

EXPOSED

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The Greek  
and Roman Body

CAROLINE VOUT

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For my father, Colin Vout  
(25 September 1931 – 17 January 2020)



# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	i
Prologue: Naked, not nude	3
1. Human being	21
2. Body and soul	53
3. Sex and society	85
4. Bodybuilding	125
5. Beauty in ugliness	165
6. Medics and miracle workers	199
7. The body politic	235
8. Sleep and death	269
9. Resurrection	301
Epilogue: Bodies familiar and unfamiliar	339
Further reading	353
List of Illustrations	397
Index	409

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

WRITING a book takes its toll on the body – not just the strained eyes, and the feet itchy to escape, but the soaring spirit when the words spill onto the page, and the fevered brow when there is a blockage. Lockdown intensified these feelings, as it did everything else – our relationships with our bodies, and the bodies of our loved ones, these bodies’ relationship with society. Never has our temperature, our breathing, our sense of smell, our proximity to others been so freighted. I have tried to channel this.

This would have been impossible without my extraordinary colleagues, friends and family. I thank Gavin Francis, Kirty Topiwala and Andrew Franklin for giving me this opportunity, and everyone at Profile and the Wellcome Collection for helping me to see it to completion. Profile’s Cecily Gayford has been the most exceptional editor and I cannot praise her enough: her instincts are always spot on, her feedback as brilliant as it is sensitive. Excellent too has been my copy editor, Susanne Hillen.

## EXPOSED

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CAROLINE VOUT

CAMBRIDGE, SEPTEMBER 2021

# PROLOGUE: NAKED, NOT NUDE

I NEVER meant to write a book about the body – or at least not the body as an entity. My plan had been to work on faces, and on what the lives of individual ancients might look like when reconstructed not from texts on paper and stone, but from Greek and Roman portraits. Either that, or I would try my hand at a history of Greek and Roman sexualities. But both of these projects fragment the body, denying it its role as social animal. Why stick at heads or genitals?

Two events collided to embolden me. I was invited to speak at the launch of *Shapeshifters: A Doctor's Notes on Medicine & Human Change*, by the doctor and writer Gavin Francis, and asked to devote my brief appearance to the Latin poet, Ovid. We were at the Wellcome Collection in London, an institution best known for its study of health and science. I crossed my fingers, and explained how in Ovid's most famous work, the *Metamorphoses*, the body was the source of all knowledge; how its stories of bodily transformation (into animals, trees, flowers, stones, rivers, stars, gods, girls into boys, boys into girls, man and woman into hermaphrodite) spoke to modern

anxieties about nature, culture, sex, gender, body dysmorphia. My listeners nodded. Their questions – about diet, disability, suicide, selfhood – showed that the Greek and Roman body had barely aged. Ovid is as adept as he ever was at asking what it is to be human.

The second event made the local paper: ‘Cambridge’s Bridge Street closed after “cyclist hit by mobility scooter”’. I remember flying, too high, like Ovid’s Phaethon, who loses control of his father’s fiery chariot ... and then a fifty-five-minute wait for the ambulance. I was conscious, my only lasting injury a break to my writing arm. Now I had more questions in common with Ovid: about the relationship of man and machine, about mind and body, about bodily integrity. I was subsequently told that eleven of the skeletons found at the Roman cemeteries of Poundbury in Dorset and Lankhills in Winchester have healed fractures of the very same radius bone – none of them, I am pleased to say, with poor alignment of their limb, or excessive limb shortening. Was their treatment similar to mine? Was it similar to that found in the treatises of Greek and Roman medical writers? Had I been around back then, chances are that a horse and cart would already have mown me down: I have been short-sighted since my teens, and, although the Romans did experiment in eye surgery, I would have had to wait a millennium and more for glasses. The body is all I think about. I ask my colleague: ‘Can I really start a book in this state?’

She replies: ‘It’s perfect timing.’



