

The Big Picture



The ancient Mediterranean in early America

Early Americans loved the classical world. They admired classical art. They signed public documents with classical names (like the “Publius” of *The Federalist*). They posed for paintings and statues as classical heroes. They decorated their houses as classical temples. They read the classics until the bitter end. “When the decays of age have enfeebled the useful energies of the mind,” wrote Thomas Jefferson in 1819, “the classic pages fill up the vacuum of ennui, and become sweet composers to that rest of the grave into which we are all, sooner or later, to descend.”

But for all their admiration of ancient Greece and Rome, early Americans also looked beyond those two civilizations to the ancient Mediterranean more broadly. In other words, they got the big picture, a whole Mediterranean that included not just Greece and Rome but Egypt, the Phoenicians, the Persians, and many more. All these societies were known to early Americans from books and maps that we tend to call “classical,” or to divide artificially into distinct units like Oriental, biblical, and classical.

But eighteenth-century Americans were less inclined to focus on the isolated pieces of the Mediterranean puzzle than they were to look at the big picture. This had a number of important implications. First, eighteenth-century Americans did not necessarily think of the nonclassical civilizations of antiquity as exotic or barbaric. Today, we think a lot about the so-called East-West polarity, and we imagine that it has been there forever. But it was not as pronounced in the eighteenth century, when Europeans and Americans discussed nonclassical Mediterranean civilizations without necessarily labeling

them as strange, hostile, or exotic. In fact, these civilizations supplied useful information for Americans about matters ranging from politics to religion to art to language to science. Eighteenth-century Americans believed that while Greece and Rome had certainly played an important role in laying the groundwork for later European and American societies, these other, nonclassical civilizations were also to be credited for influence. Nor were they sealed off from Greece and Rome; it was recognized that in antiquity (just as in their own, eighteenth-century world) civilizations overlapped and synthesized, borrowed and lent.

The big picture also reminded Americans that the Greeks and Romans could be criticized as much as admired. Roman monuments were very beautiful—until you remembered that they “were raised at the expense of the freedom of the rest of the world,” wrote John Izard Middleton in his *Grecian Remains in Italy* (1812). Middleton, a wealthy southerner and aesthete, made a delightful artistic tour of Italy in the early nineteenth century. What fascinated him was less the ruins of Rome (they filled him with “regret”) than the ruins of the peoples who came before Rome. Those pre-Roman peoples had just been minding their own business, worshipping their household gods; then along came the Romans, wrecking everything in their zeal for “universal dominion.”

This big picture started to shrink in the nineteenth century as Americans, like Europeans, became interested in tracing the origin of “Western Civilization” to just one part of the Mediterranean: to a noble race of ancient Greeks, who single-handedly invented all that was beautiful and true and free. The Greeks then passed the torch to the more pragmatic Romans, who codified and stabilized Greek learning before handing it off to the medieval Europeans, who then handed it to modern Europeans and Americans. This new, nineteenth-century story about the evolution of the Mediterranean emphasized Greek originality and invention and its intact transmission from Greece to Rome to Europe to America. The rest of the Mediterranean was still there, of course, but it became less important in the story of how we got here.

In 1930, this modern view of the importance of Greek civilization was captured with breathtaking clarity by Edith Hamilton in her best-selling book, *The Greek Way*. Her title says it all: there was a distinct people (“the Greeks,” by which she meant the classical Athenians) who shared one culture (a “way”). The Greek way was the cradle of the West and modern America. “None of the great civilizations that preceded them and surrounded them served them as model,” wrote Hamilton of the ancient Greeks. “With them something completely new came into the world. They were the first Westerners; the spirit of the West, the modern spirit, is a Greek discovery and the place of the Greeks is in the modern world.” And there it was. The Greeks were the cradle of the West. No others need apply.

