

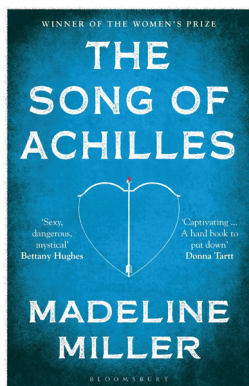
## Book Reviews

### The Song of Achilles

Miller (M.) Pp. 352. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011 (first published in paperback 2017). Paper, £9.99. ISBN: 978-1-4088-9138-4.

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For someone who loved Natalie Haynes' *A Thousand Ships*, reading Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* was a logical next step. Rather than focusing on the unseen and unheard women of the story, *The Song of Achilles* takes the relationship between the hero Achilles and his male companion Patroclus as its central focus, interpreting their relationship as a romantic one and following it from when they meet through to when they part. My students have been waxing lyrical about it – it has even inspired a student who doesn't take any classical

subjects at A Level to write an EPQ on whether retellings like this dilute Homer's original. Simply put, I was not disappointed.

The title initially appears deceptive; the story of Achilles is in fact told in the first person through the eyes of his companion Patroclus. This is a nice piece of Ovid-esque misdirection and puts the reader off-balance immediately when the curtain rises on Patroclus in his father's palace, especially when he describes himself on the first page as a 'disappointment'. It is made more effective by the fact that his name is not mentioned until page 20, after Patroclus has accidentally killed a boy, although we are aware from page 5 that Achilles is a separate entity to our mysterious, hitherto nameless, narrator.

It is immediately clear that this is far more than a retelling of the *Iliad*; it is wide-ranging, both in time frame and geographical location. It could be argued that this broader focus detracts from the storyline, but I appreciated the deviation from the narrow time confines of the *Iliad* to explore, for example, the story of Achilles on Skyros (told by later authors such as the Roman poet Statius in his *Achilleid*) where he is hidden as a woman to prevent him being called up to fight. While students might struggle to discern where Homer's story ends and Miller's (or indeed Statius') story starts in this section of the text, the sympathetic and human portrayal of these characters ultimately brings the story to life in ways in which more formal translations of the *Iliad* can struggle to.

While I would not hesitate to recommend this work to A Level students, I would question its suitability for younger years,

especially KS3, as there are fairly explicit scenes of a sexual nature. It neatly complements students' studies on the World of the Hero for A Level Classical Civilisation and provides a way to stretch and challenge A Level Latin students as an accessible teaser of epic poetry beyond Virgil.

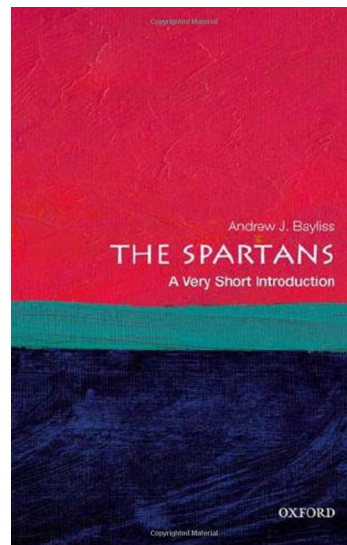
doi: 10.1017/S2058631023000168

### The Spartans: A Very Short Introduction

Bayliss (A.J.) Pp. xxiv + 145, ills, maps. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. Paper, £8.99, US\$11.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-878760-0

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Full disclosure: I have always been interested in the Spartans but was confirmed in this view in 2014 when I visited Sparta for the first time, and saw, in the middle of the main street, a board detailing every Spartan victory in the Olympic Games (with the event) going back to the 8th century BC. These people are proud and are not afraid to show it! Andrew Bayliss had a similar 'moment' when he learnt about the battle of Thermopylae and the bravery of the Spartan soldiers as told by Herodotus. It is a stirring tale, retold most recently, with some licence, in *300* (2006), but also in 1962 in

*The 300 Spartans*, where Sir Ralph Richardson plays Themistocles. The story is often 'adapted' but the general idea is of a suicide mission which delayed the main Persian forces and thereby allowed the remaining Greek city states, Athens in particular, to gather at Salamis. Thermopylae was a defeat for the Spartans but Paul Cartledge (*The Spartans: An Epic History*, C4 Books 2002) rightly points out that although Leonidas must have been aware of the Delphic oracle saying 'only the death of a Spartan king would ensure an eventual Greek victory against the Persians', it was really a battle fought for freedom, and it was this lesson that Xerxes had to be taught. But was that the most important thing we know about the Spartans? Probably not. Bayliss writes in an engaging manner under seven major headings: the story of Thermopylae; the civic structure