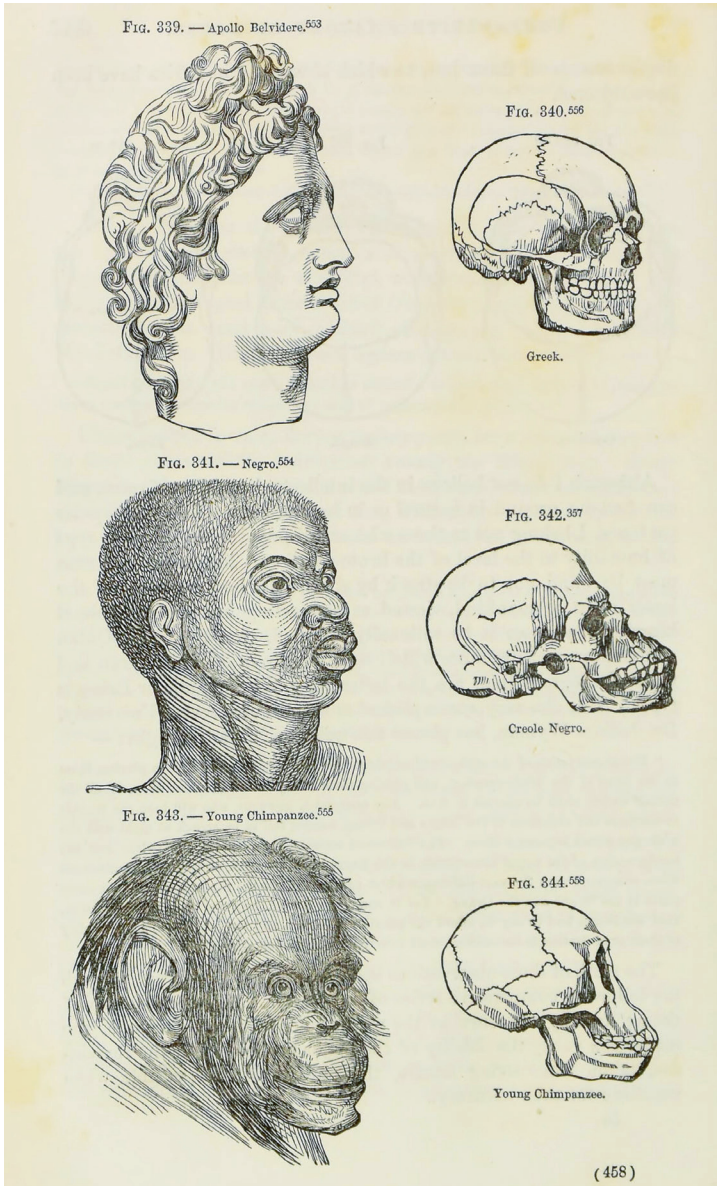
Perfection. The Greek and Roman body is a flawless body, lean, lovely, on a pedestal. It is also a beautiful lie. Even the greatest painters of the period struggled to find inspiration in a single human, taking ‘the best bits’ of several sitters to fashion a flawless composite. Meanwhile, sculptors made bronze and

marble bodies that were too good to be true – or truly mortal. Greek sculptor Polyclitus is a good example: from the outset his Spear-carrier was deemed paradigmatic of the human form (fig. 1). Made in the fifth century BCE, the statue is now lost, but not before admiration of it had led to multiple Roman copies. Let us pause for a moment over its youthful face, mature torso, and incongruously tiny penis. It makes the point (a point that was frequently debated by the ancients) that the requirements of art are different from life.

The Spear-carrier is an unsullied body, expressing unsullied character. Beauty and goodness. For the Greek philosopher Plato, these qualities already went hand in hand, and were central to his politics. But they grew in intensity, when, post antiquity, Greek and Roman statues were found with only traces of their original paintwork, and were whisked to the restorer's studio to be stripped bare of their pigment, and then paraded in the gallery. For anyone unable to acquire a genuine antiquity, plaster casts, even whiter than



1. *This body has come to be seen by many as an ideal body. It was conceived in bronze back in the fifth century BCE by the Greek sculptor Polyclitus and was widely copied. This is a plaster cast of a Roman marble version found at Pompeii.*



2. Illustration from Josiah C. Nott and George R. Gliddon's *Types of Mankind*, which sees the Apollo Belvedere statue as the highpoint of human development. They thought everything else inferior, but some humans more inferior than others. The 1854 text favours polygenesis, the notion that different races had different origins.



polished marble, would do. Pale and interesting, these statues are ghosts of the Greek and Rome past – purveyors of purity as virtue.

