



Imaginative Time Travel: The Greeks and Romans

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Tony Spawforth on recent books about the ancient world.

While the Olympic Games help to ensure that children retain an interest in ancient Greece, the epic film **Gladiator** with Russell Crowe as the enslaved general with right on his side, has now kindled interest in ancient Rome. With its astonishing state-of-the-art reconstructions of a battle field in Gaul, and its panoramic views of ancient Rome and the Coliseum, this film has certainly inspired children's historical imagination. **Tony Spawforth** assesses recent children's books about ancient Greece and Rome that will build on this enthusiasm. <!--break-->

The marvellous thing about the ancient world is that it has a fairy-tale quality ? hence instant kid-appeal. This is true above all of ancient Greece, with its marvellous tall stories about the Greek gods, goddesses and heroes. Publishers have now twigged to this, and currently there is a bumper crop of children's books full of compelling yarns about the derring-do of the strongman Heracles, the cloud-skimming flying horse, Pegasus, Pandora with her fatal nosiness, and scores of others.

The best books retell the ancient stories for a young person's ear and eye and are ideal to be read aloud. For juniors there is Heather Amery's retelling of **Greek Myths for Young Children** , with big print, brightly-coloured paper and illustrations, including some wonderful ones of monsters like the serpent guarding the Golden Fleece. Like all the best myths these tales point a moral. Thanks to Pandora's opening the forbidden box, we are told, ?People would now suffer all kinds of terrible things, but because they had hope, they would never despair.? So there.

Two nicely-produced books from Orchard, **Greek Gods and Goddesses** and **Greek Myths** , target a somewhat older age-group, ready for white paper and smaller type. The stories include favourites like Paris and Helen and ?big baby? (a.k.a. the god Hermes), and writer Geraldine McCaughrean, a winner of the Whitbread Children's Award, tells them with an engagingly light touch, and plenty of chatty dialogue (?You don't care one fig or grape for me,? says Semele to Zeus). Emma Chichester Clark's illustrations are bright and cheerful, and have a classical-cum-Mediterranean feel. **Greek Myths** , by the same team, focuses on some lesser characters in the pantheon. Many of them, as is the way of Greek myth, are in for a rough ride, such as Icarus. Here he is given proudly multi-coloured wax wings which will melt as he soars too near the sun. In Anthony Masters' **Greek Myths and Legends** the illustrations by Andrew Skilleter have a darker, more Tolkienesque feel, with the monsters (plenty of them) altogether more scary.

McCaughrean and Chichester Clark pair up again on a book of **Roman Myths** . The subject is a surprise on the face of it, as the Romans were generally too busy conquering the world to become ace storytellers like the more ?civilised? Greeks. But McCaughrean captivantly retells the best of the few Roman legends there are ? like that of Romulus and Remus, the abandoned children taken into care by a she-wolf, who grow up to found Rome. And like the Romans, she is not averse to borrowing myths from the Greeks. Here, called ?Kissed by the moon?, is the charming tale of the lovestruck moon-goddess who puts the handsome but mortal Endymion into an eternal sleep because she cannot bear the thought of him ageing.

For older children (and parents) spurred on to find out the basic facts about this magical galaxy, John Malam's **Gods and Goddesses** provides a nicely-illustrated introduction, enlivened by quotes from ancient Greek writers, such as Homer's description (p21) of cattle being sacrificed – not for the squeamish or the vegetarian. This book is an example of the other Big Trend in children's writing on Greece and Rome, towards the didactic. As well as helping out with homework and school projects, this kind of non-fiction book feeds the curiosity which we all have, and children in spades, about What was it like then? and How did they live? It is the type of book which you hope a child might demand after enjoying a visit to a museum where lots of Greek pots are displayed or which would serve for a classroom project.

Scenes from such pots feature tellingly in Fiona Macdonald's superbly illustrated **Women in Ancient Greece**. Mothers intent on a bit of feminist consciousness-raising may want to buy this, as it helicopters at just the right height over the main differences, usually much for the worse, between ancient and modern women's lives. The tone is rather grown-up. 'Sometimes she slept with him, but sex was not always part of the arrangement?', we read of hetairai, the female entertainers of ancient Greece.

