

Review



Angus Palmer enjoys this well-researched book describing the evolution of engineering technology and tools from the early Bronze Age to the Greek and Roman empires, and believes it will appeal to both engineers and the public at large.

Technology of the Ancients: An Overview

Authors: Charles M.G. Husband

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I have always found industrial heritage

an intriguing topic, and was therefore very interested in reviewing this book. I was, however, totally surprised and astounded by the ingenuity and tenacity of the “Ancients” as presented in this book, and can only marvel at the projects described and those that still survive. The book is clearly written by an engineer for an engineering audience, but that said it is free of technical jargon and complex formulae and so should also be enjoyed by a large readership.

The book starts with a general introduction and describes the evolution of engineering technology and tools from the early Bronze Age to the Greek and Roman empires – a span of some 1500 years. It is always fascinating to see how technological evolution goes hand in hand with engineering capabilities (a trend we still see today) and how different cultures exploit these new skills. The main difference between then and now is our awareness of “health and safety” and “labour relations” that were clearly not an issue in those days, and we can only imagine

what it must have been like to have been a labourer on these projects.

The chapters within the book deal with different subjects or types of projects, which are all related back to real projects, many that still survive, or based on old texts and archaeological remains. These subjects range from surveying and building construction, to bridges, roads, aqueducts and tunnels. Many of these projects were immense civil engineering achievements that would have been well planned and resourced from the highest level within government, but others were more mundane and required more traditional solutions, such as providing local water supply and irrigation for those living in arid regions.

The range of projects described is fascinating, and most would be daunting tasks even today using modern techniques and equipment. The Tunnel of Eupalinos on the island of Samos is an example: this 1000m long tunnel through a mountain to supply water to the city took 10 years to construct. The story of the development

of this project and its civil engineering challenges is brought to life with historical references, descriptions of tools and methods used to survey the tunnels, tunnelling methods and diagrams. One can only imagine the sense of anxiety the engineers must have had when they started tunnelling from both ends, and the immense sense of relief when they met in the middle of the mountain!

The book is completed with a number of tables and diagrams. These include a series of timelines showing the development of technologies, projects and key people. The diagrams help support the text with line drawings, based on historical descriptions, of a number of tools that may have been used at the time. There is also a glossary and an extensive bibliography. The book could have been improved with more images or photographs of remaining structures, but this is a minor comment given the descriptive nature of the text.

In short, this book has been extremely well researched, and is written in a very easy and accessible way that is bursting with knowledge and insight. It must have been a labour of love to write and was a joy to read.

Angus Palmer

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Angus joined BuroHappold in 1988 after graduating from Oxford University. Having spent time in the Middle East and USA, he was made a Partner and is now based in the firm's London office. Angus has worked on numerous projects covering large-span structures, cultural buildings, demountable structures, historic refurbishments, offices and schools.



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