



The Abbey

KINDNESS

How did xenia  
encourage kindness  
amongst the Greeks?

Kate, Upper VI (Year 13)





# How did xenia encourage kindness amongst the Greeks?

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Xenia is the Ancient Greek principle of hospitality, a concept far removed from our modern-day standards, but very much necessary in a world in which staying at an inn was fraught with danger of abduction, theft and even murder. Literally 'guest-friendship', ξενια is a moral obligation demanding that shelter, gifts, food etc be granted to any stranger who asks for them, regardless of their background.

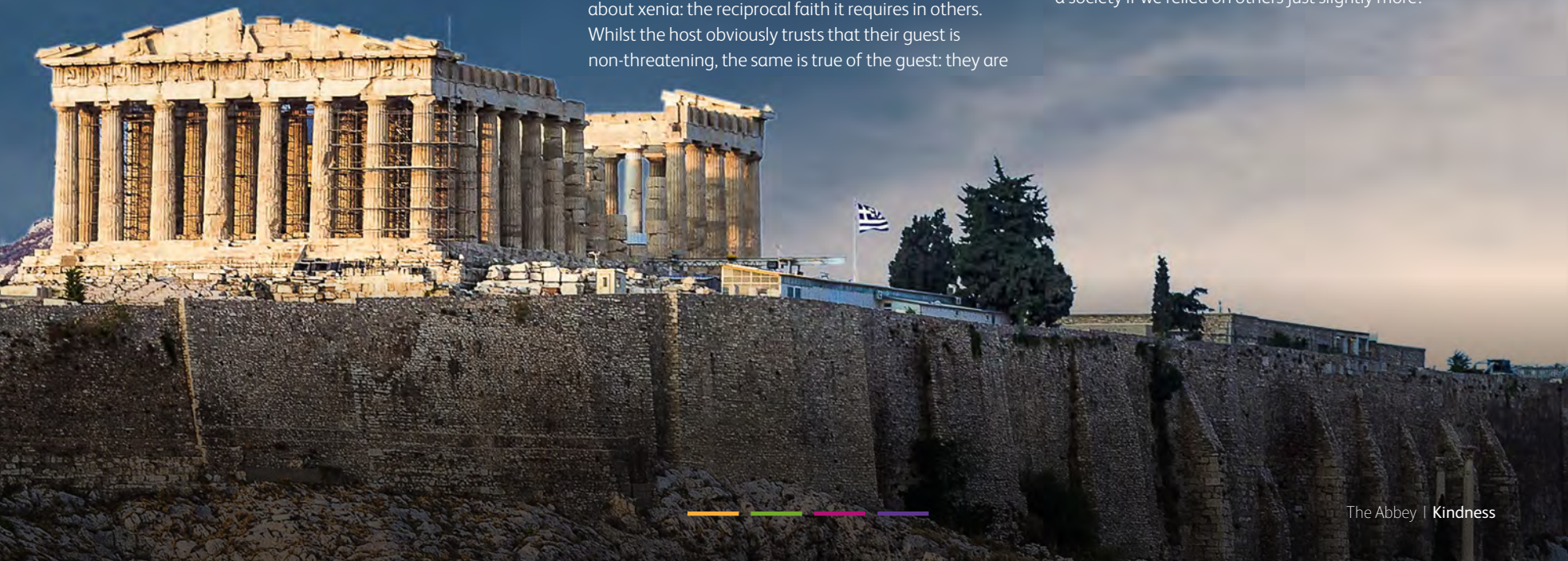


The concept of *xenia* is rooted into the etymology of the word. It hails from the Greek word *xenos* (ξένος), which has a variety of meanings, including stranger, foreigner, host, guest or friend. This forms the idea central to *xenia*: that a stranger is equated to a friend - Ancient Greek travel was almost the antithesis to 'don't talk to strangers'! To the modern ear, it may seem astonishing that such a level of trust could be established between two strangers, but *xenia* relies on a central ingredient of the Greek psyche: their piety. Zeus, protector of travellers, was the divine embodiment of hospitality, so in the Greeks' eyes disrespecting this custom was a direct assault on the king of the gods, and risked incurring divine wrath. Throughout Greek literature there are examples of *theoxenia*, where a god would appear under a mortal guise at a person's home rewarding those who honoured *xenia* well. In *Metamorphoses* VIII, we see Jupiter and Mercury (disguised as mortals) taken in by an impoverished couple, *Baucis and Philemon*.

Unlike their disrespectful neighbours, the pair welcome the two divinities kindly into their home, feeding them most generously, despite their overt poverty. After revealing their true identities, the two gods reward them generously, turning their house into a temple in return for their piety. *Xenia* therefore goes beyond a friendly welcome: it is treatment worthy of the divine.

Central to Greek hospitality is a complete lack of discrimination. One of the main rules surrounding *xenia* is that the host must grant the guest a meal and a wash before asking any questions as to their background or who they are. A prime example of this is in *Odyssey* VI, when *Nausicaa* welcomes *Odysseus*, who has been shipwrecked on the remote island of *Phaeacia*, into her father *Alcinous'* palace, with no questions asked as to himself and his circumstances. Her kindness and generosity is frankly astonishing to a man she has found windswept and naked in the wood whilst doing her washing. This is precisely what I find interesting about *xenia*: the reciprocal faith it requires in others. Whilst the host obviously trusts that their guest is non-threatening, the same is true of the guest: they are

entrusting their life into unknown hands. And it is not as if *xenia* never went wrong, because it frequently did. Take *Odysseus* himself for example. Prior to his arrival in *Phaeacia*, he and his men had been taken in by the cyclops *Polyphemus*, who proceeded to shut them in his cave and eat them one by one. Six were killed before *Odysseus* came up with a cunning plan of escape. And yet he still relies on *xenia* for a safe passage home from *Phaeacia*, purely because he had no other way of returning home to *Ithaca*. There is a sense of need at the core of *xenia*: sometimes there is no other option but to receive kindness from others. I think we recognise this to an extent today, but for the Ancient Greeks it goes beyond recognition: it is the centre of a functioning society. Kindness is not an option, but an obligation: not honouring it is an offence punishable by the gods. So I think if you take away anything from this article, perhaps consider how much we value self-sufficiency in this modern age. Would we not be more unified as a society if we relied on others just slightly more?





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