

Greece's Golden Century

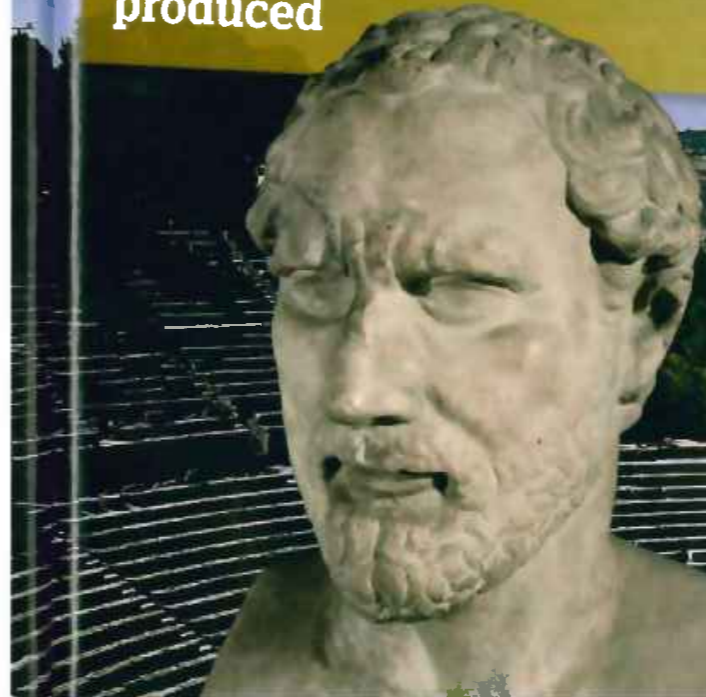


The first ever fully naked female statue in ancient Greek art



One of the greatest, most powerful and most intriguing rulers of ancient times

The most famous orator the ancient Greek world has ever produced



Two of the most influential philosophers of all time

Historians who claim that the fifth century BC was the golden age of ancient Greece have missed a trick, says **Michael Scott**. As Scott argues in a new book out this month, some of the most crucial developments in classical Greek history did, in fact, occur a century later

WHAT LINKS the ground-breaking, world-changing statues, rulers, orators and philosophers shown in the above pictures? The answer is that they were all living or being created in the ancient Greek world between 400 and 300 BC, a period known as the fourth century. But you will be hard pressed to find a book about this underrated era on the shelves of your local library.

In the story of ancient Greece, the neglected fourth century BC, despite the treasure trove of glories it contains, is nearly always pushed out of the limelight by the 100 years preceding it, the fifth century BC, the so-called 'golden age' of ancient Greece. How has this imbalance come about? Why has the fourth century not caught our imagination? What could it tell us if only we were to listen? The fifth century BC is not without its merits. It was in this century that the Parthenon – the defining monument of ancient Greece, which still stands proud

over modern-day Athens – was created. It was in the fifth century BC that Athenian democracy gathered speed and Athens itself rose to rule a mighty empire across the Aegean. It was in the fifth century BC too that the Greek world tore itself apart in a gruelling war between its two main powers, Athens and Sparta. In 404 BC, at the very end of the fifth century, Athens lost that conflict. Most people have heard the story of Athens' celebrated democracy during the fifth century BC – not least because

LEFT A copy of the statue of the Aphrodite of Knidos
TOP A coin bearing a portrait of Alexander the Great, produced c314–313 BC
ABOVE A bust of the great Athenian orator, Demosthenes
RIGHT A 15th-century relief showing Plato and Aristotle
BACKGROUND The fourth-century theatre at Epidaurus

of its links over the millennia with our own systems of democratic government. But what happened next? What happened after Athens fell? All too often, the answer in textbooks is a resounding silence, until the story picks up again late in the following century with the emergence of King Philip of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great, who rose to rule massive swathes of the ancient world. The fourth century BC, if it is acknowledged at all in the history books, is remembered as the time of

Alexander (just look at the recent Hollywood film starring Colin Farrell and Angelina Jolie). The result is that, in the way we currently tell the story of ancient Greek history, we skip from the fall of democratic Athens at the end of the fifth century to the rise of the absolute monarch Alexander the Great in the last part of the fourth century, missing out all that comes in between. We jump between two polarised worlds of democracy and absolute monarchy as if the great majority of the fourth century had never existed at all.