Like all ghosts, these statues are numinous, and terrifying. If it is ghosts we are talking about, we tell stories to try to tame them. With statues too, we spin narratives to account for where they come from. Few of these narratives have proven more commanding than that of German scholar Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768). For Winckelmann, Greek bodies of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE were unsurpassed. It was then that the stars aligned to create the climate and culture most conducive to freedom, and freedom of expression. What Winckelmann saw as an ideal, others determined by empirical criteria. Take Dutch anatomist Pieter Camper (1722–1789), whose work on skulls and statues claimed that the formula for perfect beauty lay in profiles and facial angles. Drawing a line from the forehead to the projection of the upper teeth, and plotting it against a horizontal that ran through the aperture of the ears, Camper established a hierarchy from the tailed ape at  $42^\circ$  to the straight line of the Apollo Belvedere, a statue made in ancient Rome, but again based on a lost Greek original. The most that real men could hope for was  $80^\circ$ , and only European men at that. Africans and Asians might score as low as  $70^\circ$ . It is not hard to see where this kind of work was heading. The woodcuts in Josiah Nott and George Gliddon's bestselling *Types of Mankind*, published in Philadelphia in 1854, are a case in point, a sliding scale that would bind the Greek and Roman body to whiteness, and beauty and goodness to race; a pseudo-scientific rationale for slavery (fig. 2). Cut forward to 2016, and US campuses are targeted with posters of the Apollo Belvedere as a pin-up of white supremacy.

All of us are implicated. Until at least the twentieth century, the premium put on a classical education, and the lessons to be learned not only from Greek and Roman sculpture, but also



from their literary, historical, philosophical and medical texts, created a false sense of intimacy with these cultures, making them formative of ideas about politics, law and social justice, as well as art, anatomy and race. ‘We are all Greeks. Our laws, our literature, our religion, our arts, have their roots in Greece’, claims Shelley in the preface to his lyrical drama, *Hellas* (1821). We still read their love poetry, or their law-court speeches, and are seduced into believing that we know what it felt like to be in their bodies. Yet our life experiences have very little in common: most of them married young, sometimes very young, and did not expect to live as long as we do. They had different attitudes from us to sex, to risk, and to punishment.

Shelley’s ‘we’ is inevitably exclusive and exclusionary, and Greek culture is lauded – often to the detriment of other cultures – as an incomparable conduit of knowledge. Whitewash the Greeks and Romans and we misappropriate the inheritance they offer – and not only because Plato, Apollo, and the Spear-carrier were exceptional even then, but because it credits the Greeks and Romans with a unity of thinking and doing that never existed. What about the diversity of skin colours, belief systems, languages, gender and class that made up the Greek world or the Roman empire, which, at its height, stretched from Britain and Portugal into Africa and Syria (fig. 3)?

Nowhere is this diversity more acutely felt than with respect to the body. In writing this book, I go back to the drawing board, putting Plato, the Spear-carrier and the Apollo Belvedere into dialogue with a less familiar, and unprecedented, range of material. I get to grips with the differences between real and represented bodies, our bodies and their bodies, male and female bodies, Greek and non-Greek bodies, bodies in Athens, Alexandria and Rome, and in Roman Italy, Roman Egypt, Roman Britain. I also get to grips with how these bodies, and bodily experience, changed over time. This book’s earliest evidence is Greek poetry of c.700 BCE, and its latest is from late

antiquity, when Christianity becomes the Roman empire's dominant religion.

On route, the Athenian empire of the fifth century BCE was dwarfed by the empire of Alexander the Great, whose



3. We do not know where in the Greek world this grey marble head was found. Slightly short of life-size, it was probably made in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) in the second century BCE, and was originally part of a statue.

conquests in the second half of the fourth century BCE took Greek culture as far east as India. Upon his premature death, no one else could maintain Alexander's momentum, and his territory was divided. Two centuries later, and the kingdoms that followed in his wake were gradually swallowed by Rome's expansion. But to organise the book chronologically would be to have Greek and Roman bodies talk only of historical development, when what we really want them to do is to speak for themselves, *about* themselves – about what it meant to have a body in and of the moment. It would also be to privilege great men, and their minds over their bodies.

