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DARWIN LECTURE SERIES 2012 'LIFE'

DR MICHAEL SCOTT

'Life in the ancient world'*

'Only the future is uncertain, the past is always changing'
Anonymous

Not everything is quite as it seems

This is – as it's becoming increasingly difficult to forget – an Olympic year. The Olympics have a long history, as we are often told, which stretches back to the world of ancient Greece. This link between ancient and modern will be trumpeted again during London 2012, not least at an exhibition entitled 'The Olympic Journey' at the Royal Albert Hall, which will tell the story of the Olympics from ancient Greece to the present day.¹

And yet, just what picture of the ancient games, and thus the links with our modern Olympics, do we have in our heads? A quick quiz highlights the issues. Which of the following **did** form part of the ancient Olympics?

- a. The Olympic torch relay
- b. The Marathon race
- c. Male athletes tying up their penises with string

Only the last is true of the ancient games. The torch relay was introduced by Hitler at the 1936 Berlin Games, and the Marathon race first became part of the Olympics in 1896, at the inaugural modern games. Athletes tying up their penises with string, on the other hand, known as 'infibulation', 'ligaturing', or by its ancient name *kynodesme* ('dog-tying'), was a well-known feature of ancient athletics.² Its purpose is, however, unclear, with some scholars arguing that it was meant to help avoid unwanted erections, others simply to keep the penis out of the way when running, others that it was an issue of sexual attraction and others still an issue of modesty.

Nor are the differences between ancient and modern games just in the details. In fact I would argue that the entire context and tenor of the games has shifted substantially. The ancient Olympics were held in the middle of a religious sanctuary: they were fundamentally tied up with worshipping the gods. Only Greeks could compete, indeed only men could compete. Married women were not even allowed to watch, in part because the athletes all competed naked.

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¹ <http://festival.london2012.com/events/9000961529> (last accessed 1.2.12.)

² The original thesis on the subject is Dingwall 1925.

Nor were the ancient Olympics a very pleasant experience (cf. Figure 1). Imagine it – 40,000 or so Greeks in the middle of hot Greek summer, camped in tents around the sanctuary and stadium at Olympia, along with all the animals and other foodstuffs necessary to feed them. Imagine the animals being sacrificed, their throats slit, on some of the 70+ altars around the religious sanctuary at Olympia, the blood congealing in the heat as parts of their bodies were burnt to the gods and part roasted for consumption, sometimes as many as 100 oxen at one go. Imagine the human and animal waste building up around the site from such a large crowd in a place with no drainage or sanitation. It is not for nothing that the Eleans, who ran the sanctuary, sacrificed to Zeus *Apomuios* – Zeus the ‘Averter of Flies’. Athletes sweating, bleeding, sometimes dying; crowds pushing, orators, philosophers, historians, nutcases mouthing off at every opportunity, stallholders selling, politicians bickering. No wonder that the ancient sources talk of the difficulties of getting accommodation (even Plato had to bunk up in a stranger’s tent), of getting transport away from the games afterwards, and there is even one famous ancient piece of advice that if you wanted to punish a slave, you sent him to the Olympics.³

FIGURE 1

Now of course, there are similarities between the ancient and modern games, and that’s the key point.⁴ In making links between the ancient and modern Olympics, we have in fact actively shaped an image of the kind of ancient Olympics we want to be linked too, and ignored the rest. We have fashioned a picture of the ancient world in our minds, which corresponds to what we like to emphasise in our world today. This is by no means a new game, in fact it is one we have never stopped playing since the time of the ancient world itself. In this paper, I examine *how and why*, over the centuries between them and us, we have gone about formulating a picture of what life was like in the ancient Greek world, analyse the kinds of answers we have come up with, and ask how our picture might continue to change in the future.

Taking an interest

I pick up the story at the moment in which Europe, long fascinated by the surviving literature of the ancient world, began to become interested in what was left of the physical remains of ancient Greece. It might well come as a surprise that we haven’t always been interested in ancient ruins. Yet if you think that Greece, after the break-up of the Roman empire, was subsumed as an unimportant and difficult-to-get-to backwater in the Byzantine Empire, and given that it became part of the Eastern

³ Tents: Aelian 4.9; Sweaty noisy conditions: Epictetus 1.6.26; Impossibility of finding transportation: Lucian *Peregrinus* 35; Punishment for slave: Aelian 14.18. Zeus *Apomuios*: Pausanias 5.14.1. For the nature of sport in the ancient world: Crowther 2004; Spivey 2004; Crowther 2007. For discussions of the site of ancient Olympia see: Finley and Pleket 1976; Raschke 1988; Scott 2010; Stuttard 2012. For a forthcoming discussion of the nature of sporting venues in ancient Greece: Scott Forthcoming.

⁴ As former Culture Minister Tessa Jowell recently put it: ‘while the games themselves may have altered dramatically, many of the values and ideals that underpin the Olympic movement have remained unchanged’ in Goff and Simpson 2011: 204.

Orthodox Church after the Schism of 1054 and thus unappealing to the Catholics of Western Europe, followed by its absorption into the Ottoman Empire after 1453, it is easy to see why few in Western Europe cared about visiting and about what 'what was there' could tell them about life in ancient Greece.