Great men of the fourth century BC

Epaminondas of Thebes

Who would have thought that a vegetarian philosopher could become one of the great architects of power in ancient Greece? Epaminondas was one of the fearsome generals of the city of Thebes. He was a man who won

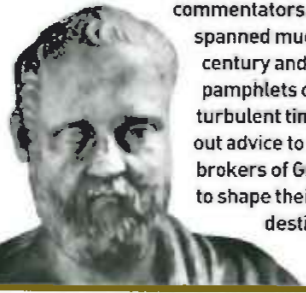
Thebes supremacy over much of fourth-century BC Greece, who defeated the legendary warriors of Sparta, whom Cicero would call the leader of Greeks and whom no less a man than Sir Walter Raleigh would honour with the title "the greatest of the ancient Greeks".



Isocrates of Athens

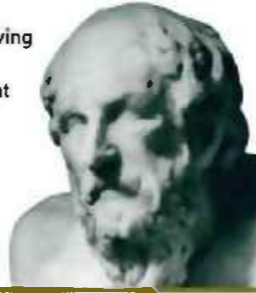
How could a man who never held public office, who never spoke in a public debate, have had any impact on the affairs of Greece? Isocrates, son of a flute-manufacturer, who made his money through teaching rhetoric to some of the greatest men of his age, also became one of the ancient

world's first real-time public political commentators. His life spanned much of the fourth century and his political pamphlets document its turbulent times as he hands out advice to the power-brokers of Greece and tries to shape their, and Greece's, destiny.



Diogenes of Sinope

He masturbated in the agora and defecated in the theatre. He lived in a barrel and urinated on people as they passed by. He was the first and ultimate exponent of the philosophy of self-sufficiency, rejecting everything that society had to offer and every rule it tried to impose, a lifestyle which earned him the title 'the Cynic'. But he also represented a way of living attractive even to men like Alexander the Great and was the first to really understand how much events of the fourth century had changed the world in which he lived.



So why has the fourth century become the "sickly cousin", to quote one historian, of the glorious fifth?

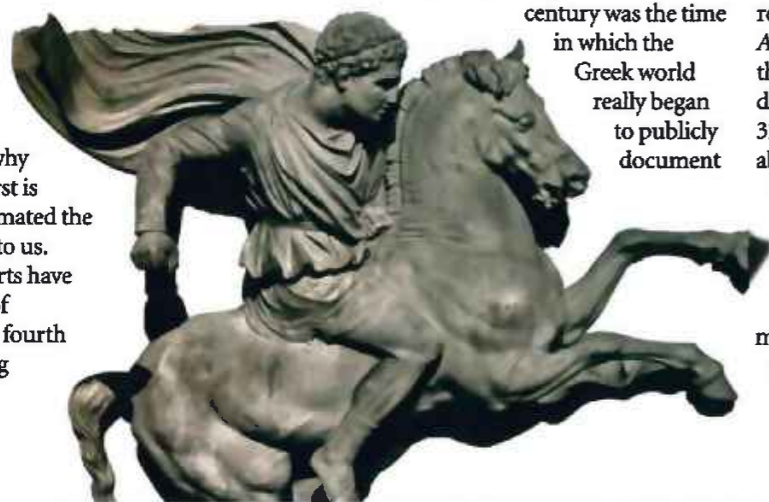
In part it has a lot to do with our obsession for, on the one hand, anything to do with democracy, and on the other, the antics of swashbuckling heroes – not to mention our unhealthy tendency to misread the history of Athens for the history of Greece as a whole. It also has to do with our love of simple historical pictures: we like our history when there is one power in control (Athens, Alexander...) rather than when it is complex and entangled.

Confusion and disorder

The fourth century does not make itself any more appealing in this regard when we look at the major ancient historical sources. Whereas in the fifth century, ancient writers like Herodotus and Thucydides set out boldly and clearly (even if one-sidedly) how we should understand the great conflicts of the age, in the fourth century the main historical source, Xenophon, ended his account in 362 BC by saying "there was more confusion and disorder in Greece... than ever before. This is where I give up. Perhaps someone else will take up the challenge..."

Thankfully there has recently been a real effort to resuscitate the fourth century and save it from the dustbin of history. That effort has revealed two key reasons why we need to get stuck in. The first is that we have simply underestimated the amount of evidence available to us. Xenophon's discouraging efforts have obscured the colourful array of windows into the world of the fourth century, which match anything

Alexander the Great on the fourth-century Alexander sarcophagus, discovered in Sidon, Lebanon in 1887



available from the already heavily-mined world of the fifth. We have historians, we have orators, we have philosophers, comedians, playwrights, political pamphleteers, social commentators, economists, military strategists, medics and biographers. More importantly, we have an ever increasing and overwhelming amount of archaeological and inscriptional evidence to take into account.

