



Ute Schüren, Daniel Marc Segesser,  
Thomas Späth (eds.)

# Globalized Antiquity

Uses and Perceptions of the Past  
in South Asia, Mesoamerica,  
and Europe

Reimer



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Edited by

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# European “Classical Antiquity”: A Brief Introduction

Thomas Späth

“What is ‘Classical’ About Classical Antiquity?” James Porter raises this question in the introduction to his *Classical Traditions of Greece and Rome*.<sup>1</sup> There is no unequivocal answer to this question, and this is hardly surprising: the concept of the “classical” necessarily amounts to a *retrospective* appraisal of an epoch and its products (from literature through architecture, the dramatic arts, and philosophy to music). Thus, the term changes its meaning depending on when it is defined. It was not just since the rise of Humanism in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe, and the canonisation of “classical authors” which began during this period, that the “classical” has been a subject of debate; instead, that debate may be said to have started in Greek and Roman antiquity already. The first evidence for the word *classicus* dates from the second century CE: the Roman author Aulus Gellius cites his friend, the orator Marcus Cornelius Fronto, who refers to an author as a *scriptor classicus* in considering him a “first-class” or “reliable” example of the correct use of language.<sup>2</sup> But this by no means established the word once and for all – *classicus* is not known as being used again in this meaning until a letter written in 1512 by Beatus Rhenanus.<sup>3</sup> The concept of an ideal past, however, rests not on the signifier; at the latest since the end of the fourth century BCE and together with the establishment of libraries, of which the most famous was the great library of Alexandria, a literary canon emerged from the inclusion of some authors in registers and the exclusion of those who found no mercy with the librarians. This construction of an exemplary past continued in Atticism – which involved first-century Roman authors projecting their style of language backward onto that used in Athens in the fifth century BCE – in the literary and philosophical movements of a “Second Sophistic” (from the first century CE), and in “Neoplatonism” (from the third century CE). Even if these various constructions of the past can be examined in Greek and Roman antiquity, “Classical Antiquity” in current usage was a product of – predominantly German – *Altertumswissenschaft*, which in English-speaking scholarship has become known as *Classical Studies* or simply as *Classics*.

The three essays gathered in the third part of this book focus on various aspects of these developments. In his contribution, archaeologist Alain Schnapp discusses the subject of *ruins*, the principal working material of his field. But as a historian of archaeology, he is just as interested in *how* past and present societies use ruins, and which meanings

1 PORTER 2006.

2 Aulus Gellius, *Noctes Atticae* 19.8.15.

3 For a critical survey of the history of the term, see CITRONI 2006: 204–211.

the testimonies of the past have acquired in the collective imagination. His current book-length project considers ruins from a global perspective and compares their uses in cultures spanning America, China, Europe, and Korea. His contribution to this volume traces the “path of ruins in the Graeco-Roman world,” that is, a Mediterranean region that obviously includes the Near East. Pointing out the differences between Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman constructions of the past, Schnapp discusses the relation between stone monuments and inscriptions, which imperial rulers combine in erecting commemorative memorials to themselves with the aim of casting their shadow over the future. His essay also discusses Greek archaic (epinician) choral lyric, whose oral delivery epitomises a way of spreading the glory of the past by far superior to monuments. It further explores Herodotus’s “inquiries,” which seek to preserve the human works (*erga*) in the widest sense against forgetting. Another subject of this essay is Thucydides’s account of the Peloponnesian War, which no longer attempts to collect *erga*, but instead analyses human deeds, in order to trace the underlying rules of action and its effects on history. Thus, the various Greek constructions of the past establish a dialectical relationship between a conceptual representation of history and a myth of legitimising the present that thwarts a “poetics of ruins”; such a poetics, however, occurs in Latin poetry as a melancholy of transience.

