Rediscovering, Reconstructing, Using the Past
Archaeology of the Classical World

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A discussion of the interrelations between history and historical stories clearly provides us with an appropriate opportunity to try once again to assess the impact of the classical Greek legacy on modern society in terms of its usefulness, its dynamics, and its misuse. Since much of our knowledge of the classical world is based on archaeology, the exploitation of material remains of that era by specialists and laymen becomes nowadays of primary importance for the reception of classical Greece: remains of the past have been and are still being broadly described as “the visible part of history.” In fact they are just the tangible part. They become really historically “visible” in the way they are interpreted at any given time by their observer. In the case of the classical world the contribution of its material evidence to history is normally enhanced by or combined with a large number of written sources (literature, epigraphy, other documents). Nevertheless even written sources are always rendered “intelligible” by their user through interpretation. The quest for the quality and the limits of interpretation of the classical world—an unending process—as well as the breadth of inspiration, artistic or practical, based on its legacy—another free and creative kind of interpretation—pose a wide range of issues concerning different areas of modern life.

History and Scholarly Archeology

In the domain of scholarship, archaeology redisCOVERS pieces of evidence from the past and makes every effort “objectively” to reconstruct history in accordance with the remains, and in correlation with written sources, if they exist. Nevertheless the interpretation, as is unavoidable when any attempt is made to reconstruct history from the study of historical evidence, is not always sufficiently factual. It is frequently influenced, or even guided, by theoretical, social, national, nationalistic, or personal conceptions current at the time of the interpretation—the latter conceptions sometimes aiming to impress and entertain the public, rather than offer serious knowledge. Interpretations produced under such influences offer temporary creations, stories, rather than history. A few well-known cases of this kind of
interpretation suffice to show how much these factors interfere with the reception of the historical substance of ancient remains.

Archaeology became a science in the 1760s. About 150 years later classical Greek art was considered, in a strongly idealistic theoretical environment, to be the visual expression of an ideal way of life of an unsurpassed standard, realized at the time of its creation. It took time for the discrepancy between the high ideal and the real life of the period to be recognized, and for the artistic expression of other periods and its historical value to be properly estimated. Despite the full rehabilitation of prehistoric, Roman, and Byzantine art in the course of the twentieth century, the perception of classical art as the visual expression of an exceptional period of history, unique in time and place, is still latent in the minds of many specialists and laymen. The term archaic Greek art, for example, still remains in use, placing the beginnings (ἀρχή > ἀρχαῖος > ἀρχαϊκός) of Greek art around 700 BC, when monumental Greek art began to develop, and ignoring at least three preceding centuries of Greek art—and consequently of Greek life and history. The term is a relic of the superseded but not wholly extinguished idealistic conception. A good example of how deeply this latent traditional conception can still falsely influence our reception of ancient Greek art is the shock felt recently by scholars and the general public when they visited the exhibition “Colored Gods: Colors in Ancient Sculpture.” The deeply rooted idealistic conception of the “purified” human figure, incarnate in glittering white marble, was violently overthrown by the coloured reconstructions of well-known classical sculptures, showing that the surface of marble statues had in reality been enlivened by multihued painting, expressing a cheerful and vivid feeling of life. On the other hand, by no means may one deny that classical Greek art embodies a most valuable ideal of a well-balanced, creative personal and social life, always active as a fund of ideas and inspiration. Like the idealistic approach they criticize, sociologically motivated theories discrediting classical art and the paradigm of life it represents as the creation of and for an élite—hence a reactionary art—and focusing on the remains of popular artifacts as witnesses to the real everyday life of the past, apply an equally exclusive approach to history, ignoring the fact that

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2 Brinkmann et al. 2007.
3 See conveniently the article “Ὑψηλή τέχνη” in Wikipedia. Cf Clark 1960.
classical art was the expression of the common spirit of a coherent society, which was the Greek city-state.

National parameters can also create stories rather than history. A good example, out of many, is the case of the pyramidal ruins of ancient buildings in the Argolid (fig. 1). After archaeometric measurements of their building material they have been interpreted as real, small pyramids (tombs or astronomical watchtowers) built early in the third millennium BC.\textsuperscript{4} Archaeological study, on the other hand, dates them to the fourth and third centuries BC and interprets them as the remains of roadside guardhouse towers with a high tapering base (fig. 2).\textsuperscript{5} The character and antiquity ascribed to these constructions by scholars who are attracted to the first option offers to modern Greek pride a welcome story, locating the invention—or parallel early use—of the famous Egyptian pyramidal form in Greece. But this story contributes nothing to history so long as it ignores the strong archaeological argument.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.jpg}
\caption{Figure 1.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{4} Lazos 1995.

Personal scholarly visions produce equally unconfirmed “historical” images, which can sometimes affect the current reception of a historical period. This, for example, is the case with the “restoration” of the “Palace of Minos” in Knossos. On the basis of poor remains of the lower parts and the decoration of the building complex (fig. 3), upper stories and a full decoration were re(?)-constructed, following Evans’s intuitional ideas of what they should look like (fig. 4). Although we do not know how they really looked, the image of these “modern ruins” of Knossos exercises a considerable influence on our reception of Minoan civilization.

