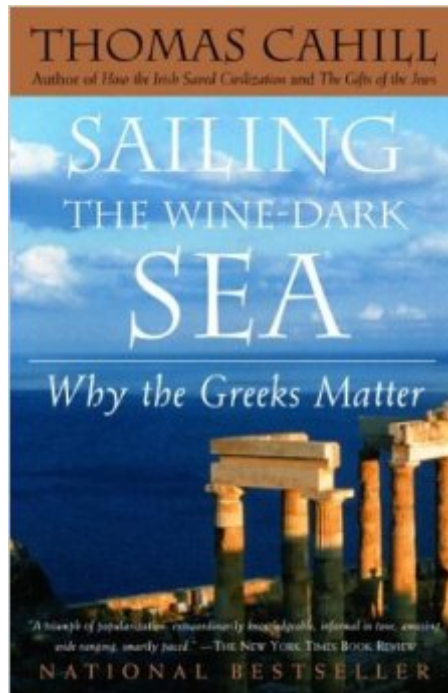


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Sailing The Wine-Dark Sea: Why The Greeks Matter (Hinges Of History)



Synopsis

In *Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea*, his fourth volume to explore the hinges of history, Thomas Cahill escorts the reader on another entertaining and historically unassailable journey through the landmarks of art and bloodshed that defined Greek culture nearly three millennia ago. In the city-states of Athens and Sparta and throughout the Greek islands, honors could be won in making love and war, and lives were rife with contradictions. By developing the alphabet, the Greeks empowered the reader, demystified experience, and opened the way for civil discussion and experimentation yet they kept slaves. The glorious verses of the *Iliad* recount a conflict in which rage and outrage spur men to action and suggest that their bellicose society of gleaming metals and rattling weapons is not so very distant from more recent campaigns of shock and awe. And, centuries before Zorba, Greece was a land where music, dance, and freely flowing wine were essential to the high life. Granting equal time to the sacred and the profane, Cahill rivets our attention to the legacies of an ancient and enduring worldview.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As a Greek-American, a college professor who has taught a course on the ancient Greeks (Hellenes), and something of a fan of Thomas Cahill, I was very excited to see his latest book on the rise of the Western Liberal Tradition, *"Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea: Why the Greeks Matter."* Perhaps because my expectations were so high, I was a little disappointed. It is a worthy volume in his "Hinges of History" series, but it is not without some problems. But let us be honest, Cahill is a

humanist and speaks of ancient Hellas from the perspective of the humanities in general rather than history or political science and that may be the problem here. Much of his historical narrative is episodic and misses some vital points. For instance, despite his title, "Sailing the Wine-Dark Sea," he fails to emphasize the importance of the sea to Greek life or mention the battle of Salamis, "Holy Salamis," which according to many historians, including Victor Davis Hanson, saved Western culture from the Iranian (Achaemenid Persian) onslaught. Cahill devotes a chapter to "The Warrior: How to Fight," but makes no mention of this vital battle or the importance of Hellenic warfare by use of the trireme. The battle is not even included in his brief Chronology (later battles, Plataea and Mycale, are mentioned). True, some have questioned the overall impact of Salamis, but to the Hellenes it was a victory sent by the gods. It is interesting that this subject is missing but other, rather obscure cultural elements such as a somewhat odd emphasis on Greek sexual preferences, are included. Still, this is a valuable volume that will be embraced by the general public. In this context, his discussion of Christianity's debt to the Greeks is quite accurate and illuminating.

This is a disappointing book. Its title suggests an intellectual adventure of the new, and its subtitle promises that it will be about why the Greeks are important to us -- in other words, what the ancient Greeks offered that is distinct to them and that made western civilization possible. This book does not deliver on the promises of its title. It is a rehash of standard scholarship delivered in language of the common man (common according to Cahill). As such it presents what amounts to a laundry-list of non-essentials that does not clearly differentiate the Greeks from other cultures, nor account for western civilization. For example, this list includes the following Greek "contributions" to the West: blood-lusting militarism, vowels, the subconscious yearning for community, unfettered discourse and inquiry, homosexuality, pornography, orgiastic debauchery, slavery, democracy, political theatre, the idea of innate guilt, xenophobia, sexism, racism, imperialism, "help" inventing things like philosophy, science and history, the Socratic Method, the syllogism, transcendentalism and the divine, improvements in architecture and sculpture, pathos and yearning for an impossible ideal, pedophilia, reckless conceit, the idea of self-sacrifice for the common good. How can the reader determine what out of this hash made western civilization possible? In the spirit of cultural relativism, Cahill offers no guidance. Cahill's list of non-essentials ignores the most fundamental Greek contribution that made western civilization possible: the discovery and use of reason.

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