Nor does this book see the Greeks and Romans as separate chapters. Rome's governance of Greek cities changed the lives of those cities forever. An extreme view would say that their heritage was all they had left. But Rome's governance bound the heritage and inhabitants of these cities together to make Greek culture sing more loudly, amplifying what it meant to be, look and act Greek, and what it meant to be Roman. Swathes of the Roman empire remained Greek speaking, Greek thinking. Conversations between the Greek and the Roman crystallised body norms and sexual ethics. With the emergence of one-man rule in Rome at the end of the first century BCE, the idea of the exemplary body was further refined – only to be overhauled completely in the fourth century CE, when Rome's emperors make Christianity's global domination possible. Christianity had its origins in Judaism, and an early power base in Africa.

Instead, this book adopts a thematic structure that is as happy panning across this expansive terrain as it is zooming in on specific periods, places, protagonists. The adjectives 'Greek' and 'Roman' are sometimes important and sometimes irrelevant, trumped by more elementary tensions – between the individual and the communal, the local and the global – and by the fact of being human. Doing justice to these relationships means embracing bodies beyond those found in texts and in

galleries, not only beautiful bodies, but ugly bodies, sick bodies, dirty bodies, bodies as part of, and cast out from, society. And it is not as easy as it sounds: most of our written sources come from elite men in urban centres. But archaeological data and forms of material culture such as pottery, curse tablets and anatomical votives give a voice to alternative populations and to everyday physical experiences. Even without direct access to the voices of women, labourers and captives, we know these ‘cradles of civilisation’ to be misogynist, war mongering, slave owning.



We don’t have to sympathise with the Greeks and Romans to appreciate that centuries of cultural investment have made them special. ‘Special’ is not the same as superior. We can ask the same questions about the body as they did without condoning their answers. And it is the questions that make Plato and Polyclitus worth talking about. Indeed, we *must* talk about them because of Winckelmann, Camper and Shelley’s enthusiastic appropriation of them. Where do humans come from? What makes them human, autonomous, able to act, and act responsibly? What happens to these bodies, and the forces that animate these bodies, when a person dies? These are all questions that were debated over and over in antiquity, and questions that still drive today’s post-human and trans-human thinking, leading some people to spend tens of thousands of dollars having their bodies, or only their heads, frozen in liquid nitrogen, in the hope of future restoration. Is the body so superfluous in determining our personhood? Many ancients would have thought that it was; yet many used their philosophical training to prolong life in the writing of medical treatises on organs, diseases, diet, and on the practice of complex surgical procedures. Cosmetics, perfume and gym membership were

big business, and not only because the future of the species depends on attracting a mate, but because, as the popularity of contraception attests, there was serious commitment to pleasure.

Gym membership was to Greek culture what bathing was to Roman culture: both of these activities were part of what made these peoples distinct, in their eyes, from barbarians. In fifth-century BCE Greece, exercising nude turned men into citizen men, by training them to secure glory for their cities in local and panhellenic athletic competition, and (just as important for their formation as fully fledged adults) to attract the admiring glances of other citizen males. Romans were staid in comparison, all receding hairlines and cumbersome togas. Whatever Romans got up to in private, or dreamed of getting up to, love between citizen men was publicly frowned upon.

Not that the Romans were averse to getting their kit off. Towns and villas all over the Roman empire had lavish bathhouses, with versions of statues such as Polyclitus's Spear-carrier and figurative mosaic flooring designed to make bathers more self-conscious about their bodily vigour or inadequacy. These feats of engineering and artifice, and the heightened awareness of the body that they bred, were, from Rome's perspective, part of the civilising process. But hierarchies were hard to wash away. When the emperor Hadrian, who had a penchant for public bathing, caught a war veteran rubbing himself up and down against the wall because he did not have anyone to remove his oil, he gave him slaves and cash towards their upkeep. When, on his next visit, there were numerous men doing the same, he ordered them to rub each other!

