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Historiography

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A widespread preoccupation among scholars of classical antiquity is the worry about an often perceived growing irrelevance of the ancient world for the present one. The volume under review illustrates in many ways the opposite phenomenon, i.e. concern over multiple modern uses and abuses of aspects of the Graeco-Roman past and its study, particularly for non-academic purposes: *Classical Controversies. Reception of Graeco-Roman Antiquity in the Twenty-First Century* deals in large part with 'the misuse of the ancient world' (32) in the modern political arena, besides exploring how especially the material remains of the ancient world are (mis)represented or (under)explored in museum contexts and on archaeological sites. In broad terms, the volume offers a range of case studies concerned with recent appropriations of subsets of Graeco-Roman history, primarily in north-western Europe and the USA; it argues for the importance of academic intervention in the debate about the uses to which antiquity is put in modernity – what Beerden calls in her Preface to the volume 'a call for action' (11).

The volume is divided, like Gaul under Caesar, into three parts: the editorial Preface (Beerden, 9-14) and a long Introduction (Naerebout, 15-39) make up Part I; Part II presents six chapters that are grouped under the heading 'Controversies and literary traditions' (41-153); Part III offers four chapters under the 'Controversies and heritage ethics'-banner (155-229). This division is indicative of a major disjunction in the thematic coherence of the volume: Parts I and II are chiefly concerned with what Naerebout calls 'the conservative steal of my discipline' (33), i.e. 'the abuse of Antiquity for political ends' (15) by those with centre-right and right-wing views; by contrast, Part III deals with seemingly more benign uses of the past principally in conservation contexts (both regarding collections and in-situ remains), even if the four chapters also criticise underlying conservative agendas (including racist and transphobic attitudes).

Unsurprisingly, exploration of the political (ab)uses of the classical past in Part II centres on Sparta in three of the six contributions. Hodkinson (59-83), Siapkas and Sjösvärd (85-101), and Müller (103-22) all explore different (national) aspects of what Hodkinson calls in his discussion of the storming of the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 the 'invocations of the Spartan's martial reputation' (61) – from the replica Corinthian helmet to the war-mongering catchphrase MOLON LABE. The target for Siapkas and Sjösvärd is the anti-immigration propaganda in contemporary Sweden that utilises Sparta as 'the ultimate bastion' of Western culture 'to promote xenophobia and racism' (97). Müller zooms in on the Identitarian movements in France and Germany and their idolisation of the 300 Spartan heroes who defeated the Persian army at Thermopylae to advance 'anti-egalitarian, nationalist, racist and fascist ideas' (112). All three chapters spotlight the role played by the film *300* in the shaping of modern ideas about Sparta and, hence, the impact of modern media and pop culture on the construction of historical (mis)understanding. These chapters also emphasise the mismatch between the discussed modern appropriations and current scholarly appreciation of the ancient past. In the words of Müller: 'The historical evidence contrasts with the plain and straightforward appropriations of Spartan warriors as displayed by IDB and GI' (111). The chapters also emphasise the need for modern scholarship to engage with political (ab)uses of the classical past on the basis of research: drawing on his life-long work to deconstruct 'the modern mirage of Spartan militarism' (69), Hodkinson for instance concludes that 'the challenge to such appropriations needs to be grounded in re-evaluation of Sparta's relationship with war' (73). The 'detailed analysis of ancient sources' (103) is also part of the toolkit championed by Müller to rebut the Identitarian arguments. Siapkas and Sjösvärd take matters to the next level by stressing 'the complex interplay between academic classical studies and public receptions' (97), i.e. the fact that scholarly advances do not reliably reach a wider audience – the responsibility for which Siapkas and Sjösvärd locate in academia itself, possibly in the aspiration to maintain control over the remedy for the problem.