of Sparta (more democratic perhaps than the Athenian commentators liked us to think, with some interesting anecdotes about ‘tremblers’ who had allegedly shown cowardice in battle and the *homoioi* or Spartiates, whose fathers were also part of this elite group and who had to serve in the army until the age of 60 to retain citizenship) and the Spartan lifestyle, including the dining clubs and the rather egalitarian requirement to donate equal rations of barley, cheese, figs, olive oil and wine produced on their own estates. This would have provided an enormous amount of food which is now believed to have gone towards feeding the boys who were being trained or even to the helots to ensure they had enough food to do their tasks. The relative abstemiousness of the Spartans in comparison to the Athenian *symposia* is illuminating. There is also a chapter on raising a Spartiate, the *paideia* (sometimes called *agogē*) and one on Spartan women who, in general, seemed to have a better time than Athenian women. Helots have a chapter to themselves and Bayliss debunks some of the accepted stories about the treatment of these people who it has long been believed, from Thucydides, gave the Spartans serious headaches. The final chapter deals with modern reception of the Spartans; particularly sad is the fact that, following the Nazification of the Spartan legacy in 1930s Germany, it was not until the last two decades of the twentieth century that Sparta became a mainstream subject again. This is an excellent and informative book, as are most of the books in this series, and it would be very useful as an introduction to the topic of Sparta which is popular in Classical Civilisation curricula and syllabuses.

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## The Fasces. A History of Ancient Rome’s Most Dangerous Political Symbol

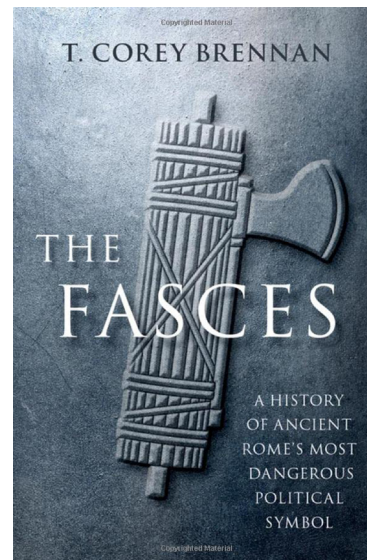
Brennan (T.C.) Pp. xii + 291, ills. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. Cased, £22.99, US\$34.95. ISBN: 978-0-19-764488-1.

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Rutgers University Professor of Classics, T. Corey Brennan, takes his readers on an interesting historical journey from ancient Rome through the modern era in an in-depth history of one of Rome’s most enduring symbols of its power, the fasces. The fasces is a bundle of rods with an axe bound together by a leather cord. It was a visual reminder of the state’s power to inflict both corporal punishment and capital punishment; thus inspiring respect and awe for the authority of the state and of its representatives.

The first seven chapters serve to provide a detailed account of the history and role of the fasces in ancient Rome. Brennan provides detailed references to classical authors in order to illustrate both the customs surrounding the use of the fasces and the psychological effect it had on those of different social standing in ancient Roman society. Brennan masterfully strings together various anecdotes from ancient Rome to give a full account of the lictor’s role and the power of that ancient symbol – the fasces.



The second half of the book details the reception and use of the fasces as a symbol from the Middle Ages through its use in the United States to its use in fascist Italy and up until today. This half of the work is particularly interesting when one considers how symbols can be co-opted and reimagined in different cultural and societal milieu. In a recently independent United States, the framers of that new republic adopted a great deal of ancient Greek and Roman symbols. Thus, one comes to take for granted the presence of two fasces on either side of the Speaker’s chair in the chamber of the House of Representatives in the US Capitol. However, this symbol comes to take on a particularly negative connotation when it was adopted as a symbol of fascist Italy by Benito Mussolini – thus inspiring the term *fascist*. In recent times, the symbol has been coopted once again by white nationalist groups and by members of fringe right-wing extremist groups. As an American, this made for a particularly interesting read in light of the recent Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia or the January 6<sup>th</sup> attacks on the US Capitol.

This work is certainly of interest to any serious student of ancient Roman history or the reception of ancient Roman symbology in the modern world. It might be too dense and scholarly to use in a wholesale manner in the secondary school classroom, but excerpts could certainly help to inform classroom discussions or a lesson on Roman symbols or governmental authority. It is definitely a valuable work and its relevance in modern political discourse only helps to highlight the value of understanding the history of this ancient symbol.

doi: 10.1017/S205863102300048X

## The Reception of Cleopatra in the Age of Mass Media

Daugherty (G.N.) Pp. xii + 233, ills. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023. Cased, £85. ISBN: 978-1-350-34072-5.

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This book provides a comprehensive and painstakingly researched study of Cleopatra’s influence on popular culture from the early twentieth century to the present. Daugherty’s book delves into a wide