly those in color, over and over again. There has resulted a demand for books for the general public with texts equal in quality to the illustrations, a demand that is being supplied admirably, especially by the series of which **The Birth of Western Civilization** (McGraw-Hill, New York, 1964. 360 pp., $28.50) is the third volume.

Like its predecessors, the present volume is the loosely-knit product of many authors (ten in this case). The introduction by Michael Grant, the editor, and each of the ten chapters are accompanied by a section of handsome illustrations, about half of them in color, which have lengthy captions that to some extent repeat the text and attempt to present a separate, but much shorter, account than do the chapters themselves. The chapters, varying in length from 8 to 18 large-size pages, are on the whole quick sketches, deftly drawn by competent hands, giving at a glance a view of one aspect of Greek or Roman civilization. With breadth of coverage as the aim, there is no place for pausing to draw the intricacies of detail that some might wish, but that the ability to do so lies within each author is manifest in most cases from the sureness and authority of the sketch. Both the authors and the editor deserve much credit for the clarity of the accounts and the lack of obvious dissimilarity in style in a work produced by so many hands.

As an introduction, Grant has used the theme of the manifold influences of Greek and Roman civilizations on those of later eras down to our own and has stressed the role of mythology as a primary link in the chain of transmission. The latter is a theme that lends itself well to illustration, and we are treated to a feast of portrayals in many media—ancient, medieval, Renaissance, modern, and even contemporary—of a number of myths. Although our heritage in architecture can be, and is, illustrated, our debt to Roman law is easier to state verbally than pictorially. Grant states in closing that the purpose of the book is to show our inheritance, both good and bad, from Greece and Rome and to give an appreciation of the past and of our moorings in it.

The sketch of earliest Greece, from Neolithic times to the introduction of alphabetic writing about 750 B.C., is by George Huxley. Here one can detect a hand much less sure in the account of pre-Mycenaean Greece than in that of the Mycenaean period and the Dark Age. There is, for instance, no mention of preceramic Neolithic. The dating of Dimini Late Neolithic as late as 2500 B.C. is no longer possible. The House of the Tiles at Lerna was destroyed at the end of Early Helladic II, perhaps 2300 to 2200 B.C., not at the end of Early Helladic III, some two or three centuries later. Gyali obsidian will not flake and so cannot be used for arrowheads or for any tools or weapons. The case for a Luvian invasion of Greece is overstated; there may be no basis for it at all. For Minoan and Mycenaean cultures there is a fine account, and it is good to see that Huxley wastes none of the reader's time in a refutation of Palmer, merely stating that the latter's case for a lower dating of the Linear B tablets from Knossos cannot be said to be proved. The Trojan War is explained on strategic grounds as the first step by the Mycenaeans in getting control of northwest Asia Minor from the Hittites. But both Mycenaeans and Hittites fell before the onslaught of barbarian hordes in the 12th century B.C. The confusion of movements that followed to and fro across the Aegean and the Mediterranean is here sketched with clarity and brevity.

A. R. Burn's account of Greek history and H. C. Baldry's essay on Greek literature are potent capsules, full of facts and competent interpretations of them. These make excellent reading and have much to recommend them to the scholar as well as to the layman, for whom they are really intended. To one who has spent many of the past 30 years excavating at Corinth, it is astonishing to read that "hardly anything survives on the plain except a few columns from the Temple of Apollo" (p. 54). Of the illustrations to these chapters, it is those showing the position of the forces at Marathon (p. 56) and Salamis (pp. 58 and 59) that deserve special mention. They are sure to be picked out for further use in texts, and we owe a special debt to Alan Sorrell for the latter. The three-page, illustrated, color map of the routes of Alexander's campaigns is exceptionally helpful in understanding the magnitude of his achievement and the tremendous diversity of the Hellenistic world. Perhaps even more striking to the general public will be W. K. C. Guthrie's chapter, "The revolution of the mind," for in this age of science there seems to be far too little basic appreciation of the nature of philosophical speculation, much of which we would now call science, that flourished in Greece from early in the sixth century B.C.

If I pick out John Boardman's account of Greek art and architecture as the finest among many of high quality, it may only be because of the prejudice of an archeologist, but I believe that the unbiased will here find the most masterful sketch of all. It is tightly packed, but I would change little if anything, either to add or to substract. I counted the 14 pages over and over in disbelief that so much could be put into so few pages. Yet it reads extremely well and is written in language that will be clearly understood by all. The illustrations are chosen with the same care that is evident in the text; with 95 photographs on plates and 17 drawings in the text, there is enough to give a very clear and concise picture of Greek art and architecture. William Suddaby's reconstruction in color of the interior of the Parthenon is most welcome, though I would take exception to the Corinthian column used to prop up the right hand holding the golden Niké.