But this hermetically sealed version of the story of how they became us would have surprised eighteenth-century Americans. With ideas of nationalism still forming and with a far richer immersion in a larger variety of classical texts,

maps, and images than is typical of even highly educated Americans today, eighteenth-century Americans had the motive and opportunity for viewing the ancient Mediterranean much more broadly. While still seeing the Greeks and Romans as first and best, they nonetheless delighted in looking beyond, before, and after the classical world for instruction and emulation. In my book, *The Mirror of Antiquity*, I showed how the so-called neoclassical style that swept America around 1790-1830 was in fact not just Greek or Roman in inspiration but also Turkish and Syrian, that is, a fusion of western/classical and eastern/Oriental elements. (It helps to know that the word *neoclassical* was not used in the period 1790-1830; it is the label of a later era, and it misrepresents the broad interests and influences of the earlier period by suggesting that they are only classical rather than also nonclassical.)

The big picture, the ancient Mediterranean of eighteenth-century Americans, is easy for historians to find. First of all, it lives gloriously in the huge coffee-table books of the eighteenth century, whose size allowed for the reproduction of what were literally big pictures. These folio editions of ancient sites include gigantic maps and big, gaudy, hand-colored engravings of crumbling temples and chipped urns from ancient Spain, Italy, Greece, Lebanon, Syria, Persia, and North Africa. Because they were so big and expensive, these books were printed and illustrated in Europe. But by the late eighteenth century they started to be purchased by some of the great institutions of Enlightenment America, like the Library Company of Philadelphia.

The big picture can also be found in the Greco-Roman texts that filled the greatest private libraries of this age, like those of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. These libraries tend to get described by modern historians as "classical," which is true as far as it goes. But the simple term "classical" hides the fact that the Greeks and Romans whose writings crowd these libraries constantly talked about other Mediterranean peoples, their influences, their virtues and failings. Though we label such early American libraries as "classical," it is important to remember that they were a major source for American knowledge about the larger Mediterranean world.

And finally the big picture comes into focus in the most intimate letters, diaries, and recollections of eighteenth-century Americans, during an era when Mediterranean antiquity was so very present and relevant that one might actually write about it in a letter to a spouse or a friend. When John Adams found himself in Spain in 1779, he visited a "very ancient Monument" of mysterious origin. "It is conjectured that it was created by the Phenicians," he observed in his autobiography, showing that he knew how this ancient seafaring people from the eastern Mediterranean had colonized Spain before the domination of Rome.

If we surveyed the ancient Mediterranean, eighteenth-century American style, what would it look like?

First of all, Carthage would immediately rise into view. A mighty North African

city that dominated the Mediterranean for about six hundred years after roughly 800 BCE, Carthage fascinated eighteenth-century Americans. The popularity of Carthage had a lot to do with eighteenth-century Americans' concerns about empire building and nation building. Recently members of the British Empire and then in the business of launching their own empire to the west, Americans looked to the long-lived, spectacularly successful seaborne colonial and mercantile might of Carthage as a positive example to be imitated. They were fascinated by the idea that Carthage had been successful at trade without degenerating into luxury and debauchery, a fate that the historians of Rome warned awaited those who abandoned martial, agrarian values for the temptations of materialism. They were also taken by the idea that Carthage influenced Rome and Greece, just as Greece and Rome influenced Carthage. A lot of respected authorities—from Oviedo to correspondents of Thomas Jefferson—even thought that the Carthaginians had originally peopled the Americas. Far from being dead and forgotten, Carthage was alive in the eighteenth century, the focus of a lot of debates about the here and now.



Fig. 1 The Carthaginian Empire in Africa, drawn by Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, geographer (1738). From Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, *Twelve Maps of Antient Geography Drawn by Sieur Danville...and Designed for the Explanation of Mr. Rollin's Antient History* (London, 1750): plate III. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

A map of Carthage published in the middle of the eighteenth century confirms the importance of the ancient city to Americans at that time (fig. 1). Entitled *The Carthaginian Empire in Africa*, it centers not on Rome and Greece but on western North Africa and the Carthaginian colony of Spain. The toe of the boot of Rome appears at the top, kicking Sicily, also a Carthaginian colony. Greece is nowhere in sight.