Any yet, by the fifteenth century, things were also beginning to change. The Humanist movement in Italy fostered an interest once again not only in the surviving texts of ancient Greece, but also its coins and inscriptions, and gradually in the remains of the place itself. The famous Italian merchant Cyriac of Ancona travelled all over the Mediterranean in the second half of the fifteenth century, trying to map literature onto geography.

What did these early explorers seek and what picture did they come back with? Cyriac's vision of Greece, informed by ancient literature, was as a place full of heroes, legend, powerful gods, civic duty and philosophy, something expressed well also in Raphael's slightly later 'School of Athens' painting (1511) in the Apostolic Palace of the Vatican, depicting Greek philosophers at conversation. But crucially, what Cyriac and his contemporaries thought could be gained from this physical investigation was the evidence for a picture of an ancient world which the modern would do well to imitate. The image of life in ancient Greece as a goal to strive for had begun to gather momentum.

It is not a long step from imagining life in ancient Greece as a model for the present to wanting to associate yourself with its surviving remnants, and in turn to owning them. Through the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries, artists directly imported ancient figures into their paintings and kings and the aristocracy of European nations, particularly England and France, started to acquire ancient Greek art. The ruins of ancient Greece morphed from object from which lessons could be learnt, to symbol of a gentleman's 'connoisseurship', to pawn in international power-politics amongst European royalty. Not in all cases with the resulting respect for the objects you might have thought. One antique column drum, owned by a certain Mr James Theobald during this period, was apparently used as a roller for his bowling green at his home in Berkshire.⁵

As a result of this development in ancient art connoisseurship, by the late seventeenth century, the focus of interest in this idealised conception of ancient Greece was also changing. Up to this point, the 'model' from ancient Greece had often been that of Sparta, the city of men with über six packs, long hair, and a 'spartan' approach to life and art.⁶ But as the arts – their understanding and collection – came to be a more and more honourable pursuit in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the focus for a model in

⁵ For example, the collection by the Earl of Arundel (1586-1646), known as the Arundel Marbles, contained the first Greek artifacts to reach England. At his death, the collection contained 37 statues, 128 busts and 250 inscriptions, most of which eventually passed to the Ashmolean Museum. Cf. Stonemann 2010: 48-52. Mr Theobald: Constantine 2011: 10.

⁶ James Harrington in *The Commonwealth of Oceana* 1656 called on Oliver Cromwell to be a new Lycurgus, the mythical law-giver of Sparta in the 7th century BC.

ancient Greece began to shift from 'spartan Sparta' to 'artistic Athens.'⁷ That is to say, as the modern world's interests changed (in part thanks to the re-appearance of ancient Greek ruins), so too did the modern world's focus on what was best in ancient Greece, and, as a result, the emphasis of the portrait painted of life in the ancient Greek world. The ancient Greeks were no longer only sharpening their swords to kill, but also sharpening their tools to carve.

Yet, while the notion of Greece – and particularly Athens – as an ideal was developing alongside the acquisition of bits of its ruins, just what picture of the landscape, architecture and 'shape' of ancient Greece was being formulated? The irony is that, apart from depictions in the surviving literary sources, no one had a clue as to what ancient Greece had really looked like. Despite pilfering many of its surviving pieces of art, there was still no sustained interest in investigating, recording or understanding what was left of its landscape. In 1554, a century after Cyriac, Martin Kraus, a Greek scholar at Tübingen in Germany wrote to Theodoros Zigomalas, a Greek in Constantinople, to inquire whether Athens still existed or had been replaced by a fishing village.⁸ Poussin's 1648 painting of the 'Body of Phocion Carried Out of Athens' records a key historical moment in Athens' history as presented in the literary sources (cf. Figure 2). But his vision of ancient Athens is almost entirely made up from his imagination based on his interpretation of the ancient literature. Indeed so flexible was the public's impression of ancient Athens that Guillet de Saint-George, in the second half of the seventeenth century, was able to publish a highly successful book about Athens based on a fictional visit to the city by his fictional brother!⁹

FIGURE 2

Greece, it seems, was an ideal because to a large extent, it was a blank canvas, on to which people could impose their own ideas picked up through their own interpretations of the literary sources. Moreover, what is fascinating is that for many, this notion of ancient Greece as an ideal demanded the corresponding belief that there was nothing left of it to find even if they went looking (you could not have the 'ideal', it seems, without the nostalgia for its current 'loss'), a thought which extended to assuming the ignorance of the modern Greeks about their glorious ancestry. Guillet de Saint-George's book also poked fun at the way in which the modern Greeks actually played up to European expectations by feigning particular ignorance about ancient culture in their presence.

In the last decades of the seventeenth century, however, this interest in art began to encourage people systematically to fill in the blank canvas and record what was left of ancient Greece. The Capuchin monks, originally sent in by the French to convert the Orthodox Greeks, started making the maps of ancient Athens. Painters attached to the French Ambassador to the Ottomans, the Marquis de Nointel, made the first sketches of

⁷ Cf. the famous comparison of 'spartan' Sparta and 'artistic' Athens in Thucydides *History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.10.

⁸ Etienne and Etienne 1992: 33.