These last two types of evidence in particular open up new aspects of the ancient world to us, many of which never usually make an appearance in literary sources (themselves almost always written by male elites). From town planning to individual homes, from religious practices to shipping, from funerals to working the land, from military installations to political monuments, the archaeological evidence brings whole new spectrums of fourth-century activity into view.

Likewise inscriptions – documents written on stone – enable us to glimpse the complex and evolving bureaucracy of Greek cities, the rigid rules governing sanctuaries and religious ritual, the complexities of building contracts, as well as a whole host of other aspects of ancient society. The fourth

century was the time in which the Greek world really began to publicly document

itself in earnest. While the preceding century is of course not devoid of literary, archaeological or inscriptional sources, it is becoming increasingly clear that the fourth century is the period in which we can use the wealth of material on offer to get at the ancient world in an unprecedented variety of ways and at a forensic level of detail.

But the second reason why the fourth century is fast coming onto the agenda is due to a realisation of our own errors as observers of the past. Think of Plato or Aristotle, the great philosophers. In which century did they live? Many people, I think, would be tempted to say the fifth. Or the orator Demosthenes? Fifth century again, I would imagine.

We assume, because we have been taught that the fifth century was Greece's golden age, that anyone important must have lived in that time. But it is just not the case. Plato did most of his work and Aristotle all of his in the fourth century. Demosthenes too. In worshipping the fifth century, we have been guilty of collapsing the chronology of the ancient world. Even worse, we have used evidence from the fourth century as if it came from the fifth.

Historians too often use Aristotle's recently discovered *Constitution of the Athenians* for instance – his treaty on the workings and history of Athens' democratic constitution, written in the 320s BC – as if it were talking only about fifth-century democracy, over 100 years before. It's like using evidence from the Houses of Parliament now to talk about what it was like at the end of the 19th century. In our eager attempts to make a sensible picture out of the patchwork of surviving historical

MARY EVANS PICTURE LIBRARY/ALAMY



This first century BC to first century AD Pompeian mosaic shows Plato and his school of philosophers

evidence, we have been guilty of compressing the ancient world into a single fifth-century snapshot. We have ignored the importance of change over time, a story the fourth century seems ideally suited to underline.

What kind of stories could the fourth century tell us if we were prepared to listen to it? First and foremost, it is the story of tumultuous change. It was during the fourth century that a Greek world in which democratic Athens was top dog

Our image of the 'glorious' fifth century is coloured by an obsession with democracy and swashbuckling heroes

morphed into a world ruled by a single absolute monarch, Alexander the Great.

How did such a dramatic political change come about? This was a century in which old empires expired and new cities and peoples were catapulted into the front line, forever redrawing the political framework of the ancient world. Using the vast array of sources at our disposal, we can follow that process of change through the eyes of the people involved in making it a reality. We can follow history not as a defined sequence of events made inevitable with hindsight, but as a series of

opinions, debates and decisions by key players over how to respond to the changing world around them.

But the story of the fourth century is by no means only a story of political change. Throughout the century, the Greeks were constantly expanding into unknown parts of the ancient world. Trade and people were moving with ever-greater speed and purpose across land and sea. Communities thousands of miles apart were becoming intertwined and dependent on one another both politically and economically as fights to secure alliances and natural resources became commonplace.

By the end of the century, Alexander ruled an empire that stretched from Greece to modern-day India and was trading with communities even further away in every direction of the compass. The fourth century saw the globalisation of the ancient Greek world, with all the perils and opportunities that came with it (including immigration, social policing, economic collapse and ancient Greece's very own credit crunch).

The fourth century also bears witness to a significant increase in focus on the individual's place within that turbulent and expanding world. Such a focus varies from a practical interest in how best to insulate oneself and one's family from economic downturns to sociological critiques of different

Timeline

The fifth century BC

440s Construction begins on the Parthenon in Athens.

431-404 Peloponnesian war tears Greece apart.

404 Athens surrenders and its democracy is replaced by an oligarchy for a year.

The fourth century BC

386 The Persian king lays down a peace agreement for ancient Greece.

371 Epaminondas of Thebes leads his city to supremacy in Greece at the battle of Leuctra.

362 Xenophon, the historian, ends his narrative of Greek history with the battle of Mantinea taking place in this year.

360 Philip II becomes king of Macedon.

358 Construction begins on the great theatre at Epidaurus.

355 Athens in the midst of a credit crunch recession.

350-340s Demosthenes argues ferociously in Athens that Philip is not the saviour but the tyrant of Greece.

350-330 First ever fully naked female statue of Aphrodite created.

