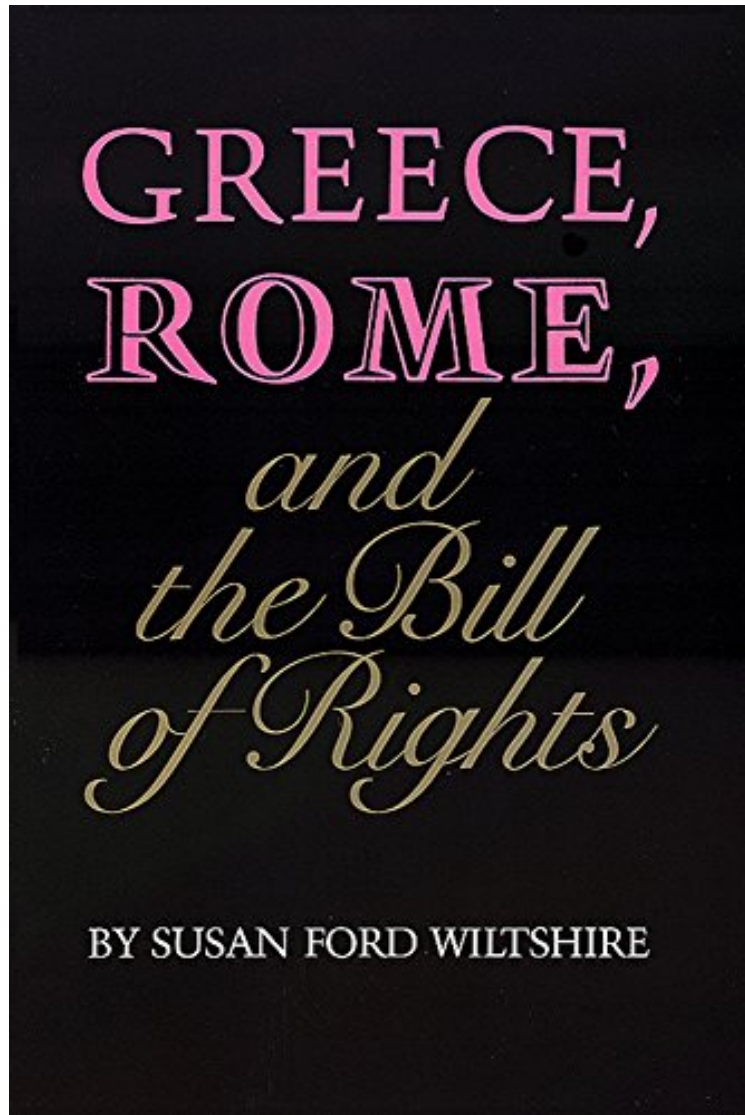


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Greece, Rome, and the Bill of Rights (Oklahoma Series in Classical Culture Series)

Susan Ford Wiltshire

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before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Greece, Rome, and the Bill of Rights (Oklahoma Series in Classical Culture Series):

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found the following review helpful. She should've narrowed her thesis a little...By Jason CarterMs. Wiltshire attempts a lot in this book -- to trace the theme of personal rights over 2000 years of history from ancient Greece and Rome through the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and into colonial America, culminating in the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution. The nature of the task and the size of the book make more than a cursory attempt at a historical lineage impossible. Nevertheless, Ms. Wiltshire has provided some introductory framework for the discussion. Some portions of the book (particularly her discussion of the ninth and tenth amendments and her attempt to paint the Apostle Paul as a natural law theorist) are contrived. I thought the book was a reasonable introduction to the subject until I read her conclusion and a separate essay she wrote on the book, in which she stated that her purpose in writing was to place the origin of the bill of rights in a classical, as opposed to a Judeo-Christian, context. While I would agree with her that the typical fundamentalist exaggerates when he paints the framers of the Constitution as almost entirely orthodox Christians, I would disagree with her conclusion that Christianity was not a primary influence. For a better treatment of this view, read Forrest McDonald's "Novus Ordo Seclorum: Intellectual Origins of the Constitution," where he concludes that it is futile to say with any dogmatism that the "founding fathers thought," or "the founding fathers intended," because the framers of the Constitution were a diverse group with diverse backgrounds and interests.

Susan Ford Wiltshire traces the evolution of the doctrine of individual rights from antiquity through the eighteenth century. The common thread through that long story is the theory of natural law. Growing out of Greek political thought, especially that of Aristotle, natural law became a major tenet of Stoic philosophy during the Hellenistic age and later became attached to Roman legal doctrine. It underwent several transformations during the Middle Ages on the Continent and in England, especially in the thought of John Locke, before it came to justify a theory of natural right, claimed by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence as the basis of the "unalienable rights" of Americans.

From the Back CoverThe principle that a purpose of government is to protect the individual rights and minority opinions of its citizens is a recent idea in human history. A doctrine of human rights could never have evolved, however, if the ancient Athenians had not invented the revolutionary idea that human beings are capable of governing themselves and if the ancient Romans had not created their elaborate system of law. Susan Ford Wiltshire traces the evolution of the doctrine of individual rights from antiquity through the eighteenth century. The common thread through that long story is the theory of natural law. Growing out of Greek political thought, especially that of Aristotle, natural law became a major tenet of Stoic philosophy during the Hellenistic age and later became attached to Roman legal doctrine. It underwent several transformations during the Middle Ages on the Continent and in England, especially in the thought of John Locke, before it came to justify a theory of natural rights, claimed by Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence as the basis of the "unalienable rights" of Americans. Amendment by amendment, Wiltshire assesses in detail the ancient parallels for the twenty-odd provisions of the Bill of Rights. She does not claim that it is directly influenced by Greek and Roman political practice. Rather, she examines classical efforts toward assuring such guarantees as freedom of speech, religious toleration, and trial by jury. Present in the ancient world, too, were early experiments in limiting search and seizure, the billeting of soldiers, and the right to bear arms. Wiltshire concludes that while the idea of individual rights evolved later than classical antiquity, the civic infrastructure supporting such rights in the United States is preeminently a legacy from ancient Greece and Rome. In the era celebrating the Bicentennial of the Bill of Rights, Greece, Rome, and the Bill of Rights reminds us once again that the idea of ensuring human rights has a long history, one as tenuous but as enduring as the story of human freedom itself.

About the AuthorSusan Ford Wiltshire is Professor of Classics and Chair of Department of Classical Studies at Vanderbilt University. She is the author of *Public and Private in Vergil's Aeneid* and the editor of *The Usefulness of Classical Learning in the Eighteenth Century*.