⁹ Guillet de Saint-George 1675 *Athènes ancienne et nouvelle* (published under the name of his brother la Guilletière).

the Parthenon and its sculpture (cf. Figure 3).¹⁰ Jacob Spon and George Wheler, undertook the first detailed investigations and drawings of surviving monuments around Greece, in the process having to convince the Turkish soldiers that they were not spies (measuring old bits of stone the Turks found very suspicious) and more often than not bribe them.¹¹

FIGURE 3

By the end of the seventeenth century, the picture of life in ancient Greece had been established as an ideal, its ruins as valuable commodities, but the nature of that picture was still largely a creation of European imaginations and ancient literature, with increasing pockets of more detailed knowledge of surviving ruins, particularly in the now fashionable-to-admire Athens. But even those surviving pieces were themselves – sometimes brutally – reshaped to fit with modern European morality. The Duc de Mazarin, taking over Richlieu's collection in the Palais Royal in 1670, went round with a hammer knocking off the genitals of ancient statues so affronted was he by their nudity. This sense of effrontery at, and attempt to disguise, the seeming sexual liberation of the ancient world would continue for a long time. Visit any collection of ancient Greek art today, and you will see any number of ancient statues that have had a fig leaf added to their nether regions, not irregularly on the direct orders of the Pope himself.¹²

Nostalgia, admiration and reclamation

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the ability to fictionalise completely a tour of ancient and modern Greece was no longer viable: Guillet de Saint-George's fiction was exposed to great outrage in London by Spon and Wheler. In its place, the new craze was Homer, and particularly the ability to identify the locations in Homer's text in the Greek landscape, and in so doing, to link life in ancient and modern Greece back together because, it was felt, Homer's genius had originally emerged from a contemplation of that same landscape.¹³ The pleasure of reading Homer was immeasurably improved by reading it in the locations he was talking about. But at the same time, that process affirmed a change in the perception of the realities of ancient Greece. As Goethe later said 'we stopped seeing in Homer's poems a strained and inflated world of fabulous heroes and saw instead the true reflection of a primitive reality.'¹⁴

In part linked to this new-found desire to read Homer in situ, European knowledge of ancient Greek art and architecture was increasing leaps and bounds. But it was also due

¹⁰ Drawings attributed to Jacques Carrey: Constantine 2011: 12.

¹¹ 12.5kg of coffee secured Spon access to the Acropolis during his visit. The published account and drawings are in J. Spon 1679 *Voyage d'Italie, de Dalmatie, de Grèce et du Levant fait aux années 1675 et 1676 par Jacob Spon et George Wheler* I-II. Amsterdam.

¹² Constantine 2011: 6-12.

¹³ Cf. the publication, first in 1769, then properly in 1771 and again in 1775, of Robert Wood's *Essay on the Original Genius and Writings of Homer with a comparative view of the ancient and present state of the Troad.* Wood had written the text much earlier in his life, but did not come to publish it till late due to his intervening career as a politician.

¹⁴ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1811-1833) IX, 537-8.

to recent greater freedom to travel in this region, and indeed, a social emphasis on its desirability. The Grand Tour was now a fixed part of any gentleman's upbringing and the Society of the Dilettanti was formed in 1734 in England, for aristocrats who had visited Italy. The Society went on to fund numerous voyages to ancient lands and their resulting publications, like those of Richard Chandler (1764-66), and, critically, those of James 'Athenian' Stuart and Nicholas Revett, who published detailed plans of many ancient Greek temples and buildings in several volumes after 1762 (cf. Figure 4). Copying these structures became *de rigueur*: the monument of Lysikrates, which was to be found in the kitchen-garden of the Capuchin monks who had drawn the first map of ancient Athens, was copied as far away as Philadelphia in the United States, where it crowned the Merchant's Exchange building, completed in the early nineteenth century.¹⁵

FIGURE 4

Yet Greek architecture was not the only focus of interest, particularly for German scholars including Johann Winckelmann. The Germans had only recently become interested in ancient Greece (thanks to the new craze for Homer and the Greek landscape), and Winckelmann now led the way with his construction of the first history of ancient Greek art. Indeed so keen on Greece was Winckelmann that he famously claimed in a letter to his friend 'I have never wanted anything so passionately as this [the chance to visit Greece]. I wouldn't mind losing a finger, in fact I wouldn't mind loosing my balls for such a chance of getting to see those countries.'¹⁶ Despite numerous opportunities, however, he never went. Whatever his protestations, the first scholar to deliver a history of Greek art did so from Rome.

Despite the distance, Winckelmann's influence on the nature of Greek art, and thus the nature of the ancient Greek world in which it had been created, was fundamental. Using statues like the Apollo Belvedere (Figure 5), the same statue to which Winckelmann was forced to witness the Pope ordering the attachment of a fig leaf in 1759, Winckelmann argued that the production of great art was tied to political and social freedom, but he also trumpeted the 'noble simplicity and calm grandeur' of Greek sculpture.¹⁷ That highlighting of simplicity and grandeur (made possible by liberty) chimed with the goal of the modern European Enlightenment: the promotion of nature and reason. As a result, this new vision of life in ancient Greece was able to continue smoothly as a 'new' ideal for a new modern society.

FIGURE 5

¹⁵ Expeditions of Richard Chandler published in 1775 as *Travels in Asia Minor* and 1776 *Travels in Greece*. James Stuart and Nicholas Revett 1762-1816 *The Antiquities of Athens*. Cf. Stonemann 2010: 127.

¹⁶ *Briefe an Bianconi* (Letters to Bianconi) II.69.