338 Isocrates, the political commentator at Athens, dies, having finally transferred his allegiance from Athens to Philip.

336 Philip is murdered and his son, Alexander the Great, becomes king.

320s Aristotle, the philosopher, writes his *Constitution of the Athenians*.

323 Diogenes of Sinope dies. Alexander the Great, who had created the largest empire the ancient world had yet seen, also dies.



A Greek coin depicting Philip II

The agora: Athens' beating heart

WHAT WAS life like in fourth-century Athens? The place to be was the agora, the beating heart of the city, the melting pot of political, social, economic and legal goings-on.

In an area not much bigger than Trafalgar Square, here one would be assaulted by a hive of activity: over 170 different types of goods

being bought and sold in bustling markets; prostitutes waiting to be picked up; people coming to check public documents in the new city archive, to read recently published laws in the chief magistrate's office, to defend themselves in the newly built law courts, to report for jury service, to check their civic

duties for the month, to worship the gods and to collect water. The agora was a place to which citizens were drawn in order to be seen, but which could also contaminate reputations if lingered in too long. It was a place for a pleasant evening stroll and the place for a vicious punch up. It was a place where

statements of class, political affiliation and intention could be made just by buying a certain type of fish. It was a place of memory, in which statues of founding fathers and recent heroes mingled with the throbbing crowds, and paintings of great battles and inspiring virtues acted as backdrops for spirited discussion. It was a place of poets and philosophers, politicians and prostitutes.

It was also a place that everyone made fun of, but which was a grave dishonour to be banned from. The agora, whose remains can be visited today, was what made Athens Athens – and unlike any other city in the ancient world.



An illustration of an ancient Greek symposium that has degenerated into a drunken orgy

were constructed in this period.

The fourth century was also an important period of temple building across Greece, in Asia Minor and even in north Africa. Even more crucially, it was a dramatic period of development for ancient art, which responded to, and helped shape, the world around it. From the taboo-breaking first ever fully naked female statue of the goddess of love and sex, Aphrodite – created by the sculptor Praxiteles for the city of Cnidus in Asia Minor (see picture on page 56) – to the sombre statue of 'Peace' nursing the infant 'Wealth' in Athens, the fourth century, far from being a time of artistic decline as has so often been argued, was a century of artistic diversity and creativity.

The fourth century has incredible potential to expand and improve our understanding of the ancient Greek world in a myriad number of ways. Digging into it reveals not only just how much is on offer to us, but also, just how crucial this period of time was for the ancient world.

It was in the fourth century that decisive debates on politics, economics, philosophy, religion, society and identity took place as part of a transition between 'Classical' and 'Hellenistic' worlds. It was also in the fourth century that we see the ancient Greeks beginning to engage seriously

with their own past, to reconstruct it for their present needs and to manipulate it in order to shape their future. The fourth century reminds us, above all, that history is what you make of it. It is up to us now to make more of the fourth century BC. ■



Michael Scott's new book investigating the story of the fourth century BC – From Democrats to Kings: the Brutal Dawn of a New World from the Fall of Athens to the Rise of Alexander the Great – is out this month

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Books

► From Democrats to Kings by Michael Scott (Icon, 2009)

► To buy From Democrats to Kings from BBC History Bookstore for £14.39 (RRP £17.99) turn to page 72

► History of the Classical Greek World 478-323 BC by Peter Rhodes (Blackwell, 2006)

► Alexander the Great: the Hunt for a New Past by Paul Cartledge (Pan, 2003)

On the podcast

Michael Scott discusses ancient Greece on October Pod 2 (online from 14 October) ► www.bbchistorymagazine.com/podcast.asp

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Timeless radio

For the past 11 years Melvyn Bragg has hosted the weekly intellectual discussion show In Our Time on Radio 4. As a new book of the series is published, he talks to Rob Attar about how the programme comes together and the secrets to its success

TEN YEARS into his presenting stint on Start the Week Melvyn Bragg was sacked by the BBC. He had just been made a life peer and the corporation felt that his new role was incompatible with hosting a programme they believed was connected to politics. "My Start the Week didn't have anything to do with politics," Bragg recalls. "It was to do with scientists, historians but nevertheless they were worried and they asked me to leave". As compensation, Bragg was offered the chance to present a new Radio 4 programme on Thursday mornings. The show he carved out was In Our Time, a forum for scholars to chew over the big ideas of history, science, philosophy, religion and culture. It first aired in 1998 and, over the past 11 years, has become a great success with audience figures close to two million, plus hundreds of thousands of podcast downloads.

