



# What Have the Greeks Done for Modern Civilisation?

*John Pentland Mahaffy*

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An excerpt from the Introductory.

...I do not suppose that any of you will be disposed to dispute the fact (which the very title of these lectures presupposes)—that modern civilisation, from various points of view, owes a great debt to the old Greeks. If there be any such sceptic here, I trust he will be converted in the course of my conversation with him from this platform. But even to those who readily admit the fact, explicit proofs of it may not be useless, for they will show you the reasons that have long since persuaded the world of teachers to make Greek essential in a liberal education. Assuming, however, for the present the main fact, I think I shall begin this discourse most profitably by discussing the supposed causes which gave the Greeks this curious pre-eminence. It is perhaps, to use familiar words, putting the cart before the horse, but you need hardly be reminded that if in logic we often do not explain a statement until we have established its truth, in time the order is different. The causes of every great result are hidden in past ages, shrouded by the mists of antiquity, covered with the cloud of oblivion, so that in the present case the consideration of the prehistoric causes of the greatness of the Greek intellect may well precede the evidence of that greatness, which we gather by the lamp, often dim, of history, if not by the searchlight of archaeological science. Though this subject cannot but prove dull to some of you, I shall do my best to relieve the dullness by illustrations or even by digressions into kindred fields of knowledge.

I know that there are two considerations which, in the minds of people who are easily satisfied, pass for an adequate account of this extraordinary genius of the Greeks. It is usual, especially among those who will not take the trouble to learn Greek, to say that it was really through Rome that the greatness of the Hellenic race was created. Rome conquered the Western world with her roads, her armies, her laws, her language, and impressed even on barbarians the culture which she had herself adopted and developed. The Latin races which were in the van of civilisation up to the seventeenth century were the daughters of Rome and had little direct teaching from Greece.

All this is perfectly true, but it only moves the problem one step backward. Assuming that the Romans were the carriers of enlightenment to the North and West of Europe, why did they depend so completely on Greek teaching; why did they one and all confess that this was the unique source of their progress? They came in due time into contact with the culture of Carthage, of Syria, of Egypt. But the splendours of these countries were never to the Romans more than mere curiosities, whereas Greek culture was the very breath of their intellectual life. Virgil, a very great poet, frames every one of his works on Greek models, and translates even from second-rate Greek work. Horace, a very great artist, prides himself on having made Greek lyrics at home in his country, and Lucretius, whose reputation for originality among modern critics is mainly due to the total loss of the original which he copied, himself claims as his main credit that he had ventured to reproduce a yet uncopied species of Greek poetry. It is hard to conceive a more complete case made out for the unparalleled influence of Hellenic genius upon proud and dominant neighbours. I will merely remind you how a fresh wave of Greek influence, coming into Romanised Europe in the fifteenth century, caused such a revolution in literature and art as to be called a new birth (Renaissance)....

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