This Carthage-eye view of the world was not locked away in some obscure library. It appeared in what was perhaps the most widely read book of ancient history in the English-speaking world at this time: Charles Rollin's *Ancient History* (1730-1738), originally published in French and quickly translated into English. From the middle of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth, Rollin was read in England and America, by men and women, boys and girls, in libraries, colleges, female academies, and reading circles. The title

of Rollin's book is usually shortened to *Ancient History*, but the complete title is an example of the big picture. In full, it is *The Ancient History of the Egyptians, Carthaginians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Medes and Persians, Macedonians, and Grecians*. So the big picture was available to anyone who wanted to read Rollin and look at his maps. It made a lot of sense in the eighteenth-century world of Atlantic sea empires, in which whole peoples collided and melded. There was also much that was practically useful about ancient Carthage for revolutionary Americans. James Madison spent a lot of time reading about Carthage as he prepared to draft the essay that became *Federalist* no. 63, which holds Carthage up as a model for how Americans might create a long-lasting, stable senate. Though definitely not "classical," the city stars in this essay next to "classical" states such as Rome and Sparta.

Even Rome was much more complicated to eighteenth-century Americans than modern readers might imagine from reading the automatic praise of ancient Rome that crowds Revolutionary American documents. Though we often speak casually of ancient Rome as interchangeable with ancient Italy, educated eighteenth-century Americans were aware that other peoples had inhabited the peninsula before the Romans. The mysterious and beautiful remains left by these pre-Romans posed an implicit challenge to the idea of Roman imperial hegemony.

There were the archaic Greeks, for example, who were colonizing southern Italy and Sicily (an area called Magna Graecia) by the eighth century BCE, well before their so-called Golden Age in Athens a couple of centuries later. Magna Graecia was important enough to Rollin's story that he gave it its own map in the *Ancient History* (fig. 2). The cities of Magna Graecia featured magnificent temples built in the simple, robust Doric style. Some of these early temples were rediscovered by Europeans in the eighteenth century at the ancient city of Paestum, south of Naples. Of course, the temples had been slowly rotting away there for two thousand years. But it was only in the eighteenth century that classically interested Americans (like Ralph Izard and Alice Delancey Izard) and Europeans traveling to southern Italy on the Grand Tour began to care about what those ruined temples meant. What they meant was that there had been a great civilization in Italy that predated the Roman conquest. So Europeans painted the ruins as silent witnesses to pre-Roman grandeur, and these engravings bedecked the numerous books on Magna Graecia published in the late eighteenth century.



Fig. 2. Graecia Magna including Sicily, drawn by Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, geographer (1738). From Jean Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, *Twelve Maps of Antient Geography Drawn by Sieur Danville...and Designed for the Explanation of Mr. Rollin's Antient History* (London, 1750): plate VII. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In fact, a funny thing happened on the way to Magna Graecia: by the late eighteenth century there may have been more information easily available about the early Greek temples at Paestum than there was information on the Greek temples of Athens, which are so much better known today and which epitomize—to us, at least—what ancient Greece was “really like.” Magna Graecia was all the rage in the eighteenth century because the temples of Paestum were in Italy rather than Greece, and so they were easier for Europeans and Americans to reach. Paestum offered a glimpse not just of ancient Greek architecture in the convenient setting of Italy but also—perhaps more importantly—proof of the attractive idea that the Greeks had launched empires as a first step toward cultural perfection. The Doric temple style eventually became the darling of American builders of the so-called Greek Revival after 1800. At that point the “ancient Greece” it represented was associated with Golden Age Athens and not archaic Paestum. But well before this there is evidence that Americans were bitten by the Paestum bug. In the late eighteenth century the Library Company of Philadelphia acquired Thomas Major's *Ruins of Paestum* (1768), which was full of large engravings of the temples decaying picturesquely in the Italian countryside. Some Americans even imported cork replicas of the crumbling Paestum temples.