As Manual Baumbach shows in the next essay, such a “poetics of ruins” returned almost two thousand years later in late eighteenth-century art and philosophy and in German Romanticism, both of which enthused about the fragmentariness of the past. Here, we find a construction of antiquity that follows entirely different paths than did the *Altertumswissenschaft* and the humanist education that emerged as a distinctive feature of bourgeois society, as Stefan Rebenich demonstrates using the example of Wilhelm von Humboldt. Both Baumbach, a philologist, and Rebenich, a scholar of ancient history, make critical reflections on the history of their disciplines, which were only in a *status nascenti* at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. On the one hand, “antiquity” was initially not a subject of academic research. From the fifteenth century, it attracted the editors, publishers, and readers of Latin, and subsequently of Greek and Hebrew texts. On the other hand, the popes of Rome, and not long thereafter aristocrats all over Europe, became interested in ancient works of art, coins, and inscriptions; for their collections of works and objects from the ancient world, the lords of Mantova, Venice, Paris, Vienna, Prague, Munich, Berlin, and London employed *antiquarians*, specialists in antiquity, to assemble collections for their private museums, which served simultaneously as prestige objects and as a basis for establishing “academies.”<sup>4</sup>

In the eighteenth century, one impetus for the renewal of a purely antiquarian pre-occupation with the objects of Greek and Roman antiquity came from various critical

4 WALTHER 1999: 90–93.

commentaries on ancient historiography.<sup>5</sup> These commentaries included Montesquieu's philosophical *Considération sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734), Louis de Beaufort's *Dissertation sur l'incertitude des cinq premiers siècles de l'histoire romaine* (1738, an English translation appeared already in 1740), which raised factual doubts about Livy, and Edward Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-89), which combines an enlightened interpretation of history with a critical approach to historical facts and source materials. Those writing about the history of antiquity could no longer content themselves with continuing the historiographical traditions established by Herodotus or Thucydides, Livy or Tacitus; Arnaldo Momigliano identifies a search for "the truth of the facts" as the hallmarks of the new, Enlightenment discourse of history, whose interpretative efforts brought together historians with antiquarians, the specialists in material details.<sup>6</sup> Christian Gottlob Heyne, professor of elocution and poetry at the University of Göttingen from 1763 to 1812, who was also a librarian and the editor of the *Göttingische Gelehrte Anzeigen*, marks the tipping point in this development: while Heyne made a name for himself chiefly with his annotated editions of Latin and Greek authors, he was also a scholar of antiquity, archaeology, and history; he united in one person an "Altertumswissenschaft" which had yet to discover its name and which his students established by specialising in various disciplines.<sup>7</sup> Among the students who attended Heyne's lectures – and also his seminars, a new form of teaching that he had taken over from his predecessor Johann Matthias Gesner but "perfected"<sup>8</sup> – were Friedrich August Wolf, Arnold H.L. Heeren, Friedrich Georg Creuzer, Johann Heinrich Voss, the brothers Schlegel, and Wilhelm von Humboldt.

Let me turn to three aspects of how *Altertumswissenschaften* became established at the turn of the eighteenth to nineteenth century. What follows does not lay claim to an exhaustive account of this specific chapter in the history of science, but serves to historically situate the following contributions to this book: the opening up of historiography, the separation of theology and *Altertumswissenschaften*, and the dominance of the Greek over the Roman in German scholarship.

Between 1793 and 1796, Arnold H.L. Heeren, one of Heyne's students and later colleagues in Göttingen, published a work in three volumes entitled *Ideen über die Politik*,

5 See KUHLMANN/SCHNEIDER 2012 (XXIVf.) in their preface to the recently published sixth supplement to *Der Neue Pauly* on the *Geschichte der Altertumswissenschaften*. *Biographisches Lexikon*; the volume presents a mass of interesting biographical data but regrettably it misses the opportunity to extend its account of the history of science beyond a prosopography of the predominantly male (and the few female) scholars to a history of the discursive conditions of *Altertumswissenschaften*.

