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*Re-Imagining the Past: Antiquity and Modern Greek Culture*

ed. by Dimitris Tziovas (review)

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Dimitris Tziovas, editor, *Re-Imagining the Past: Antiquity and Modern Greek Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2014. Pp. xvii + 420. 37 illustrations. Cloth \$150.

This volume appears in the *Classical Presences* series, which has now published more than 75 titles in its 10 years of existence. The number of those volumes that centrally address the contemporary Greek reception of antiquity can be counted on one hand; those addressing the Italian relation to the ancient past on one finger. Modern Greece fares well by this accounting, but the series overall serves as a reminder that the views of those people who live in classical lands

arouse limited global interest. From the international perspective on classical reception, the Greeks occupy a very particular political space that has given rise to distinctive, not to say parochial, concerns with the question of continuity. In his Introduction, Dimitris Tziouvas points out that this volume aims to move the matter on to a wider range of issues: popular (not just elite) reception; performances rather than texts; the pragmatic uses of antiquities as opposed to description of them as traces; and a turn away from glorification to critical history. As Lorna Hardwick (one of the series editors) suggests in her concluding chapter, this volume offers the chance to explore how “modern Greek studies and classical reception research can be mutually illuminating” (334).

In order to begin to think about how a present relates to a past, some thought needs to be devoted to the topics of time, temporality, and history, since these all condition formulations. The basic idea of continuity, for example, rests paradoxically on the historicist conviction that the past is over, succeeded diachronically by other presents up to the now. Historicism was consolidated in the early nineteenth century and applied by Greek and European historians to the Greek past. Anastasia Stouraiti provides new insight into this matter by looking at the activities of antiquarians in the Venetian-controlled areas of what is now Greece. Many antiquarians were doctors, who transferred their skills in *autopsia* and *historia* to understand the ancient past. This chapter illuminates the prehistory of historicism, and it is not incidental that such an analytical approach developed in a colonial context where a driving foreign fascination with Greek history conditioned an increasingly objectivist, distanced view of antiquity.

Several chapters take up the topic of continuity—not from a naturalistic perspective that would see these continuities as actually existing despite the passage of time, but rather from a constructionist viewpoint that sees them as serving ideological demands. Vangelis Karamanolakis lays out the unwavering classicism of the University of Athens up until 1937, while Gunnar de Boel shows the appeal of Dorians for Greek writers in the mid-twentieth century. The Dorians represented autochthony and opposition to colonial powers, and General Metaxas (1936–1941) further embraced the authoritarian (Dorian) Spartans as the classical reference point for his Third Hellenic Civilization. For international tourist consumption, the Metaxas regime promoted images asserting the connection of the modern country to Greek antiquity. Particularly striking are the photos by Nelly’s, Greece’s Leni Riefenstahl, juxtaposing ancient statuary and modern physiognomies—a topic studied in the nicely illustrated chapter by Katerina Zacharia. Alexander Kazamias shows that classical associations could shift according to contemporary political needs.

Less than two decades after Metaxas asserted that martial, authoritarian Sparta funded the key concept of national mindedness (*ethnikofrosyni*), the Greek government reoriented this concept toward ancient Athenian democracy. This was no longer a racial inheritance but a cultural tradition open to incomers and thus compatible with membership in NATO and its embrace of a “Greco-Roman” heritage (143).

Dimitris Plantzos looks at the “idiosyncratic, nationalist metaphysics” that informed the views of the writers Elias Venezis and Andreas Karkavitsas, as well as the filmmaker Theo Angelopoulos (160). In the works of the novelists, more connection to antiquity can be found in a peasant girl or in local dreams of statues than in academic archaeology, while in Angelopoulos’s *Landscape in the Mist*, the colossal hand of an ancient statue hovers over the cityscape like an indictment of modernity. The overall gist in all of these works is that the ancient Greek spirit might still inhabit the population, but modernity threatens to extinguish it. This position casts archaeology as an inimical modern practice, but it arguably stays within the paradigm of historicism if this spirit is conveyed on the ground through time—that is, so long as the spirit has historicity. On the topic of material remains and spirit, Eleana Yalouri offers an incisive, illustrated argument about the inseparability of the two. The idea of a Greek spirit, however, challenges the boundaries of historicism if it is not subject to historical process.

Shelley’s declaration that “We are all Greeks,” discussed by Roderick Beaton (54), espoused just such a mystical continuity where spirit traveled across time without any material correlate. He supposed a timeless Greece to have been in existence throughout the Middle Ages, held “in suspension or as potentiality” (54). Shelley’s poem, *Hellas*, conceived in 1821 as the Greek Revolution got underway, illustrated his view that poets could be “hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration” (57). Reworking Aeschylus’s *Persians*, Shelley connected the eternity of the ancient Greek nation not just to the modern struggle against the Ottomans but to all the nationalist struggles on the European political horizon. This transcendental use of the *Persians* may be contrasted with the anonymous lament for Athens composed after its fall in 1456 and analyzed in the volume by Gonda van Steen. The poem refers to the Ottoman conquerors as Persians, thereby displaying a deep historical consciousness and possibly a familiarity with Aeschylus’s play, then in the early stages of canonization. The poem activated an affective analogy binding past and present trauma together—yet another mode in which the classical past becomes present. This example offers a valuable perspective on the vexed question of whether a common identity was felt between the medieval Christian

population and the ancient Greeks, a connection otherwise thrown into question by the prerevolutionary meaning of Hellene as pagan, discussed by Tassos Kaplanis in his chapter on “Antique Names and Self-Identification.”

My sense is that the analogical relationship to the *Persians* in the lament for Athens transferred emotionality but did not collapse temporal distance as priest and educator Neofytos Doukas thought could be done by reviving the ancient language as the everyday spoken medium. In his chapter on the subject, Peter Mackridge observes that Doukas conceptualized Ancient Greek in Orthodox Christian terms as an ancestral (*propatorikon*) possession which could be resurrected. Taking on the ancient language wholly would restore Ancient Greek thought patterns and open the way to fitting achievements.

Historicism saw the future as infinite and random; however, according to Orthodox Christian thought, the future would eventually return to the beginning. Messianic temporal notions may have informed Doukas’s ideas about the transformative effects of staging ancient dramas, but such possibility was rejected by the early-twentieth-century critic Grigorios Xenopoulos. He saw moral peril in inviting the Christian public to become pagan again, maintaining that such resurrections were better left to religious rituals. Later critics, as Eleni Papazoglou shows, reached the same critical historicist position independently arrived at by Benedetto Croce that all modern productions of ancient drama must be understood as contemporary performances.

In sum, this volume delivers a wealth of information on Modern Greek perceptions of the past, and it goes far beyond the acceptance of glorifying nationalist views of continuity. In many cases, it examines the dark side of continuity: how the connection to antiquity has advanced authoritarianism and been manipulated to serve present needs. The variety of essays should help Modern Greek Studies of classical reception reach a larger field. There remain still other dimensions and other audiences interested in the questions addressed in this volume. One future endeavour might address Greek ideas about time and temporality in a framework of interest to historiography and the philosophy of history. To speak to a larger audience, one might also imagine a volume comparing Greek views of the past with, say, Caribbean ideas about Africa, or Nigerian ideas about the relation of current communities to the historical communities that produced the Benin bronzes.

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