¹⁷ Cf. *Briefe an Bianconi* III.62-3. Winckelmann's major works: 1755 *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in Malerei und Bildhauerkunst*; 1764 *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*; 1767-8 *Monumenti antichi inediti*. The key passages are collected in Irwin 1972. Cf. Etienne and Etienne 1992: 45-6; Whitley 2001: 22; Constantine 2011: 93-142.

Did this continued – indeed increased – idealisation of life in ancient Greece still demand a counterpart expectation of ignorance amongst the modern Greeks as it had in the seventeenth century? The issue was hotly debated. Edward Gibbon continued the more traditional line that the modern Greeks were pale imitations of their ancestors: ‘it would not be easy in the country of Plato and Demosthenes to find a reader, or a copy, of their works. The Athenians walk with supine indifference among the glorious ruins of antiquity.’¹⁸ Yet, some felt the exact opposite. Pierre Augustin Guys, in 1771, published his account of a comparison between ancient and modern Greek values, arguing that the modern Greeks had much of the ancient spirit. That meant both a natural simplicity and occasionally a tendency to be ‘artful, vain and not very scrupulous observers of their oaths.’¹⁹ Guy’s work was political in two ways. First, it threw stones at the overly fussy and degenerate culture of aristocratic Western Europe: the sentence ‘such were the simplicity and good sense of ancient manners, we are far removed from them today’ (I, 54) was removed in the English translation of his work. But, his work also intimated that the modern Greeks, currently under Turkish occupation, were merely dormant and had it in them to return to the glories of their ancient ancestors. Guy boasted Catherine the Great of Russia as one of his avid readers, and it is no surprise that she, in 1770, had a hand in inciting the Greeks to rebel against the Turks. But the dismal failure of that rebellion had the unfortunate result of encouraging many to side with Gibbon that the modern Greeks simply weren’t up to their ancestors’ standard.

By the end of the eighteenth century, the answer to the question what was life like in ancient Greece was perhaps even more complex than it had been a century earlier. On the one hand, it was all about noble simplicity, calm grandeur, naturalism and reason, which could be understood for some only from within the landscape of Greece with Homer in hand, and, for others, from afar through its art. That noble simplicity, made possible by ancient liberty, in turn, was portrayed either as a goal for the modern Europe Enlightenment to head towards, or as a stick with which to punish those countries who were, now, thought too ‘over-sophisticated’, as well as cover to hint for greater political and social freedom in European society. Yet, at the same time, depending on how you read the character of the modern Greeks, ancient Greece was also either totally lost or, in fact, balanced on the edge of a come back.

Collecting, independence and archaeology

The nineteenth century was to prove no less complex in its attitudes towards ancient Greece and its image of ancient Greek life. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, in part because more and more people were travelling to Greece, seeing its current state of desolation, hearing about the lack lustre performance of the modern Greeks compared to the ancient Greek ideal, the overall impression of life in ancient Greece began to take on a foreign, distant note. As Leslie Hartley later put it in his novel *The Go-Between* (1953): ‘the past is a foreign country – they do things differently there’. Art at the time seemed to capture this distant, foreign, otherness of the ancient world. Paintings in the

¹⁸ Cf. Constantine 2011: 142.

¹⁹ P. A. Guys 1771 *Voyage Littéraire de la Grèce ou Lettres sur les Grecs anciens et modernes, avec un parallèle de leurs Mœurs* (English edition) I, 25. For a similar argument of connection between the ancient and modern Greeks, see Johann Hermann von Riedesel 1773 *Remarques d’un voyageur moderne au Levant*.

early nineteenth century of Greek landscapes are famously bathed in a haze of golden light, which is the antithesis of the often extraordinarily clear outlines and quality of light natural to Greece. Even the artistic vision of ancient Greece was separated from the viewer by mist.²⁰

The irony is that, just as, for some, life in ancient Greece seemed more distant, for others, knowledge and attachment to the Greek landscape was also becoming stronger than ever. Edward Clarke, travelling in Greece in 1800-1801, claimed that 'Epidauria is a region as easily to be visited as Derbyshire'. Indeed, it wasn't just that visiting Greece was easier than it had been, it was that every part of the country mirrored that of England: Thessaly was the Yorkshire Dales, Ligourio was Cheltenham.²¹ At the same time, the first expeditions intent not on drawing sculpture or architecture, but on mapping the Greek landscape, set out. British Army Officer William Martin Leake, in his travels in Greece 1805-7 and 1809-10, established the location of many of the famed, yet so-far lost, sites of ancient mainland Greece.²²

And whether ancient Greece was like a foreign country or whether its modern landscape was like Cheltenham, Europe still wanted to own what remained. In 1801-3, Lord Elgin packed one hundred cases of Parthenon sculpture to ship to London. In 1812, the sculptures of the Temple of Aphaia on Aegina were sold to King Ludwig of Bavaria. Nor was this only happening in Greece. The French at this time carried off the Luxor obelisk to stand in the Place de la Concorde in Paris. However we view these actions today, at the time, the main players were adamant of their moral right to do this. 'Antiquity', said Captain de Verninac Saint Maur, responsible for taking the Egyptian obelisk, 'is a garden that belongs by natural right to those who cultivate its fruits.'²³ Yet in bringing these sculptures to Europe, another debate was ignited about the nature of Greek art, and ancient Greece itself. Seeing the Parthenon sculptures up close, artists and scholars, expecting the 'noble simplicity' of Winckelmann, were astounded by the detailed rendition of human reality. Greek art was no longer about a mathematical canon, but about real human beings. So fundamental was this change that many, at first, felt driven to deny the Parthenon sculptures entirely as a work of Greek art. Richard Knight, on behalf of the Society of the Dilettanti, argued that Elgin had misidentified as Greek what were in fact Roman sculptures from the time of Hadrian. It was not until 1816 that Elgin was able to convince the British Museum of their veracity and worth.

