
Mary Beard & John Henderson
CLASSICS
A Very Short Introduction
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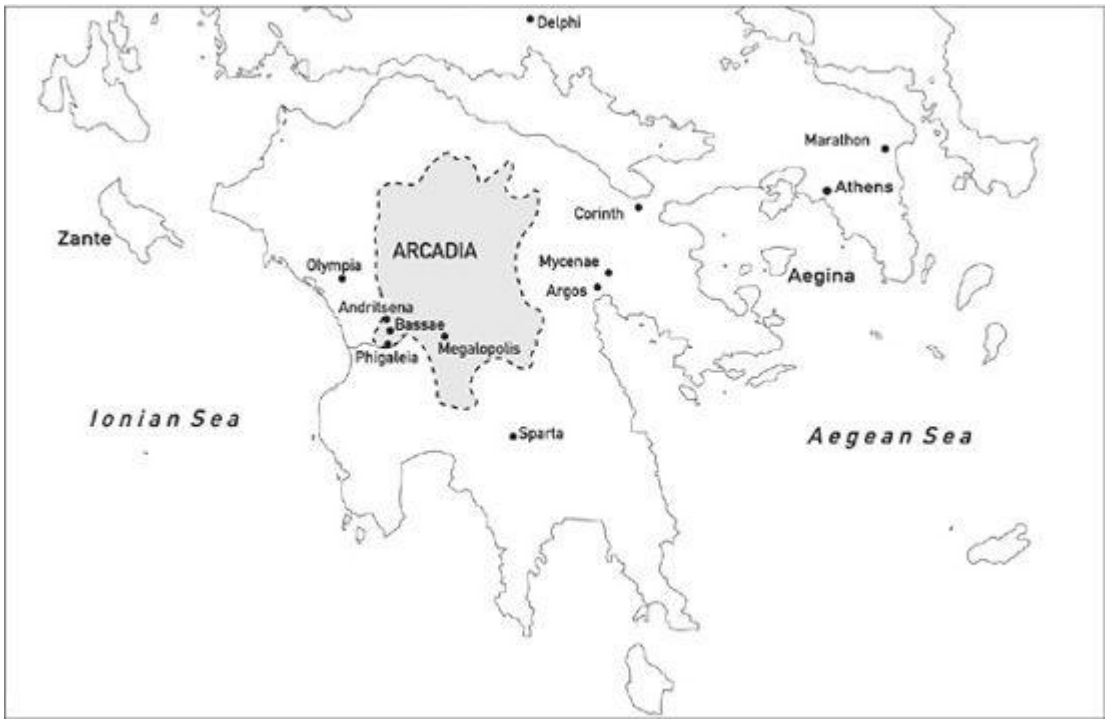
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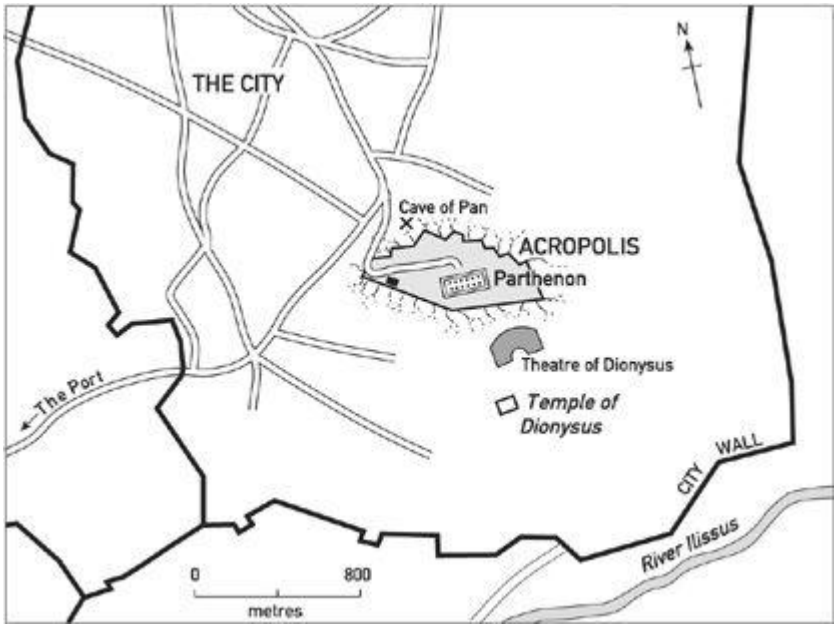
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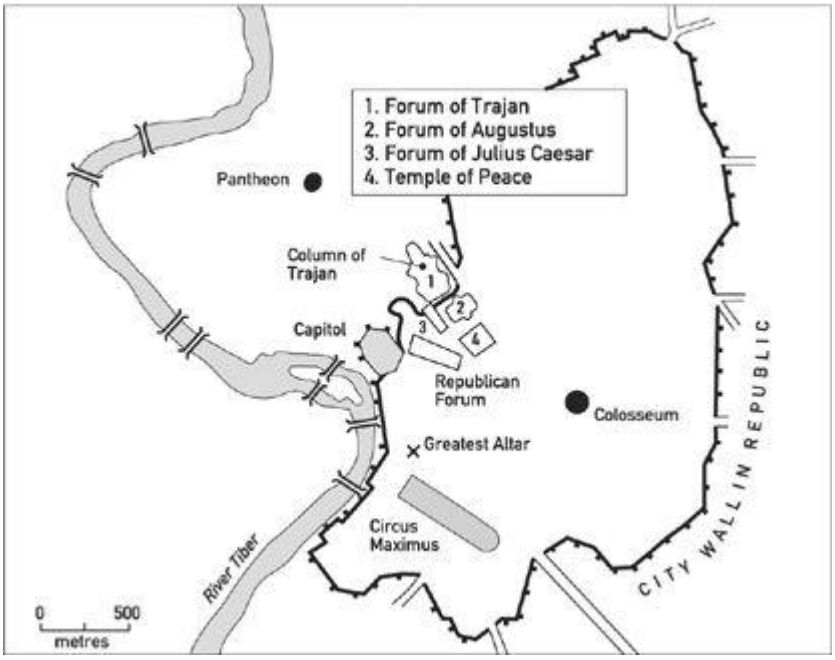