For many, life was tough. At the bottom of the social hierarchy, enslaved bodies were denied full personhood and the protection that that demanded. A funerary monument from Amphipolis in northern Greece marks this all too graphically (fig. 4): in its lowest tier, slaves are led like pack animals,

PROLOGUE: NAKED, NOT NUDE



4. A drawing of the large stone funerary marker of Aulus Caprilius Timotheus reveals the detail better than a photograph. It dates to the first century CE, when the region in which it was found was under Roman control, and offers various windows onto the enslaved body.

chained at the neck. In the tier above, they work like Trojans. At the apex, they serve the deceased, Aulus Caprilius Timotheus, who reclines on a banqueting couch, larger than life. The monument's inscription informs us that Timotheus was a slave trader ('body-seller' in Greek): his enjoyment of life, and visibility in death, is built on his men's back-breaking labour. Compared to the care he devotes to his body, their bodies are compromised, yoked like a team of oxen, or, in the scene at the top, where they tend to his every need, are further evidence, like the horse to the right, of his enviable resources. The only other thing the inscription tells us is that Timotheus is a freedman (i.e. himself an ex-slave). His metamorphosis is worthy of Ovid.

Women were defined by their bodies in a different way again, their purpose in life being to have babies. If they were not sexually active they were deemed a danger to themselves and to society, as wild as their wombs that were thought to wander their bodies in search of moisture. If they *were* sexually active, they were also a danger to society: a man had to know that the child she was carrying was his – hence the premium put on seclusion and marriage (fig. 5). However educated or moneyed a woman might be, her body made her a second-class citizen.

But it was not only 'weak women' that struggled with self-control. The battle to balance physical urges with rational thought made everyone in the Greek and Roman world human. Sleep with too many men, or women, or grieve excessively for a dead wife or child, and even an elite man was open to charges of effeminacy. The need to control the body extended beyond the boundaries of life itself: for many, death constituted liberation, escape from one's bodily baggage, but it still had to be managed in the right way, and the corpse properly disposed of. We will be looking at dead bodies as well as living, breathing ones, and at public as well as private bodies. Control of one's body was an esteem-indicator for anyone in public office; being



in the public eye left them especially exposed. The gods were an exception. By society's standards, their cruelty and promiscuity were off the scale – proof of their extraordinary status.



This is a lot of body for one book. But the gods will help to structure it, as they helped structure Greek and Roman society, taking care of diverse domains of human life and asking for distinct observance. Whether we have been conscious of their presence or not, they are already with us: Phaethon's father, Helios (the Sun), Apollo, with whom Helios is identified, and Dionysus (Bacchus), whose remit includes the grapes that Timotheus's mid-tier workers process. Greece's gymnasia, meanwhile, did not just foster a cult of beauty, but the worship of Hermes, and of Hercules, the son of Zeus (Jupiter in Latin) and a mortal mother, Alcmene. Even Hadrian was regarded as divine on his death. For every surgical incision into bleeding flesh, there is a story about Apollo's son, Asclepius, and the cures administered by his health-bringing snakes.

The moment the Greeks made their gods and goddesses man- and woman-shaped, they made them measures of humanity; at the same time,



*5. In 1883, artist Thomas Eakins used the recently discovered technology of photography to help him in his studies of the human body. Eakins thought the Greeks masters of modelling from life and dressed his models in classical costume. In antiquity, they would have been of an age to be married.*



they made Greek and Roman questions about the humanness of the human body more urgent. Dionysus, for example, is born from Zeus's thigh after his mortal mother, Semele, makes the fatal error of asking her lover to ditch his disguise and appear to her in his natural glory (fig. 6). The embryo she carries is rescued and transplanted, but not before she is burned to a crisp. The essence of god is too hot to handle.

Zeus may look like a red-blooded male in Dente's engraving, but he, and his son, have ichor, rather than plasma and platelets, pumping through their veins, as a result of eating not bread and wine but ambrosia and nectar. It is this bloodlessness that makes the gods immortal. In another version of the myth, Dionysus is born not of Semele, but of Zeus's own daughter, Persephone, only to be murdered and eaten by the Titans, who ruled Olympus before them. Was nothing sacred among the gods? At least his heart is saved: according to one author, it is minced and fed to Semele in a soup, enabling his regeneration (fig. 7). Mortal bodies, in contrast, were bound by strict codes of custom and taboo. For them, death is insurmountable.