The Greek war of Independence (1821-29) called the bluff on Europe's claim to idealise ancient Greece. Some of Europe put their lives where their admiration led them. The Germans sent three hundred fighters to help the Greeks, more than any other nation.²⁴ Lord Byron, who not only wrote many poems extolling the virtues of ancient Greece and

²⁰ E.g. Charles Lock Eastlake 1829 'Byron's Dream' and Hugh Williams Williams 1820 'The Temple of Jupiter Penhellenius (Aphaea) in Aegina'.

²¹ Edward Daniell Clarke *Travels I-VII* (4th edition 1818); cf. also William Otter (1825) *Life and Remains of Edward Daniell Clarke*.

²² William Martin Leake (1821) *The Topography of Athens*; (1830) *Travels in the Morea I-III*; (1835) *Travels in Northern Greece*; (1846) *Peloponnesiaca*.

²³ Quoted in Stonemann 2010: 165. For discussion on the Parthenon marbles and other pieces taken out of Greece at this time: St Claire 1984.

²⁴ Morris 1994: 25.

vociferously attacked Lord Elgin for his taking of the Parthenon sculpture (cf. *Childe Harolde* 1812), but also recreated famous ancient acts like Leander's nightly swim across the Bosphorus from Sestos to Abydos to reach his beloved, died at Messolonghi while acting as a Greek freedom fighter.

Without doubt the war also helped close the gap once again between a 'distant' ancient Greece and the modern present. For the modern Greeks fighting in the war, it was time to lay claim to their ancestry. As Alexandros Ypsilantis, one of the early Greek leaders in the War, exclaimed in 1821: 'Brave and valiant Greeks, let us remember the ancient freedom of Greece, the battles of Marathon and Thermopylae, let us fight on the tombs of our ancestors who fell for the sake of *our* freedom.'²⁵ It is interesting to note that too, in the decades after the war, ancient Greek names became increasingly popular for modern Greeks, as they sought to strengthen their connection with their past.²⁶ But for Europe, the War of Independence also ignited an ever-stronger bond between modern Europe and ancient Greece as expressed through the recognition of the Greek impact on the European present. John Stuart Mill, in 1846, is famed as saying that:

'the true ancestors of the European nations are not those from whose blood they are sprung, but those from whom they derive the richest portion of their inheritance. The battle of Marathon, even as an event in British history, is more important than the battle of Hastings. If the issue of that day had been different, the Britons and the Saxons might still have been wandering in the woods.'²⁷

The rest of the nineteenth century bore the fruit of this belief in, and determination to foster, European closeness to ancient Greece. As Greece itself was tied closer into Europe with the establishment of Prince Otto of Bavaria as King of the Hellenes in 1833, so too progressed the development of the scientific study of Greece's ancient remains, along with the need to protect them, conducted by both Greeks and other European nations. The Acropolis was declared the first archaeological site in 1834. In 1836, the first archaeological law was passed in Greece regulating what could and could not be sold, supplemented by a second in 1899. In 1837, the Greek archaeological society was formed. In 1846, the French School in Athens was set up. In 1874 the famous Heinrich Schliemann published, or rather adorned his wife with, the results of his excavation at Troy and in 1876 began to dig at Mycenae. In 1874 too, the German Archaeological Institute was founded, and in 1875, the first of the big digs commenced at Olympia, which was entirely buried underneath metres of alluvial sediment, followed by that of Delphi in 1892, which was also buried deep under a modern settlement. Both of these excavations, along with many others, represented enormous financial investments for the excavating nation, testament to their deep connection to ancient Greece.²⁸

²⁵ Quoted in Etienne and Etienne 1992: 85. Cf. Dakin 1972.

²⁶ Greek names: I. Galanakis 2012 (personal communication). See the influential work by Konstantinos Paparrigopoulos *History of the Greek Nation* (1860-77), which outlined the connection between ancient and nineteenth century Greece.

²⁷ Published in Mill's 1846 review of George Grote's *History of Greece* (1846-1856). Cf. Whitley 2001: 30.

²⁸ In 1886 the British School at Athens was founded and many major academic journals of archaeology began to circulate during that decade: Dyson 2006: 159.