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Chapter 1
The Visit

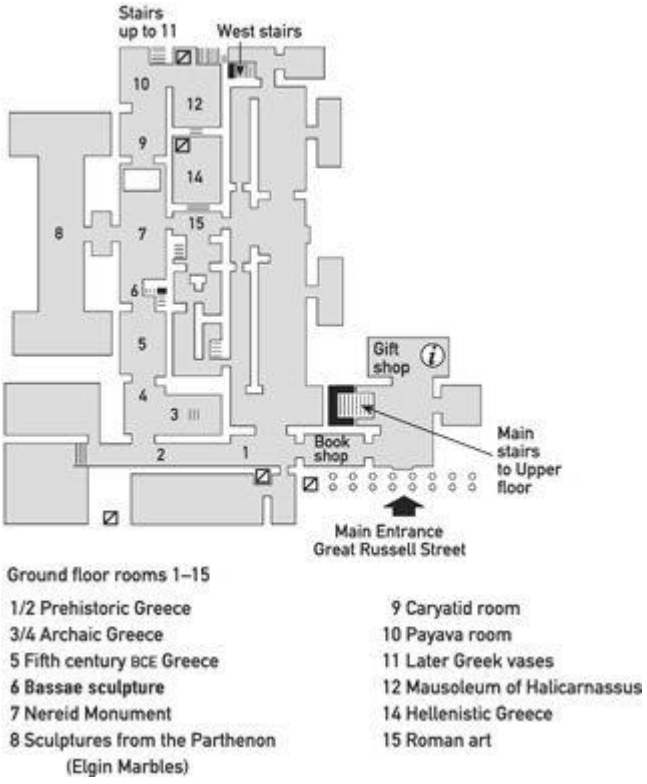
In and Out of the Museum

This introduction to *Classics* begins with a brief visit to a museum. We have chosen the British Museum in London, and one particular room, housing one particular monument that survives from ancient Greece. A museum is a good place to look for ancient Greece and Rome; but this visit will be the starting point for an exploration of *Classics* that extends far beyond any museum and its objects.