If this all seems a bit much, try Stewart Ross's **Daily Life**. The production is superb, with the high-quality photographs and quotes from ancient writings which are the hallmark of Wayland's 'Ancient Greece' series. Sport is another great way of relating to the ancient Greeks – they invented it, after all, or at least athletics, as the same author's **The Original Olympics** reveals. Here kids can find out how the ancient Greeks did the long jump (weirdly, they used stone weights to help them go further), and, no less oddly to most of us, that they played sport in the buff.

Reading this book you could almost imagine yourself in ancient Olympia, of which there are numerous sun-drenched photographs.

Usborne publishers have had the clever idea of formatting a children's book on ancient Rome as if a guide for an ancient visitor circa AD125, replete with map (**A Visitor's Guide to Ancient Rome**). Under 'Useful Information', for example, you learn about numbers in Latin. But can a toga – trodden in a mixture of sodium-carbonate and a type of clay known as 'fuller's earth' – really be said to have undergone 'specialist dry-cleaning'? This is a fun book, with a solidly researched sub-structure – and of course splendid to have if you really *are* on holiday in Italy with the kids.

Another means of imaginative time-travel is offered by 'Look Inside', a series which takes you through ancient keyholes, Richard Dargie into **A Roman Villa** and Peter Chrisp into **A Greek Theatre**. Unlike David Frost's TV show, however, the intent is to do more than entertain: both books give you solid information about their subjects, not least with the school curriculum in view. The picture-researchers have done their work superbly in both, as has illustrator Adam Hook, whose picture of an ancient actor playing Oedipus after tearing out his eyes does not leave the mind in a hurry.

For kids with boundless appetites for the ancient world, or for ones who just like the pictures, the children's market now also produces some rather good encyclopedias. **The Usborne Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece** is a marvellously illustrated compendium, arranged chronologically, with a thick central section on ancient daily life, and a factfinder at the end. A good buy, in spite of some slips in the captions (e.g. p96 illustrates a tombstone not an altar). The same publishers have also brought out **Ancient World**, again with terrific pictures and reconstructions, offering a whistle-stop tour of all the world's ancient civilisations.

Finally, why are the funny old ancients still relevant today? 'Well, they gave us **Gladiator**' is one answer. Absolutely right. But Anita Ganeri's excellent **Legacies from Ancient Greece** suggests other ways of looking at the question too, as in the lively sections called 'Having a Say?', 'Going for Gold?', and 'Curtain Up?'. There is no over-egging the meringue – we are reminded that women had no political rights in Athenian 'democracy', let alone slaves – but the book leaves you even so with some mind-tickling clues, from the House of Commons to Olympic champion Michael Johnson and our horseshoe-shaped theatres. And if all this sounds a bit earnest, there is always Archimedes in his bath to raise a laugh.

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of the **Oxford Classical Dictionary** (1996), and a presenter of documentaries on Alexander the Great and other archaeological subjects for BBC2.

Books discussed

Greek Myths for Young Children , Heather Amery, ill. Linda Edwards, Usborne, 1999, 0 7460 3725 2, £12.99 hbk

Greek Gods and Goddesses , Geraldine McCaughrean, ill. Emma Chichester Clark, Orchard, 1997, 1 86039 109 5, £12.99 hbk

Greek Myths , Geraldine McCaughrean, ill. Emma Chichester Clark, Orchard, 1992, 1 85213 373 2, £12.99 hbk

Greek Myths and Legends , Anthony Masters, ill. Andrew Skilleter, Macdonald Young Books, 1999, 0 7500 2629 4, £9.99 hbk, 0 7500 2631 6, £4.99 pbk (also available: **Roman Myths and Legends** , 0 7500 2628 6, £9.99 hbk)

Roman Myths , Geraldine McCaughrean, ill. Emma Chichester Clark, Orchard, 1999, 1 86039 753 0, £12.99 hbk

Gods and Goddesses , John Malam, Wayland ?Ancient Greece?, 1999, 0 7502 2490 8, £10.99 hbk

Women in Ancient Greece , Fiona Macdonald, Belitha ?The Other Half of History?, 1999, 1 84138 013 X, £10.99 hbk (also available: **Women in Ancient Rome** , 1 84138 110 1, £10.99 hbk)