The worlds of Greece and Rome

meet in F. R. Cowell's chapter on everyday life in both. I cannot help but feel that the squalor of Athens is overemphasized, and I do not believe that there was less of this in Rome or that the poor of Rome lived better because of the tenements. It is rather the squalor of the latter that has so often appalled us. We know much, from Olynthos and Delos in particular, of the houses and appurtenances of middle-class merchants in Greece, but none of this is mentioned. The picture given here seems quite out of focus with respect to material remains. The statement that there were no tables as we know them seems out of keeping with the evidence (p. 182). With respect to occupations, avocations, education, justice and the law, the account is better.

R. A. G. Carson's account of Roman history, from the founding of the city to the moving of the capitol to Constantinople, is another tightly and masterfully drawn account. The author's interest in numismatics is often evident, nowhere with more pleasing results than in the numerous excellent photographs of coins, often in color, used to give the reader a visual image of the chief participants in the events described; the series of coins shown on pages 216 and 217 is superb. Hardly less can be said for Michael Grant's chapter on Roman literature. There is nothing of importance left out and little that one would want to do without. Its high readability matches that of both Boardman's and Carson's chapters. The illustrations are most varied, and Grant has drawn on every possible source to illuminate his account.

But in Sir Mortimer Wheeler's chapter on Roman art and architecture we are let down with a thud. From the very start there is a feeling that the author protests too much against the usual preference for things Greek and that he is on the defensive as an apologist for the Roman product. One would expect him to muster his best arguments in support of the Romans, and it is disappointing to see that he does not. In an 18-page chapter, more than 14 pages are on architecture, which is understandable since it is in this field that the Romans made their greatest contributions to the material world. But eight pages are taken up with a repetitious account of Roman town planning, an area in which the author claims no great originality for the Romans. Much of this space could, and should, have been saved so that there might have been room to tell of the Roman genius in planning large, symmetrically arranged building complexes, best epitomized by the Imperial Fora but already apparent in the early Republic. The evolution of the Roman temple, as distinct from the Greek temple, might then have been explained with regard to it axial position in great rectangular enclosures, usually at the back and attached to the rear portico of the rectangle. The particular decorative use of the Greek orders in superimposed rows, common as early as Sullan times, might have been mentioned, as might also the use of continuous arcading. The type of multiple-terraced composition represented by the Temple of Fortune at Praeneste, one which had great influence in Renaissance and later times, receives no mention here. But most lamentably, the discovery of concrete and its consequences for Roman architecture, especially the complete change in the concept of enclosed space that comes with the resultant development of vaults and domes, is alluded to so briefly that only in the final summing up at the end of the chapter does one get any idea of its tremendous significance for the whole history of architecture. The Pantheon alone is singled out to epitomize this development, and no monument does so better, but there is much before and a great deal after to the story of this momentous development. For all this there would have been room had the author not indulged an interest in town planning, and a presentation of the material that demonstrates the real genius of Roman architects would have made unnecessary the initial weak pleadings of the apologist. Much of this information on the Roman genius is brought out in Frank Brown's recent book *Roman Architecture* (1961), which is not even mentioned in the bibliography. With but three pages left for other aspects of Roman art, Sir Mortimer did well to choose the development of portraiture, of narrative, and of landscape as most important; each of these is presented well in very brief compass. The conclusions are a better statement than the chapter proper, for here the author has at least alluded to the essential points that add up to a major Roman contribution in art and architecture.

Michael Gough concludes the book with a brief but very well stated account of the triumph of Christianity and of its role as a bridge between the ancient and medieval worlds. Both text and illustrations point out the degree to which Christian iconography, much of it already well formed before the Edict of Milan in 313 and the founding of Constantinople in 330, is indebted to the art of Greece and of Rome, on the one hand, and, on the other, how much it transmits from antiquity to the Middle Ages. Hirmer's photograph of the cupola of the Baptistery of the Orthodox at Ravenna is one of the most glorious in the book; it alone says so much of the union of the new order and the old.

In summation, this is a highly satisfactory series of sketches, done by competent hands in quick and sure strokes. Yet each sketch is of only a part of the whole, and one cannot help but feel that they lose something in not being more closely integrated, for they do not add up to the one great picture of which they are all part. The whole is in this case more than the sum of its parts, for in the dissection a feeling for the whole has been lost, and the links are nowhere clearly established. Yet to ask for more is almost to ask for the impossible. No one person could paint the whole picture as well as these artists have sketched the parts. Only by becoming immersed in the past can one gain a full appreciation of the whole picture, and here is an excellent beginning for the layman along the road to the full understanding of the manifold genius of Greece and Rome.

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Exobiology

Worlds Without Ends. A reflection on planets, life, and time. N. J. Berrill. Macmillan, New York, 1964. x + 240 pp. $5.95.

Appreciation by the public of scientific progress has proven to be a remarkably difficult objective to achieve. The incomparable Jules Verne, who wrote science fiction based on solid scientific fact and on justifiable inference, was perhaps the best practitioner in the art of informative and imaginative scientific writing. By contrast, other attempts to popularize science have often been pedantic and humorless.