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# Darwin and the decline of Ancient Greece: a problem or a shining example for his theory?

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## Abstract

In "*The Descent of Man*" (1871), Darwin devoted several pages to discussing the effects of natural selection on civilized nations. By developing a rather complex argument, he concluded that in the cases such as that of ancient Greeks "continued progress depends in a subordinate degree on natural selection" and went on to offer several reasons for the apparent paradox of a superior civilization going into decline. Darwin's discussion reaffirmed his conviction in natural selection as a force acting only conditionally but is also telling with respect to the Victorian fascination with Ancient Greece. The *Descent* passage was a direct response to W.R. Greg's 1868 article "On the Failure of 'Natural Selection' in the Case of Man" but the Greek case had been puzzling him for quite a long time, as his correspondence with Charles Lyell reveals. This paper will try to explore Darwin's views of those "wonderful people", and the persistence of the classical heritage more generally, with the help of his notes and letters to Lyell, Galton and Greg.

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