Our visit follows the route set out for us by the numbering on the plan provided for visitors to the museum, which the various guidebooks also follow, in sequence, through the galleries (Fig. 1). Up the grand flight of steps, through the tall columns of the classical porch, into the front hall, and past the bookshop; on through the burial urns and giant 'Ali Baba' jars that stand for heroic, pre-historic Greece (Rooms 1 and 2), and the first stiff marble figures that mark the beginning of 'classical' sculpture (Rooms 3 and 4). Then we weave our way around the cases of shiny red and black Greek vases (Room 5), until we reach the bottom of a narrow staircase, that promises to take us off the main track. (We haven't reached the prize exhibit of the Parthenon sculptures yet.) A deviation, then – and a surprise in store.

We climb the stairs to Room 6, which is on a mezzanine floor above the other galleries. Past an emotive picture of ancient ruins drawn by some 'milord' who has emphatically included the signs of his class and character –

his gun and dog (see Fig. 2). Our destination turns out to be a specially designed exhibition room, with carefully planned spotlights trained to set off a series of carved stone slabs, about half-a-metre high, laid end to end to form a frieze (a strip of fighting bodies, men, women, horses, half-horses …) that runs around the room at eye-level. (Not a centimetre to spare – this room was built to *fit*.) A couple of information panels are here to help. These sculptures, they tell us, once formed the frieze, carved towards the end of the fifth century BCE, inside the Temple of the god Apollo at a place called Bassae in Arcadia, a remote district in the south-western corner of Greece. (All the places mentioned in the book are marked on the Maps, pp. xi–xiii.)



1. Plan of the British Museum: how to find the Bassae Room

2. Displaying the Spoils: Cockerell's image of the temple at Bassae after the excavation

The frieze (so the panels explain) shows two of the most famous scenes of Greek myth. Half of this mass of bodies turn out to be combatants in the battle of Greeks with the half-man/half-horse Centaurs (who, in true beastly fashion, had spoiled a wedding feast by trying to steal the women); the other half are fighters in the conflict between Greeks (Greek men that is, and Herakles himself in the lead), and the wild, warrior women Amazons, strange and uncivilized. It was, the information tells us, one of the famous Twelve Labours of Herakles (in Latin, Hercules) to steal the belt of the Amazon Queen.

And the frieze is all here in the British Museum, precisely because of the English milord, and his friends, whose picture we noticed on the way up. In

the early nineteenth century the remains of the temple at Bassae were rediscovered by a group of English, German, and Danish archaeologist-explorers. In a matter of months they were to make a small fortune when the sculpture was auctioned off to the British government. A few fragments have ended up in Copenhagen, a few are still in Greece; but essentially the whole thing was brought back to England.

There's a puzzle here though, as the information panel explains. This museum room may have been 'built to fit' – but to fit *what*? The twenty-three individual slabs, here neatly laid out end to end, side by side, were found widely scattered around the ruins of the temple, one by one, in complete confusion; and no one has ever been quite sure what goes with what, how to do this great stone jigsaw, or what exactly the picture is supposed to be. If you examine the drawings of the slabs of the frieze outline at the back this book (pp. 128-9), you will be following *one* solution to the problem of the original layout. What we see in the museum's Bassae Room can be no more, and no less, than someone's best guess at how it might once have looked.

At how it might once have looked? Never mind the jigsaw puzzle, the information panels have already alerted us to the fact that these sculptures, in their ancient setting, never looked much like this. In their temple they were high up, 7 metres up the wall of the inner room of the sanctuary, poorly lit, probably difficult to see (let's imagine plenty of dust and cobwebs); they were not conveniently at eye-level, spotlit for our attention. It's stating the obvious, of course, to say that we are in a museum, whose job it is to present these 'works of art' for our inspection (admiration or study), clean, tidy, and explained; stating the obvious to say that the temple at Bassae was no museum, but a religious shrine, and that these sculptures were part of a holy place, whose own visitors (as we shall see) had not come looking for labels and explanations of what they saw. (After all, *they* knew the stories of Herakles against the Amazons, Greeks against the Centaurs, from granny's

knee.) There is a big gap, in other words, between the historical context and the modern display.

Museums always operate with that gap, and we museum visitors have learned to take it for granted. We are not surprised, for example, to find a prehistoric spearhead (once, maybe, lodged fatally and bloodily in the skull of some unfortunate fighter) laid out in front of us in an elegant show-case; we do not even imagine that any of those gleaming museum reconstructions of the Roman kitchen, with their wholesome ingredients and cheerful waxwork slave cooks, capture much of the (grimmer) realities of Roman, or any, cooking and domestic labour. That is how museums *are*. We are not deceived by their displays to think they 'simply' represent the past.

At the same time, that gap between the museum and the past, between us and them, prompts a series of questions. In the case of Bassae, we may be well aware that the sculptures were originally part of a religious sanctuary, not a museum. But 'religion' in what sense? How are we to think of the 'religion' practised in a Greek temple? And were 'religious' objects not also 'works of art' for the Greeks, as well as for us? This temple (as we shall discover) was in the middle of nowhere, the back of beyond, on the side of a mountain. What was the point of a temple *there*? Did no one ever come to visit it as a tourist rather than a pious pilgrim, to see the sights? Did no ancient visitor want some of the scenes, barely visible 7 metres up, *explained*? How different was a visit of theirs from our visit to the museum? How sure can we be, in other words, about the gap that separates us and them, about what we share with the fifth-century BCE visitors to this temple (pilgrims, tourists, worshippers …?), and what sets us apart?

There are questions too about the histories that unfold within that gap. These sculptures are not simply objects of a story shared only by us and those who first built and used the temple. What did Bassae mean to the

inhabitants of *Roman* Greece when, 300 or so years after our temple was constructed, the great superpower of ancient Rome had added Greece to the biggest empire the world had ever known? Did Roman conquest make a difference to who came to this temple, and to the expectations they had? And what of the intrepid group of explorers who braved the bandits of (then Turkish) Greece to rediscover the temple and bring its sculpture back to England? Was that an enterprise (of imperialism, of exploitation) that now embarrasses us? Were they tourists, rather like us, or not? How did Bassae fit into their vision of the classical world? Is that a vision that we can share with them, based (at least in part) on shared admiration for the literature, art, and philosophy of Greece and Rome?

Us and them: *Classics*

Classics is a subject that exists in that gap between us and the world of the Greeks and Romans. The questions raised by *Classics* are the questions raised by our distance from 'their' world, and at the same time by our closeness to it, and by its familiarity to us. In our museums, in our literature, languages, culture, and ways of thinking. The aim of *Classics* is not only to *discover* or *uncover* the ancient world (though that is part of it, as the rediscovery of Bassae, or the excavation of the furthest outposts of the Roman empire on the Scottish borders, shows). Its aim is also to define and debate *our* relationship to that world. This book will explore that relationship, and its history, starting from a spectacle that is familiar, but, at the same time, as we shall see, can become puzzling and strange: dismembered fragments of an ancient Greek temple put on show in the heart of modern London. In Latin the word 'museum' once indicated 'a temple of the Muses'; in what respects is the modern museum the right place to preserve treasures from a classical temple? Does it only *look* the part?