Until Christ. For all that Dionysus's dying and rising makes him a forerunner, Christ is a new kind of god, a god not just man-shaped, but man – as fully human as he is fully divine. His bodily resurrection, and the promise of resurrection for his flock, change attitudes to the body forever. Self-control and temperance were no longer enough. Scripture taught Christians that they were sinful from birth, and that repentance had to start immediately. What better way to share in Christ's suffering than through mortification of the flesh – suppressing the body's natural urges by abstinence and fasting? For the strictest adherents, even sex within marriage was an unnecessary evil. Safer to turn one's back on society, and live apart in the desert,

*6. Marco Dente imagines Zeus assuming human form to seduce Semele. Like many Renaissance artists, Dente could not get enough of Greek and Roman sculpture and stories. Zeus could not get enough of sex with mortal women.*







or in a monastery ('monos' means 'alone' in Greek), hand in hand with Christ, the ultimate bridegroom.

But this is to get ahead of ourselves. Christ will introduce the final chapter of our story, the tipping point between the classical world and the medieval and Byzantine periods. Shelley turns out to be unusual in being an atheist. For Winckelmann, Camper and many others besides, Apollo, Dionysus, Hadrian and Helios had sat comfortably next to Christ and the Virgin. The preceding chapters start from human creation as it was imagined in Greek culture, and end with death and pre-Christian ideas about the afterlife, so as to ensure that the body, and not society, is the protagonist. We have already met one of our other guides, Asclepius. Working alongside him in this capacity are gods and demi-gods, familiar and less familiar: Aphrodite (Venus) and Hephaestus (Vulcan), figureheads of beauty and



7. The central section of the lid of this Roman marble sarcophagus shows the rebirth of Dionysus from Zeus's thigh as Hermes looks on and then whisks the baby to safety. Dating to the end of the second century CE, coffins like this offered hope of new life even in death.

ugliness respectively; Hercules; Hypnos (Somnus), personification of sleep, who carries heroes to their resting place; Augustus, god in the making, and model for what a Roman emperor looks like; and Psyche. Psyche's marriage to Venus's son, Eros (Cupid), is more than a romance: it is a contribution to debates about the relationship of body and soul. Dionysus returns fleetingly in the epilogue: as well as tying together many of our themes, he stands for out-of-body experience, or 'ec-stasy'.

We begin, though, with Prometheus, the originator of being, both as architect of a chain of events that comes to define the human condition (with all of the failed aspiration and conflict that that brings with it) and, in later versions of the myth, as the actual maker of mortals. He is not a god like Zeus, but a Titan, who struggles against Zeus and the awe and worship that Zeus demands. Indeed, from the Renaissance on, he is a symbol of science's battle against religion, inspiring Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*, and his wife Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Prometheus played a relatively minor role in the religious lives of the Greeks, but he was already worshipped in Athens.

These figures frame our discussion. It is not their show, but they insist on the strangeness of the worlds we are about to enter, worlds without televisions, satellite imagery, seismographs, medical screenings; worlds less predictable than our own; worlds in which the only way of preparing for the future was often to consult the oracle. The human bodies that star are shaped by this uncertainty, as well as by pragmatism, and by superstition and rationality. Ancient philosophers call on mythology, and its supernatural beings, to make their arguments cogent.

These human bodies are inevitably born of nature *and* culture – always bodies in time and space, genetically coded bodies (not that the Greeks and Romans knew about genes, or amino acids or proteins either), fleshed out by life experi-

ence, by theory and practice, ambition and fantasy as much as by reality. And it is this 'relativism', the dependence of the human body on other bodies, human and divine, and on its specific physical and intellectual locale, which gives it meaning. Recognise this, and none of us are Greeks, not in the sappy sense meant by Shelley. Nor are we Romans. But acknowledging our distance from them is more productive than forging a false friendship. Approach the bodies that populated Greek and Roman culture from this respectful, sceptical stance, and there is a chance to see past inherited ideals. It is time to take the dust covers off the Greeks and Romans; and to encounter their bodies not nude, but naked.