During an era where factual TV and radio ventures are frequently accused of dumbing down, In Our Time is, in Bragg's own words, "relentlessly highbrow". Almost all of the guests are teaching academics who enjoy being able to speak to an intelligent, respectful audience. "It's a bit like a seminar," Bragg explains. "The academics are being asked to communicate with their peers, most of whom have not got their knowledge but would like to have it."

When it comes to history, In Our Time has covered an impressive range of topics. In any given week a listener might be treated to Agincourt, the Carolingian Renaissance, Stalin's geneticist or even the history of tea. How then does Bragg choose what ideas to tackle? "It's not very scientific. The producer and I go for a coffee every couple of weeks, sit down

"We don't do things because they are academically fashionable"

with our lists and say things like, 'We haven't done anything about the Middle Ages for a long time' or 'isn't it time we did something on Indian mathematics?' It's determinedly eclectic". With this eclecticism comes a strong desire to feature some lesser-known historical stories. "One of the things I'm really proud about is that we've got stuck in to the Arabic translation movements of the 8th-11th centuries," Bragg reveals. "It was something that I myself knew nothing about. I thought the Romans left in AD 410 and then there was a bit of this, a bit of that, a bit of Alfred [the Great] and then the Normans came along. I thought nothing much happened anywhere in the Dark Ages but we can discover of course that in the Arab world the most amazing things were happening. It was not only in literary translations. There were great additions to knowledge in philosophy and medicine as well."

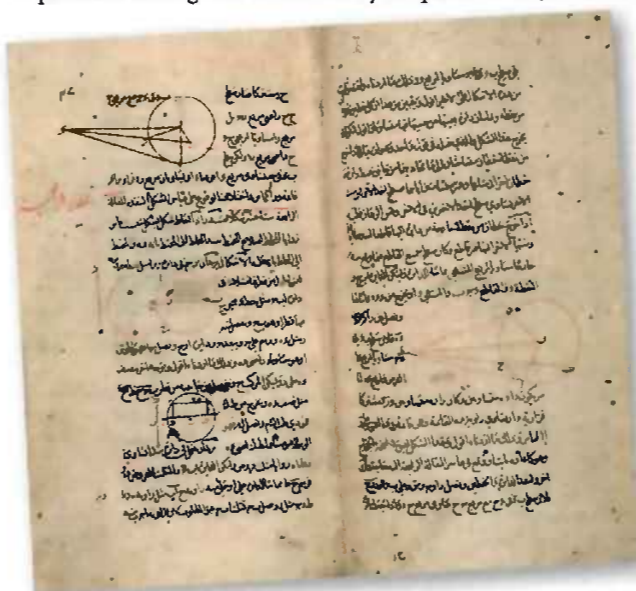
The latest academic trends are not a factor in determining the programme's content, according to Bragg. "We do what we feel like doing. We don't do things because they are academically fashionable and we don't know what the latest trends are most of the time! Of course the scholars who come in are often at the cutting edge so they bring in the latest trends with them. You can always rely, for example, on Mary Beard to give you the latest trends in classical scholarship."

Distilling many years of scholarship into 45 minutes is no easy task for the historians featured on In Our Time. Bragg describes it as "doing high table talk on speed", which is a daunting proposition to say the least. Nevertheless the programme regularly invites academics who have never appeared on the radio before and in the main the scholars rise to the occasion. "I'm always being surprised and impressed," says Bragg.

So too are the BBC hierarchy. A programme that Bragg mentally envisioned lasting only a year or two has now been a Radio 4 fixture for more than a decade, striking a blow for intellectually challenging broadcasting. "Without the benefit of focus groups, consultants, or anything like that we just hit on something," Bragg explains. "We hit on the idea that there are lots of subjects out there, that people who've been to university and those who haven't want to know about. They want knowledge. They want to know more and more about more and more and we are one of the places they can get it. Plus the advantage we have is that they can get it from the best people around." ■



Melvyn Bragg is a writer and broadcaster. His presenting duties have included The South Bank Show, Start the Week and In Our Time. He has also been controller of arts at London Weekend Television since 1990 and was made a life peer in 1998



An Arabic translation of Euclid's Elements of Geometry from the 13th century. Melvyn Bragg has championed Arab scholarship on the programme

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Book

► In Our Time contains transcripts of 26 programmes, specially selected and introduced by Bragg (Hodder & Stoughton, September 2009)

► To buy In Our Time from BBC History Bookstore for £15 (RRP £20) turn to page 72

Radio

► In Our Time is currently being broadcast every Thursday on BBC Radio 4. You can listen to all the previous episodes on the show's website www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/inourtime

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