Ancient, pre-Roman Italy also included the Etruscans, the early peoples of the area in central Italy later absorbed by Rome. The Etruscans soared to popularity in the eighteenth century as a direct product of rising Tuscan nationalism, as modern Italians in the region around Rome began to excavate Etruscan sites and to claim a pre-Roman grandeur for Etruria. Temples, roads, pots—so many objects in and around Rome now appeared to antedate the Roman conquest of central Italy. By the late eighteenth century, images of these Etruscan objects were popularized around Europe and later America by the illustrated book trade.

“Etruscan” style could be a pretty haphazard label. So many peoples had settled on the Italian peninsula over the millennia that it was difficult for eighteenth-century excavators to determine whether a vase or monument was Etruscan, Roman, Greek, or something else entirely. “Etruscan” usually implied that a pot’s decorations were black and orangey-red. As Etruscan style swept over late-eighteenth-century European and American homes, this dramatic color scheme became all the rage. The Scottish architect Robert Adam decorated several stately homes in England in this way. Americans probably became most familiar with Etruscan color scheme through the pottery of Josiah Wedgwood. Fascinated by the Etruscan style, he named his pottery plant “Etruria” and pioneered the modern factory production of new “Etruscan” ware that was black and blood red. American magazines kept the public abreast of Etruscomania, discussing the latest archaeological finds and promoting the Etruscan style in furniture decoration and dress.



Fig. 3. Cabinet of the Honorable William Hamilton, Naples. Taken from Pierre F. H. d’Hancarville, *Collection of Etruscan, Greek and Roman Antiquities from the Cabinet of the Honble. Wm. Hamilton (1766-67)*. Courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia.

An important book for popularizing the “Etruscan” style in eighteenth-century America and Europe was also in itself a monument to the spectacular possibilities of the book. This was Pierre F. H. d’Hancarville’s *Collection of Etruscan, Greek and Roman Antiquities from the Cabinet of the Honble. Wm. Hamilton*, published in four folio volumes in 1766-67. To call these volumes impressive is an understatement. They are enormous, filled with hand-colored engravings of ancient objects, most in Halloween hues of deep orangey-red and black (fig. 3). The books rode on the popularity of the man who financed their production: Sir William Hamilton, British ambassador to the Bourbon court of Naples. Hedonist, antiquarian, and patron of the arts, Hamilton spent his many years in Naples leading hikes up Mount Vesuvius and filling his villa with ancient pots and statues plucked from the on-going digs in the surrounding Italian countryside. His bewitching and much younger wife, Emma, added her own touch by dressing in ancient style and dancing for visitors à *l’ancienne* against the backdrop of the steaming crater of Vesuvius, an act she

called her "attitudes." (Emma Hamilton later shocked the world again by carrying on a public affair with Lord Nelson.) Lord Hamilton sold much of his collection of Etruscan and Greek antiquities to the British Museum, where they remain today. In 1772, the Library Company of Philadelphia acquired d'Hancarville's *Collection*. It was among the first color-plate books acquired by that institution, alongside other coffee-table books of this era that we remember better today, like the third edition of Mark Catesby's *Natural History of Carolina* (1772).

Thomas Jefferson came to the Etruscans for his own reasons, which were not so much aesthetic as political. In a letter to John Adams dated May 5, 1817, he mentioned that he was reading Giuseppe Micali's *L'Italia avanti il dominio dei Romani* (Italy before the Conquest of the Romans) (1810). The title did not promise much, he admitted to Adams, but he was drawn in. And no wonder: this is a fascinating work, a product of the same emerging Tuscan nationalism that made eighteenth-century Italians rush out to dig up Etruscan antiquities. Micali's project was to assert that the Etruscans were as worthy as the ancient Greeks and Romans. They were great artists and virtuous farmers and not (Micali adds) savage nomads like the Indians of North America. A massive folio edition was published in Paris in 1824 with beautiful plates of Etruscan monuments and vases that reflected what Micali called a Tuscan "national" style.

Jefferson believed that Micali's history of the Etruscans supplied a new, more critical perspective on Rome. Early national Americans looked to the founding of the Roman republic as one of the most virtuous chapters in Roman history, when simple farmer-warriors tilled the warm earth, thinking of grain and not glory. But from the Etruscan point of view, as put forth in Micali, the Roman founding was the end of the world, a calamity to rival the fall of Rome to the barbarians a thousand years later. Jefferson saw this, and it gave him a new perspective on the very Rome he had worked so hard to enshrine as the model for American politics and taste. "Micali," he wrote to Adams, "has given the counterpart of the Roman history for the nations over which they extended their domination. For this he has gleaned up matter from every quarter, and furnished materials for reflection and digestion to those who, thinking as they read, have perceived [*sic*] there was a great deal of matter behind the curtain, could that be fully withdrawn. He certainly gives new views of a nation whose splendor has masked and palliated their barbarous ambition."

Carthage, Magna Graecia, and the Etruscans were just three of the civilizations that eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Americans routinely encountered in the course of what we so often call their "classical" reading. But geographical and chronological expansiveness are only part of the story. It is easy to think that eighteenth-century Americans were interested only in the rigorously political qualities of the ancient world, the virtue and stoicism that would secure the republic and that were endlessly praised in Revolutionary American rhetoric. But in fact Americans were also interested in the not-so-virtuous features of antiquity. This is easy to miss as you page through the huge library catalogues that eighteenth-century Americans left behind. After a

while all the orators and historians and moralists start to run together, and you begin to wonder how many editions of Diodorus Siculus one person really needs.

Then out from the monotonous list of editions pops something that looks sort of fun. Like the private life of the Romans: specifically, Jean Rodolph d'Arnay's *Vie privée des Romains* (1752; repr. 1757), which Jefferson had in his library. And it is fun, a glimpse into everyday life in ancient Roman. Sometimes everyday life was wholesome and virtuous, and sometimes it was deliciously not, especially as the republic degenerated into debauched empire. But that was part of the appeal of Rome and cyclical history. Readers knew what was coming, as day followed night. So after sitting patiently through the agrarian republic of virtuous frugality when simple farmers ate porridge out of wooden bowls and fought for Rome, d'Arnay's readers got to the other part, the part with the bad emperors and the orgies, the naked slaves, and the dinners of peacock tongues and parrot heads. It was all a bit *de trop*, but such books would not have sold (in multiple editions and translations) if there had not been a market for this kind of thing.

And this is just the beginning. There was so much more excitement and awe over places whose names we barely remember today. We don't remember because our own modern Mediterranean world, with its seemingly insurmountable East-West divide, has such burning, present meanings for us that we imagine that these meanings are eternal. But they are not. They too will change in time, just as the ancient Mediterranean of early Americans eventually faded away.

Further Reading:

Some of the major classical libraries of eighteenth-century America are now appearing on the Web, such as [The John Adams Library](#) at the Boston Public Library. These are a useful supplement to such major print compilations as E. Millicent Sowerby's *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson*, 5 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1952-1959). Readers interested in the antiquarian collections of Sir William Hamilton should consult Ian Jenkins and Kim Sloan, *Vases and Volcanoes: Sir William Hamilton and His Collection* (London, 1996). D'Hancarville is featured in the Library Company of Philadelphia's online exhibit of early color-plate books in America: [Living Color: Collecting Color Plate Books at the Library Company of Philadelphia](#). More on Robert Adam's Etruscan interiors can be found in Eileen Harris, *The Genius of Robert Adam: His Interiors* (New Haven, 2001). The American mania for neoclassicism is beautifully illustrated in Wendy Cooper, *Classical Taste in America* (New York, 1993).

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