What picture of life in ancient Greece did these advances – the birth of archaeology itself as an academic discipline – have to offer? On the one hand, of course, apart from simply exposing key sites, it brought huge advances in understanding their nature. Careful examination of temples for example during the second half of the nineteenth century proved that they had been painted – a fact that astonished a world so used to ‘marble’ classical ruins, and who had now to confront an ancient world looking like one of the kitschiest places on earth.²⁹ Yet, with the exception of Schliemann’s famous discoveries at Troy and Mycenae, as well as of the British archaeologist Arthur Evans at Knossos on Crete, the focus was also most often on creating a picture of the ancient world in what was considered its hey day: the fifth century BC, the acme of the Classical period, the time of the Athenian democracy, empire and the Parthenon. The Acropolis, for example, in being turned into an archaeological site, was stripped of its complex architectural history back down to the fifth century BC (Figure 6), and excavations at Delphi showed little interest in anything before the archaic period levels in the first instance.³⁰

FIGURE 6

The development of archaeology in Greece, and the resultant display of (a particular era) of ‘real’ ancient Greece, also did little to kill off the imagined ideal of ancient Greece. Indeed that ideal was busy morphing once again. In part thanks to the age of industrialisation in the second half of the nineteenth century, the concept of Greece as a timeless, rarified, intellectual world separated by haze was set aside in European art, and it instead became a spectacular world of endless holiday, of which Lord Leighton’s 1889 ‘Greek girls playing at ball’ is an excellent example (Figure 7). Ancient Greece was now a place of escape from the realities of the European world.³¹ The very forces of idealisation that had provoked an interest in the surviving remains of the ancient Greek world, and led ultimately to the birth of archaeology, now, not only continued unchecked by what those remains had to say, but offered, very much, an ‘alternative’ picture.³²

FIGURE 7

In the same period, and in complete contrast to the artistic view of ancient Greece, the view of ancient Greek life through its surviving texts was also re-framed in particular by the work of Freidriche Neitzsche, who published in the 1870s his work on Greek tragedy, offering a fundamental revision of ancient Greece as a place of both light and dark, of constructive and destructive forces, of the power of the gods Apollo and

²⁹ The first extensive discussion was J. J. Hittorf 1830 *De l’Architecture Polychrome chez les Grecs*; cf. Stonemann 2010: 253. For colour in ancient sculpture see Brinkmann 2003; Panzanelli 2008.

³⁰ Radet 1992; Stonemann 2010: 242. For Schliemann, his critics and his impact: Etienne and Etienne 1992: 110; Stonemann 2010: 265-80; Constantine 2011: 200-5.

³¹ Tsigakou 1981: 77.

³² Morris argues that from the 1870s, the study of the archaeology of Greece was systematically absorbed into Departments of Classics and cut off from the broader study of world archaeology, in order to protect the tradition of idealistic Hellenism, which it was beginning to threaten (a case of keep your friends close and your enemies closer!): Morris 1994: 11.

Dionysus.³³ For Nietzsche, the idealisation of Greece was a symptom of ignorance about the 'real' antiquity, a place that, if seen, would horrify the modern world.

Thus as the modern world emerged from the Victorian age into the twentieth century, life in ancient Greece was simultaneously a Butlins' holiday camp, a world of light and tragic cruelty, an everlasting ideal, as well as a place whose ruins (most often fifth century, and preferably democratic, ruins) were increasingly coming into focus and, as a result, a world that could be studied, catalogued and grasped.

Vikings, Polynesians, diversity and difference

Ancient Greece continued to play its role as inspirational ideal well into the twentieth century. Buses in London during World War I carried excerpts from the speeches of Thucydides as inspirational adverts – only possible because ancient Greek literature was so embedded in the education system. In modern Greece too, poets like Cavafy and Seferis were taking inspiration from ancient Greece, and using ancient myths to describe current political and social conditions.³⁴ The Greeks were also increasingly combining their ancient heritage with the other crucial period of their past: Byzantine Greece. In fact, there is still a term in Greek '*hellenorthodox politismos* ('Greek-Orthodox civilization'), which evokes a blending of ancient Greece and orthodox Christianity, and which some in Greece continue to call on today as an ideal.³⁵

As a result of all this, it was felt, in the early twentieth century, that somehow the modern European world was now tied tighter than ever before with ancient Greece. In a Berlin bookshop not long ago, I came across a 1921 volume edited by Richard Livingstone on *The Legacy of Greece*. The Preface makes the European close relationship with ancient Greece clear:

'In spite of many differences, no age has had closer affinities with ancient Greece than our own. History does not repeat itself. Yet if the twentieth century searched through its past for its nearest spiritual kin, it is in the fifth and following centuries BC that they would be found. Again and again as we study Greek thought, behind the veil woven by time and distance, the face that meets us is our own, younger, with fewer lines and wrinkles on its features and with more definite and deliberate purpose in its eyes. For these reasons, we are today in a position, as no other age has been, to understand Ancient Greece, to learn the lessons it teaches, and in studying the ideals and fortunes of men with whom we have so much in common, to gain a fuller power of understanding and estimating of our own.'³⁶

One of the ironies of this close, family, bond between early twentieth century Europe (or its academics at least) and ancient Greece is that, at exactly the same time, the art world, which had for so long fanned the flames of idealistic interpretations of Greece, had, at

³³ Shanks 1996: 173; Constantine 2011: 212.

³⁴ On Cavafy and Seferis see: JUSDANIS 1987; BEATON 1990.

³⁵ I. Galanakis 2012 (personal communication). Cf. also Hamilakis 2007.

