

Athens – A History – From Ancient Ideal to Modern City by Robin Waterfield.
Macmillan 2004.

There are few things more impressive than the presentation of a broad sweep of history in a readable way, replete but not over-stuffed with detail.

Robin Waterfield's latest book takes as its subject one of the most important cities of the ancient world, Athens, and tells its story from ancient to modern times. Undoubtedly the changing fortunes of Athens are reflected in the fact that of the book's 379 pages of text, no less than 295 cover the ancient city, and the rest is an understandably abbreviated survey of the last 1700 years, culminating in the hosting of the 2004 Olympic Games by Greece which followed the publication of the book.

Waterfield starts with a consideration of the Olympics themselves, and especially their modern reincarnation in 1896 under the presiding genius of Baron Pierre de Coubertin. He then proceeds to analyse ancient Athens from a number of perspectives, including not only historical events and individuals but also the social, financial and political dimensions of Athenian life. Ancient Athens' decline and its revival as a Hellenistic and then Roman city precede the modern phase when Athens was ruled by others, notably Byzantium and the Franks, before achieving independence.

Whether you are a student of ancient history or someone who delights in reading intelligent and well-researched biographies – of places as well as individuals, Athens – A History will give you much pleasure.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh