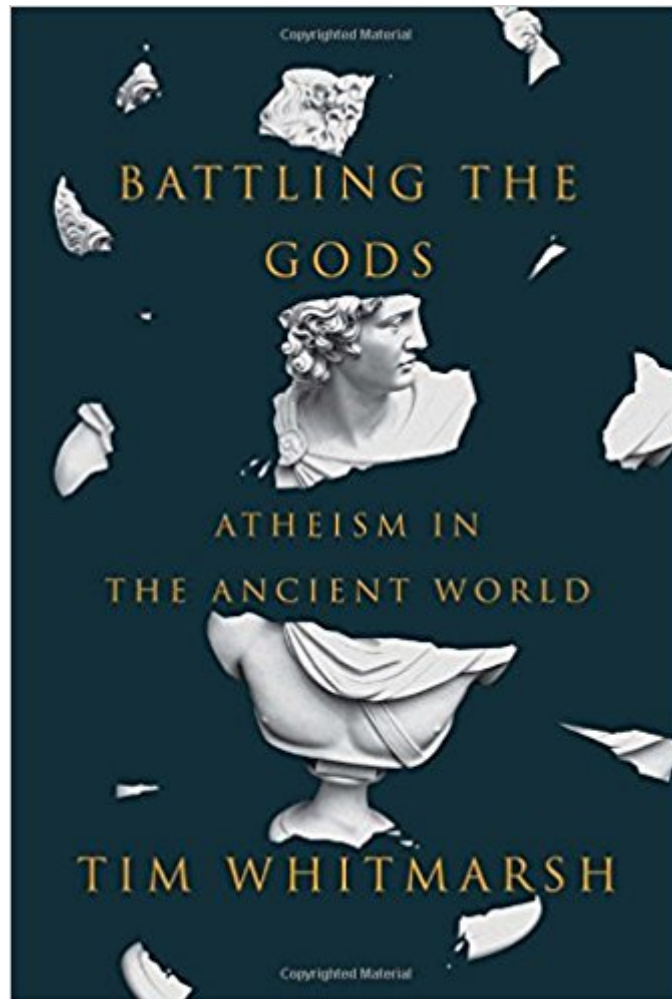


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# Battling The Gods: Atheism In The Ancient World



## Synopsis

How new is atheism? Although adherents and opponents alike today present it as an invention of the European Enlightenment, when the forces of science and secularism broadly challenged those of faith, disbelief in the gods, in fact, originated in a far more remote past. In *Battling the Gods*, Tim Whitmarsh journeys into the ancient Mediterranean, a world almost unimaginably different from our own, to recover the stories and voices of those who first refused the divinities. Homer's epic poems of human striving, journeying, and passion were ancient Greece's only sacred texts, but no ancient Greek thought twice about questioning or mocking his stories of the gods. Priests were functionaries rather than sources of moral or cosmological wisdom. The absence of centralized religious authority made for an extraordinary variety of perspectives on sacred matters, from the devotional to the atheos, or agnostic. Whitmarsh explores this kaleidoscopic range of ideas about the gods, focusing on the colorful individuals who challenged their existence. Among these were some of the greatest ancient poets and philosophers and writers, as well as the less well known: Diagoras of Melos, perhaps the first self-professed atheist; Democritus, the first materialist; Socrates, executed for rejecting the gods of the Athenian state; Epicurus and his followers, who thought gods could not intervene in human affairs; the brilliantly mischievous satirist Lucian of Samosata. Before the revolutions of late antiquity, which saw the scriptural religions of Christianity and Islam enforced by imperial might, there were few constraints on belief. Everything changed, however, in the millennium between the appearance of the Homeric poems and Christianity's establishment as Rome's state religion in the fourth century AD. As successive Greco-Roman empires grew in size and complexity, and power was increasingly concentrated in central capitals, states sought to impose collective religious adherence, first to cults devoted to individual rulers, and ultimately to monotheism. In this new world, there was no room for outright disbelief: the label atheist was used now to demonize anyone who merely disagreed with the orthodoxy and so it would remain for centuries. As the twenty-first century shapes up into a time of mass information, but also, paradoxically, of collective amnesia concerning the tangled histories of religions, Whitmarsh provides a bracing antidote to our assumptions about the roots of freethinking. By shining a light on atheism's first thousand years, *Battling the Gods* offers a timely reminder that nonbelief has a wealth of tradition of its own, and, indeed, its own heroes.

## Book Information

Hardcover: 304 pages

Publisher: Knopf (November 10, 2015)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0307958329

ISBN-13: 978-0307958327

Product Dimensions: 6.6 x 1.1 x 9.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.8 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.2 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (40 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #82,108 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #61 in [Books > Religion &](#)

[Spirituality > Atheism](#) #125 in [Books > History > World > Religious > General](#) #171 in [Books >](#)

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## Customer Reviews

In *Battling the Gods* Tim Whitmarsh counters the idea that atheism is a new phenomenon, a result of the 18th century European Enlightenment, by using reason, history, and a careful examination of written works from the classical ages of Greece and Rome. Whitmarsh, a professor of Greek Culture at the University of Cambridge, states in the Preface that his book is a work of history and that his goal isn't to proselytize for or against atheism as a philosophical position, and I found that to be true, though he does believe that dismissing atheism as a recent fad can make the persecution of atheists seem like a less serious problem than the persecution of religious minorities. In the opening chapter Whitmarsh argues convincingly that adopting a skeptical attitude toward miracles or supernatural beings would not be a strange, unheard of position at any time in history, and that there would have always been a spectrum of belief and unbelief. After this initial chapter the book is divided into four sections--Archaic Greece, Classical Athens, The Hellenistic Era, and Rome--and it's in these that the author delves deeply into the written works of ancient poets, philosophers, historians, and playwrights, looking for evidence of atheism from the time of the pre-Socratic philosophers in early Greece to the rise of Christianity during Constantine's rule of the Roman Empire. As a history I found the book fascinating, but because I'm less invested than the author in dissecting texts to discover which particular people from the ancient past may have held atheist views, my interest flagged at times.

Most of our contemporaries think about ancient spiritual and religious beliefs - if they think about them at all - as an amalgam of quaint literary superstitions involving gods and goddesses whose exploits are known from films such as the Percy Jackson series, television shows like *Hercules* and *Xena* or books about mythology. It is rarely appreciated by residents of the modern world just how

strong and all-pervasive religious belief was amongst the ancients. In the Hellenic and Roman worlds, temples and shrines meant to honor figures of religious veneration were ubiquitous throughout the countryside and were often densely packed in the cities. Religious belief for the ancients inhabited just as much of an individual's spiritual core and formed just as great of a universal sociological phenomenon as our belief in the great religions of the modern world. What we call Paganism was a religion as intellectually and emotionally gripping for the ancients as any of the subsequent belief systems. The notion that atheism was a significant phenomenon amongst the ancients, therefore, has great resonance for us when we examine our own core beliefs. It strikes me as intrinsically remarkable that belief in ancient gods and goddesses was less than universal in the ancient world. Cults of veneration were everywhere and gods such as Zeus, Apollo, Athena and their Roman analogues were considered to be intimately involved in the daily lives of believers. Yet religious non-belief was an aspect of the ancient world from the very beginning. When an entire belief system is denied, it suggests an inevitable question: what world view can possibly replace such an integral part of the human psyche?

Most of us probably think that atheism and skepticism about supernatural powers are relatively recent phenomena, and that before the Enlightenment and certainly in the ancient world everybody believed whatever the dominant society presented as its official religious belief. Tim Whitmarsh's study of atheism (mainly in the classical world) affirms otherwise. He starts the book with a chapter that presents the argument that skeptics toward the supernatural and miracles or supernatural beings have been present throughout history, and that there was always variety of unbelief, belief, and undecidedness (which we now call agnosticism). He goes on to present various authors and episodes of out and out atheism (mainly from plays or other art plus a few court records and philosophical treatises), belief in a different type of god than the society offered (Socrates and his personal daimon versus the ritualized sacrifices that the Greek polis performed publicly for one example), and other recorded evidence of skeptical or atheistic belief. His learning is evident, and the scope of the inquiry is broad. The book will be a valuable reference and roundup and guide for people interested in classical beliefs and in whatever skeptical or atheistic or unusual attitudes were reflected in literature, philosophy, and whatever court records and histories we have - ranging from pre-Homeric Greece through the classical period and on through Constantine. Whitmarsh carefully distinguishes between the various types of unbelief and skepticism, and reminds us that the term and position of "atheism" means something different in the age and culture where monotheism is the religious norm than it did in ancient polytheistic times.

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