³⁶ Livingstone 1921: Preface.

the beginning of the twentieth century, began to dispense with it. Post-impressionist artists like Cezanne labelled its imitation pernicious, and the Dada movement, in the 1920s, suggesting 'letting Laocoön' – one of the most famous ancient Hellenistic sculptures known through Roman copy (Figure 8) – 'and his children rest after their 1000 year long struggle with that fine sausage of a serpent.'³⁷

FIGURE 8

Yet its also important to realise that this sense of affinity felt in intellectual circles between ancient and modern Greece did not cover-over the seeds of doubt sowed by Nietzsche and others about the dual nature of the ancient Greek world: its light and dark, creativity and cruelty. In an article in Livingstone's volume entitled 'The value of Greece to the future of the World', Gilbert Murray tackled this Janus-like quality. On the one hand, he argued, the language of Greek poetry had an 'austere beauty' because the people were 'habitually toned to a higher level of intensity and nobility than ours'. On the other, he argues, the Greeks were separated by a thin and precarious interval from the savage. 'Scratch a Russian', Murray continued, 'and you find a wild Tartar. Scratch an ancient Greek, and you hit, no doubt, on a very primitive and formidable being, somewhere between a Viking and a Polynesian.'³⁸

The dual savage and cultured nature of ancient Greece has not been, of course, the only fascination for academic scholarship during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. It would be impossible here to list all the developments across the fields of Classical study and how they have impacted upon our impression of life in ancient Greece.³⁹ But it is crucial to note that, while many of these developments and their resulting impressions have come about thanks to new critical theory or new technology, just as many of them have been motivated principally thanks to pressure, as in previous centuries, from wider historical events as well as changing social and political attitudes.⁴⁰ Hitler's championing of the competitive elitist aspects of ancient Greece ensured that money was available for the Germans to dig out the stadium at ancient Olympia, which had hitherto been left unexcavated. In contrast, post World War II, with Europe exhausted, America came to the fore in archaeology in Europe, with the study of ancient Greece exploding with a particular emphasis on ancient Greece's credentials for freedom and democracy, with a resulting swing back from Olympia to Athens: in 1952-6, the Americans paid to rebuild the Stoa of Attalus in the Athenian agora. For the modern Greeks, however, post World War II politics led to the expression, for example in Greek poetry, of the ancient Aegean landscape as no longer a place of blue skies and sunshine, but as a place of oppressive

³⁷ Etienne and Etienne 1992: 115. Cf. also the continuing disappointment felt when actually seeing Athens for real in the 1920s: Byron 1926.

³⁸ Murray 1921: 11, 15.

³⁹ For a good review, see Snodgrass 1987; Whitley 2001: 35-57; Dyson 2006: 152-250.

⁴⁰ Other often-cited social and political changes: the emancipation of women leading not only to female scholars and archaeologists, but also to a fundamental rethink about the position of women in the ancient world and an active search for them in the historical record. Equally, the gradual acceptance of homosexuality has led to a more open discussion of the evidence for ancient sexuality, much of which had previously been hidden or ignored. Cf. Dover 1978; Dynes and Donaldson 1992.

desolation.⁴¹ In contrast again, Russian interest in ancient Greece, dating back to Catherine the Great, was preconditioned for much of the twentieth century by the politics of the Soviet Union, with its scholars choosing to emphasise an ancient Greece which was a pre-capitalist social system relying on slave modes of production.⁴² The development of the European Union project after 1958 encouraged many to emphasise the panhellenic, 'united' aspects of ancient Greece, and particularly its sanctuaries like Delphi, Olympia and Delos, as forerunners of the modern European movement. When UNESCO made Delphi a World Cultural Heritage site in 1987 it cited as an explicit reason 'Delphi's enduring ability to bring people together.'⁴³ And, for the modern Greeks, the particular problem of having to live in amongst the ruins, despite their pride and high passion for their ancient ancestry, has also occasionally pushed some to see it as a burden.⁴⁴ This came to the fore particularly during the heavy summer fires of 2007, when decisions had to be made on protecting ancient ruins rather than modern neighbourhoods.⁴⁵

Conclusion

Our vision of life in ancient Greece has thus always been tied tightly to the events, attitudes and needs of our own world. As a result, our impression of ancient Greek life, and the level of importance it has for modern society, has not just changed over time, but has also been dynamic and multiple at any one time. It has morphed, been contested, and circled around time and again as a fictional ideal and primitive reality, distant foreign land and family member, place of noble simplicity and savage cruelty to name but a few. As the archaeologist Michael Shanks once put it: 'The Classical past does not reveal itself in its essential character, it has to be worked for. This leads us to the question: what sort of Classical past do we want?'⁴⁶ As a result of this constant tussle over the nature of the ancient Greek world, and its constant evocation in different guises as an ideal (and anti-ideal) in modern society, ancient Greece has a power, which punches way above its weight in comparison to other great periods of world history. The question becomes, will that continue in the future?

The argument has been made many times, even by Classicists themselves, that we cannot rely on ancient Greece to have the same kind of stake, if indeed any stake, in the

⁴¹ Kotsovilli 2009.

⁴² Cf. Dyson 2006: 214.

⁴³ <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/393/documents/> (1987 Advisory Body Evaluation) – last accessed 1.12.12. Ian Morris argues that the study of ancient Greece, over the last two centuries, has in reality been all about understanding our own Europeanness: Morris 1994: 8.

⁴⁴ Alexander the Great, for example, was voted the greatest Greek of all time on Greek TV in 2009. But a German magazine is also currently being sued in the Greek courts for representing an ancient Greek goddess raising her finger to Europe: Associated Press November 29th 2011.

