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Language and History in Ancient Greek Culture

Martin Ostwald

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Spanning forty years, this collection of essays represents the work of a renowned teacher and scholar of the ancient Greek world. Martin Ostwald's contribution is both philological and historical: the thread that runs through all of the essays is his precise explanation, for a modern audience, of some crucial terms by which the ancient Greeks saw and lived their lives—and influenced ours. Chosen and sequenced by Ostwald, the essays demonstrate his methodology and elucidate essential aspects of ancient Greek society.

The first section plumbs the social and political terms in which the Greeks understood their lives. It examines their notion of the relation of the citizen to his community; how they conceived different kinds of political structure; what role ideology played in public life; and how differently their most powerful thinkers viewed issues of war and peace. The second section is devoted to the problem, first articulated by the Greeks, of the extent to which human life is dominated by nature (physis) and human convention (nomos), a question that remains a central concern in modern societies, even if in different guises. The third section focuses on democracy in Athens. It confronts questions of the nature of democratic rule, of financing public enterprises, of the accountability of public officials, of the conflict raised by imperial control and democratic rule, of the coexistence of "conservative" and "liberal" trends in a democratic regime, and of the relation between rhetoric and power in a democracy. The final section is a sketch of the principles on which the two greatest Greek historians, Herodotus and Thucydides, constructed their outlooks on human affairs.

Ultimately, the collection intends to make selected key concepts in ancient Greek social and political culture accessible to a lay audience. It also shows how the differences—rather than the similarities—between the ancient Greeks and us can contribute to a deeper understanding of our own time.

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