Daily Life , Stewart Ross, Wayland ?Ancient Greece?, 1999, 0 7502 2489 4, £10.99 hbk

The Original Olympics , Stewart Ross, Wayland ?Ancient Greece?, 1996, 0 7502 2556 4, £5.99 pbk

A Visitor?s Guide to Ancient Rome , Lesley Sims, ill. Christyan Fox, Ian Jackson and John Woodcock, Usborne ?Timetours?, 1999, 0 7460 3064 9, £6.99 pbk

A Roman Villa , Richard Dargie, ill. Adam Hook, Wayland ?Look Inside?, 2000, 0 7502 2590 4, £9.99 hbk

A Greek Theatre , Peter Chrisp, ill. Adam Hook, Wayland ?Look Inside?, 2000, 0 7502 2589 0, £9.99 hbk

The Usborne Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece , Jane Chisholm, Lisa Miles and Struan Reid, various illustrators, Usborne, 1999, 0 7460 3403 2, £14.99 hbk

Ancient World , Fiona Chandler, various illustrators, Usborne ?World History?, 1999, 0 7460 2760 5, £12.99 hbk

Legacies from Ancient Greece , Anita Ganeri, Belitha Press, 1999, 1 84138 027 X, £9.99 hbk (also available: **Legacies from Ancient Rome** , 1 84138 065 2, £9.99 hbk)

Ancient Greece and Rome: National Curriculum* Links explained by Margaret Mallett

Myths of Ancient Rome and Greece and information texts on these ancient European civilisations are useful resources for both history and English, particularly in the later primary years.

The requirements of the new history orders at key stage 2 (7-11 year olds) include three British history studies, one example of which is the *Effects of Roman Settlement in Britain*. Useful here would be **A Roman Villa** . Children must also be taught the required ?knowledge, skills and understanding? through *A European history study*; this considers the way of life, beliefs and achievements of the people living in Ancient Greece and the influence of their civilisation on how we live today. Books about Greek myths and legends detailed by Tony Spawforth provide insight into beliefs and values. The information texts mentioned ? for example **Daily Life** and **The Original Olympics** ? will provide relevant material and support children?s writing. Exciting writing tasks might include using the information to create letters, diary entries, recipes and play scripts.

The fiction and non-fiction texts considered are also helpful in meeting the requirements of the new English orders. Myths and legends are listed as important genres for 7-11 year olds to control as readers and writers, as well as being highly enjoyable. Using information and reference texts helps children to learn scanning and skimming skills and how to consider an argument critically ? all explicit requirements for English.

Links with The National Literacy Strategy Framework for Teaching

In addition to following the National Curriculum, teachers in England also work within *The Framework for Teaching* (a reference point for planning and managing the literacy programme). This gives a detailed term by term programme, carried out during a daily literacy hour, to use alongside the National Curriculum. Myths and legends are referred to in year 3, term 2 (7-8 year olds) and year 5, term 2 (9-10 year olds). **Greek Myths for Young Children** would be a splendid starting point for the under eights while older primary children will appreciate the books on Greek and Roman legends. The tales can be a starting point for oral retelling, for creating a story plan for their own myths and for discussion about language and plot features. When it comes to information books in the literacy hour, *The Framework* recommends that texts from across the curriculum be used for class based and group work. Books and other resources can provide welcome links between work in history and the literacy hour. The titles mentioned here would help children understand how information books are structured. **Women in Ancient Greece** and **Legacies from Ancient Greece** would make good discussion texts for older primary children who are expected to tackle argument and persuasive kinds of reading and writing (see for example term 3, year 5 of *The Framework*). The recommended texts are helpful in meeting statutory requirements but, above all, we want young readers and listeners to enjoy the language and illustrations in the books and to delight in the stories and information in the classroom and outside it.

***The National Curriculum: Handbook for Primary Teachers in England** (statutory after September 2000).

The following related software may also be of interest:

Ancient Romans (p.c. and Acorn) and **Ancient Greeks** (Acorn) Zig-zag series Longman Logotron. 8-11 years. Tel. 01223 425558.

History of the World , Version 2, Dorling Kindersley. 9-11 years. Tel. 0870 840 4400 or 020 7836 5411.

Become a history explorer , Dorling Kindersley. 5-9 years. Tel 0870 840 4400.

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