⁴⁵ Cf. the discussion in Hamilakis 2007; Loukaki 2008.

⁴⁶ Shanks 1996: 118. Or as J. Porter puts it: 'Hellenism... is a relation between a particular past, itself differently imagined over time and therefore not very particular at all, and an ever-changing present' Porter 2009: 8.

21st and coming centuries as it has done in the past,⁴⁷ and many readers will be aware of the continuing fight for the relevance of studying the ancient past in school curriculums as well as at university level. That war is certainly not over, but I do think battles are being won. For sure, putting excerpts of Thucydides on buses as inspirational messages would a little bit odd now, and I doubt anyone would claim, as Livingstone did, that we are a mirror reflection of ancient Greece, or agree with John Stuart Mill that Marathon is more important than Hastings. But, on the other hand, the evidence is, I think, that the study of the ancient world continues to have relevance, and more importantly, to thrive and captivate. Numerous individuals, societies, associations and projects, for example, are working hard at grass roots level helping with the often very popular re-introduction of ancient languages into schools across the country. Despite some universities narrowing their ancient world study options, others, are actually increasing their provision, and numbers of students applying to read Classics-related subjects at university in the UK are healthy.

In wider society too, ancient Greek themes continue to gain prominence. Many have noted the current seeming popularity of 'swords and sandals' epics in the cinemas in the last decades. This rise may indicate not so much a 're-awakening' of interest in ancient history, but rather the potential the ancient world has to provide an evocative and exciting 'blank canvas' for Hollywood script-writing and cross-genre fertilization (video-game potential, for example, is now equally, if not more, important, than the film itself in the marketing plan for these projects).⁴⁸ This manipulation of the ancient Greek world in modern cinema represents, on the one hand, as we have seen, nothing new in the way the ancient world has been used (and abused) in the past. And on the other hand, it also has the useful effect of creating a knock-on effect of interest in the ancient world in other genres and audiences. It cannot be unconnected that there has been a rise in the number of TV documentaries about the ancient world in recent years, or that, for example, Vera Wang's 'ancient Greece' wedding dress has apparently become one of the most popular in her collection, or that Karl Lagerfeld decided to dedicate the 2011 Pirelli calendar to Greek myth (modestly comparing himself to Homer when he commented that 'what Homer did with the pen, I did with the camera lens'). Such wide distribution of films 'inspired' by ancient Greece has also meant that the culture of the ancient world has spread to new parts of the modern world as a useable comparative ideal. When I was teaching in Rio in 2010, the police there were being hailed in the mainstream press as Spartan heroes (and people knew what they were talking about thanks to the film *300*).⁴⁹ All this, combined of course with the current world economic crisis and the Greek economy's position as a litmus test of the wider world financial problem, means that we find ourselves reading more and more articles comparing ancient ideals and modern realities.

The cycle it seems of interest in, and debate over, life in ancient Greece continues. None of this should make us complacent. The ancient Greek world continuing as a useful spring board for inspiration should not be confused with a re-awakening of passion for

⁴⁷ Cf. Morris 1994: 44; Shanks 1996: 108.

⁴⁸ Cf. Ross Berger *Written By*, December 2011; Clare Foster 2012 (personal communication). For discussion of ancient Rome in cinema: Wyke 1997.

⁴⁹ Cf. in America, where marines have often been compared to ancient Spartans: e.g. J. Warren 2007 *American Spartans: the US Marines, a combat history from Iwo Jima to Iraq*.

history, or a continuing desire to understand the past better. But such use and abuse of the ancient world has simultaneously encouraged academics to engage both more critically in the subject of reception of the Classical world, and thus to at least ensure our awareness of the processes of use and abuse, as well as to engage more actively in the public debate over the nature of the ancient world.⁵⁰ And that is surely key: if interest in life in ancient Greece is to continue in a useful and constructive form in the longer-term, it will only be because the argument for its continuing intellectual, social, political and cultural relevance continues to be forcefully made and won both in academic, educational and most importantly, public arenas.

⁵⁰ Classical reception has seen a huge growth in scholarship in the last two decades e.g. Biddiss and Wyke 1999.

SUGGESTED FURTHER READING:

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Figure 1: 3D recreation of the temple of Zeus and sanctuary at Olympia (© DAI – F. Adler – R. Borrmann – W. Dörpfeld – F. Graeber – P. Graef, *Die Baudenkmäler von Olympia, Olympia II* (Berlin 1892) Taf. 132). No permission required.

Figure 2: N. Poussin 1648 'Body of Phocion being carried out of Athens' (© National Museum of Cardiff). **Image + Permission to follow**

Figure 3: Anon/ J. Carrey? Sketch drawing of part of the west Pediment of Parthenon 1674, from H. Omont *Athènes au XVIIe siècle*. Paris 1898. No permission required.

Figure 4: James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, *Antiquities of Athens* 1762: Vol 1. Chapter IV. Plate III: Lysikrates monument. No permission required.

Figure 5: The 'Apollo Belvedere' statue. No permission required.

Figure 6: The – almost entirely – 5th century BC Acropolis as it is seen today (© Michael Scott)

Figure 7: Lord F. Leighton 1889 'Greek girls playing at Ball' (© Dick Institute, Kilmarnock, By Permission of East Ayrshire Council). **One copy of book to be sent.**

Figure 8: The Laocoön statue. No permission required.

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