Of similar immediate political relevance are the contributions by Janssen (43-58) and Gay (123-38) that sandwich the Spartan chapters. Janssen discusses how metaphors that draw on the history of the early Christians are employed in the political discourse in the contemporary USA. One key practice highlighted by Janssen is the assimilation of a modern, conservative opposition view to the resistance ascribed to the early Christians 'against perceived governmental overreach and injustice' (51) – i.e. the justification of political opposition in the Republican camp to, e.g., Obama's Administration, by casting the latter in the garb of 'the Roman imperial state (that) was both harsh and overly domineering' (49). The topic of immigration that Siapkas and Sjösvärd put at the centre of their chapter on the Swedish political scene resurfaces in an Italian context in Gay's study of the modern interpretation and appropriation of the *Aeneid*: emphasising the openness of the poem to multiple and diverse interpretations that have either favoured or opposed the acceptance of immigrants in contemporary Italy, Gay advocates the critical study of the *Aeneid* and its modern appropriations in the classroom, focused on the inherent ambiguity of the ancient sources and the ideological agendas that drive single-minded usages of these. The final call for action in Part II is issued by Holler in her survey of the depiction of fictional classicists in five modern novels (139-53). Highlighting race, class and gender prejudices – 'white, rich and male' (151) – Holler concludes that the 'public image of classics needs a change' and that fictional writers need to 'broaden the perspective on the field and give more depth to the characters' (151).

Encouragement for change also characterises Part III. The first three chapters explore different museums' approaches to their displays, from diverse angles. Kret challenges the choice of ritual and the artefacts' artistic value as the dominant foci for displays of mortuary relics from the Graeco-Roman world (157-76): shifting to 'a more context-driven type of display' (163) that enables visitors 'to reflect on their own emotions' (168) when faced with death is recommended instead so that museums offer engagement 'of societal relevance' (168). Gender and race take centre-stage in the ensuing two chapters. First, van den Berg explores diverse possibilities for museums to queer their collections (177-91). Starting from the premise that 'all museums of antiquity are inherently queer museums' (178), the need to actively implement queering in the display and the visitor experience is foregrounded, with particular regard to the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. Warning of the dangers of tokenism, van den Berg argues for the integration of queering 'on all levels of the museum' (185), including in its education programmes. Soliman's study of the use of the Dutch fictional children's story *Dummie de Mummie* (*Dummy the Mummy*) in the educational programme of the same museum highlights in turn the complexities that seemingly harmless pop culture can constitute in a museum context (193-213): foregrounding especially

racist overtones in the narrative's depiction of a mummified Egyptian boy who had come to life again and lived with a (white) Dutch family, Soliman warns of the dangers of projecting a 'Western gaze [...] within the context of a power relation that mirrors colonial political systems' (209-10). A discriminatory distinction between presumed greater and lesser powers is also at the core of Claes' discussion of the so-called Via Belgica that crosses four different modern countries, from France via Belgium and the Netherlands to Germany (215-29): historically, modern nation-states' claims to the Roman inheritance of (part of) the road has come at the expense of the representation of other (local) cultures, based on an appreciation of Rome as 'the supreme civilisation' (215). Against this distorted and reductive perspective, Claes advocates for a transnational approach to the conservation of the road, including reassessment of the role of Rome as the assumed 'bringer of civilisation to these regions' (225).

The noted disjunction between the volume's parts is also reflected in the state of play of what is actually at stake here. Thus, contextualised displays of mortuary and funerary relics that focus on emotional responses to death are already used in several museums, as Kret acknowledges (163). Likewise, many museums 'actively engage with the various layers and interpretations of queer stories in their collection' (186), elucidated by van den Berg on the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. *Dummie de Mummie*, moreover, no longer introduces children to the Egyptian collection of the National Museum of Antiquities, following Soliman's intervention (211). And the initiative 'to form a bigger EU heritage project' around the Via Belgica, underpinned by the European Common Agricultural Policy for Rural Development, and climaxing to date in the 2021 UNESCO recognition of the Lower German Limes on Dutch and German territory, has already hit the road (224-5). In short, there are some considerable developments on all the four scores presented in Part III. Additionally, as Holler illustrates in her critique of fictional depictions of classicists – included in Part II, but better suited for Part III, given its concern with, at base, a non-political issue – the characteristics of race, class and gender are actually complex and diversified tools in the hands of authors, exemplified in the Afro-American professor of Classics in Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (142). But the story is wholly different for the bulk of the papers in Part II, i.e. those concerned with the use of classical history for modern political aims: significant unease and frustration overshadow the discussions of the right-wing appropriations of the Graeco-Roman past that advance discriminatory modern agendas. Progress, of the desired kind, is hard to fathom in the present context, no matter how clearly the criticised historical misunderstandings or the quintessential interpretative openness of much of the ancient evidence can be demonstrated to a wider public.