6 MOMIGLIANO 1999 [1950]: 25–29.

7 On Heyne's work and life, see LEONHARDT 2012.

8 See Glenn W. Most (in GRAFTON/MOST 1997: 44), who observes that "his ungrateful student Wolf" had made sure that "[Heyne's] outstanding role as the most important pre-nineteenth-century German classicist has remained largely unacknowledged to this day."

*den Verkehr und den Handel der vornehmsten Völker der alten Welt.*<sup>9</sup> Heeren's work provides a broad account of the economic, social, and political history of ancient cultures, including those of the Persians, Babylonians, Phoenicians, Scythians, and Indians. Even if Heeren's historical investigation inspired August Boeckh's *Staatshaushaltung der Athener* (1817),<sup>10</sup> the limited scope of this study of Athenian economy reveals a second decisive change in the university-based research undertaken on antiquity at the time: namely, the secularisation of the universities – brought about in particular by the founding of the *Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität* in Berlin in 1810 and by the contemporaneous educational reforms in Bavaria – replaced the older, theology-dominated universities and led to the separation of Graeco-Roman philology from theology. All Near Eastern cultures were now subsumed under Bible Studies and later under gradually emerging Ancient Oriental Studies. The "Klassische Altertumswissenschaft" established an artificial opposition between Graeco-Roman antiquity on the one hand and the Hebrew language and Jewish culture, and also Egyptian and Mesopotamian languages and cultures, on the other. This exclusion was augmented further by the dominant racial discourse and its distinction between "Aryan" and "Semitic" cultures.<sup>11</sup> "Classical Antiquity" emerged from this exclusion of the "Orient" – and nevertheless failed to become unified: the controversy between Boeckh and Gottfried Herrmann (professor of elocution at Leipzig University) opposed "Sachphilologie" (a philology of things) and "Wortphilologie" (a philology of words), and thus laid the foundation for the splitting of the discipline into historical, philological, and literary branches.

This differentiation of disciplines coincided with a "delatinisation,"<sup>12</sup> the third aspect of the emergence of an influential German *Altertumswissenschaft* during the course of the nineteenth century. Friedrich August Wolf, a student of Heyne's who founded the first *Seminarium philologicum* in Halle in 1789, concentrated his work on Greek authors. This Hellenisation of *Altertumswissenschaften*, to which Wolf's *Darstellung der Alterthums-Wissenschaft* ("A Survey of Classical Studies") of 1807 made a substantial contribution, received a strong impetus from Johann Joachim Winckelmann's observations on art history. Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764) and *Anmerkungen über die Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1767) elevated Greek sculpture to the ideal of "beauty," and thus relegated everything Roman to epigonism.<sup>13</sup> This also laid the foundation for orienting archaeology towards art history; along with philology and history, archaeology

9 Published in 1833, the three-volume English translation was entitled *Historical Researches into the Politics, Intercourse, and Trade of the Principal Nations of Antiquity* (Oxford, D.A. Talboys). The titles of the individual volumes are: Vol 1: *Asiatic nations. Persians*; vol 2: *Asiatic nations. Babylonians, Phœnicians, Scythians*; Vol. 3: *Asiatic nations. Indians*.

10 The English translation was entitled *The Public Economy of Athens* (London, 1828). For the relations between Heeren and Boeckh, see the short comment by KUHLMANN/SCHNEIDER 2012: XXV.

11 See Josef Wiesehöfer's essay in HÖLKEKAMP/STEIN-HÖLKEKAMP/WIESEHÖFER 2006: 35f.

12 GRAFTON/MOST 1997: 44.

13 See SÜNDERHAUF 2004.

went on to establish itself as an independent discipline in the nineteenth century. The political events surrounding Napoleon's campaigns heightened the opposition between a German-speaking science, with its orientation towards an idealisation of Greek antiquity, and the unbroken interest in Roman-Latin antiquity in France.

The essays gathered here need to be placed within these various contexts. The essays themselves lead us from the constructions of antiquity in Mediterranean antiquity to the emergence of a highly controversial "Classical Antiquity" in Europe at the turn of the eighteenth to nineteenth century.

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