Besides the enormity of the task at hand, the volume's mixed quality and thematic variability affects another challenge to the argument for the importance of scholarly interventions in the modern debate. Several chapters are superficial and under-researched, if not misplaced in a conference proceedings: concerning the ongoing, open issues with the named museums and heritage sites, direct exchange with the implicated stake-holders appears to me preferable to scholarly publication, a point reminiscent of the contention expressed by Siapkas and Sjösvärd in their chapter regarding the cost to society of researching in an ivory tower. Such direct exchange (to which some of the authors have in fact contributed: see below), concentrated on own, productive involvement in place of learned recommendations to others, would also lighten the missionary tone that the volume carries – in itself an uncomfortable classicising feature, creating an air of talking down to, not with, the intended audiences. Differently classicising is the focus on north-western Europe and the US – the richest parts of the modern world of Classics (as explicitly commented on by Claes with regard to Dutch and German heritage sites), thereby causing a tension with Soliman's warning against a perspective that replicates embedded power structures. In the context of issuing loudly a call for action for others, I found the overall lack of engagement across the various chapters moreover awkward. While van den Berg outed tokenism as a practice to be avoided in queering museum collections, the few mechanical cross-references between the chapters fall short of such avoidance of tokenism regarding the promotion of dialogue. Apart from the overlap between the Spartan papers that did not, however, engineer deeper exchange in the published chapters, there are other moments in which opportunities for exchange have not been exploited. Notably, while Claes bemoans the superiority allocated to Rome by modern nations in north-western Europe, Janssen outs the Roman Empire as the *bête noire* in American discourse that draws on the history of early Christianity. That such diversity in the use of the classical past happens is not surprising: but what is the impact of this diversity of (ab)use on the volume's contention that scholars are called to action to engage with non-academic users of the

Classics to clarify, even correct, (mis)understandings of Graeco-Roman history? Scholarly knowledge is permanently in flux, as Hodkinson's admirable deconstruction of the Spartan mirage over several decades shows perfectly, regularly disallowing clarity on key questions and creating openings for the kind of interpretative ambiguity that is central to Gay's argument in his chapter on the *Aeneid*. It would have been helpful to see contributors and editors engage actively on the repercussions for their arguments arising from the frequent impossibility of reaching decisive answers.

There is a larger, underlying problem here – namely the sense that, whatever the bigger picture, Classics (Altertumswissenschaft, etc.) must be saved. This is prominently brought to the fore in Naerebout's Introduction and his call that 'ancient historians, archaeologists and classicists of goodwill must man (*sic*) the barricades' (32) – a call that, if implemented, is seen to 'secure the contemporary relevance of the study of the ancient world' (33). But why should the future of the subject itself matter, especially in the face of the much more pressing issues raised in Part II? Being both the saviour *and* in need of saving has the ring of special pleading. It also glosses over what to my mind is the fundamental irrelevance of the ancient world for the modern one, with particular regard to the instructive value of ancient practice for modern practice. The fact that women could not vote in ancient democracies, for instance, does not alter my conviction that they certainly should do so nowadays; likewise, the fact that slavery was a staple of ancient society does by no means justify its occurrence today. If, for the sake of the argument, the Spartan's martial reputation had after all a historical backdrop, this would under no circumstances legitimise its employment in the right-wing fight for political power: it is our modern values, not the ancient past, that are the source of legitimacy for contemporary action, political and other, as van den Berg's insistence on queering illustrates. How to handle contradictory value judgements in modernity – which are at the root of this volume – is a question to which antiquity is unlikely to have an answer any more than modernity currently has. The volume makes a good case for the importance of exchange with those holding opposing views, including through one's professional knowledge. But it is less clear that the Classics have, or should have, such a special role that this endeavour must simultaneously be directed at the field's protection. To my mind, the concern over the future of the study of the ancient world weakens, not strengthens, the case made in this volume: it dilutes the focus on what really matters, potentially casting the scholarly intervention in the debate on the (ab)uses of Graeco-Roman history as the means to a quite different, self-serving end.

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