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6 Papadopoulos 1997.

7 Theories put forward by scientists and other writers trying to “interpret” ancient Greek myths or remains as proof of spectacular achievements at that time can only be seen as modern stories. See e.g. the recent report of the retired British submarine commander and author Gavin Menzies to the Royal Geographic Academy, Britain, alleging that Minoans discovered America in the third millennium BC, http://www.groupsrv.com/science/about520514.html.
On the other hand, theoreticians have tended recently to deny any objectivity in our reading of the past, stressing the above-mentioned and other factors as leading inevitably to the forging of a modern image, on the basis of a modern interpretation of cultural remains. With regard to classical Greece, a strong challenge arose to the “established” perception of it. In particular, the approach to Greek antiquity as a unique historical moment of the highest human creation, and its use by modern Greeks as the nucleus of their tradition and identity, has been declared to be a constructed modern conception.8

It is not the aim of this paper to examine whether reference to classical antiquity at the time of the formation of the modern Greek state was determined merely by its citizens’ need to put down deep and glorious roots in the past, or rather by the general admiration of the “Greek miracle” then prevailing in contemporary romanticism and idealism. What I am concerned with here is to explore briefly the two main streams through which classical antiquity and its remains are a living presence today, and will continue to be so in the future. The first stream is constituted by their function as strictly historical evidence, as pieces of human experience that have permanent value. The second stream is constituted by their function as a fund of facts, achievements, and images of life, a fund of pregnant content always

8 See recently Damaskos and Plantzos 2008.
at the disposal of modern thinkers and doers for inspiring or expressing current
preoccupations.

With regard to the function of classical antiquity and its remains as historical evidence, it is
first necessary to say a few words about “objectivity.” One can in no way deny the role of the
living experience of any scholar in attempting to reconstruct life in the past. On the other
hand, one can register a multitude of facts that are not susceptible of doubtful interpretation
and that constitute a sound basis for our approach to the past. If in this approach we try
systematically to take everything that we have or can discover of this literally historical
evidence into consideration and base our interpretation on it or with reference to it, then the
story of the interpretation will each time be as near to objective history as contemporary
human cognitive capacity allows. Modern methods and possibilities of interdisciplinary
research, including the application of the methods of natural science, combined with the
rapidly growing recognition of the importance of nonartistic archaeological evidence
(agriculture, handicraft, trade, and private, social, and religious life) constantly enlarge our
objective data about the past. Their careful and sober synthesis, the creation of a story that
aspires to be objective, can vary, highlighting different aspects of the reality that the data
represent; or it can at any time be modified on the basis of new evidence.

This is the highest point of objectivity which modern “historical archaeology” can attain:
the limits of knowledge are clearly defined by the etymological meaning of the word “history.”
It is derived from the root of the verb ὁἶδα (βίδ-) ‘I get to know’. Ἱστόρω is ‘the one who
knows’, while the verb ἱστορῶ means ‘I look for knowledge’. Hence history is the constant
struggle to attain true knowledge. Speaking of historical archaeology with reference to the
classical heritage, I would go so far as to say that in any historical approach to the period, the
manifestly anthropocentric character of classical art, and its expression of an ideally free and
balanced human nature, should be considered as objective data.

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11 Grandsaignes d'Hauterive 1948:233, weid- I.
12 See e.g. Agard 1930 or Beard 2003.
A scholarly archaeological activity that is increasingly gaining ground in our own day is the preservation and comprehensible presentation of material cultural remains, with the aim of offering historical knowledge to a broad public through visual data. In countries like Greece this work, managed by interdisciplinary teams of archaeologists, architects, engineers, and others, mostly involves classical monuments.\(^{13}\) Strict international rules are already in place concerning the extent of restoration that is historically permissible, or the extent of the intervention that is acceptable in order to conserve the remains and produce out of their chance dismembered condition an easily comprehensible image of their form and function, thus revealing their historical testimony.\(^{14}\) The intervention of the present in the making of this image is nevertheless, again, in the nature of this activity. Intervention sometimes risks producing a falsified image: restoration is allowed up to the point at which scholars are absolutely sure of how the monument originally looked. But what should be the percentage and the quality of new material added to what has survived, in order to restore a comprehensible image of the ruin? Is this “comprehensible image,” which up to the present has never existed, a falsification, or rather a further phase in the life of the monument? If the monument preserves elements of different periods of its history, as for example is the case with an ancient Greek temple converted later into a Christian church, to what extent can one preserve and present each phase, or on the basis of what criteria should one attribute more weight to one or some of them (original phase, best preserved, or connected with important events)? A characteristic example is the dilemma faced in the restoration of the temple of Zeus in Olympia (fig. 5): The drums of most of the columns of this building still lie as they fell. Restoring them would have produced a much more complete image of the original form of the building, which was a *human creation*. On the other hand, though, the condition in which the ruin is found forms part of its history, even if this condition, caused by an earthquake, forms part of its *natural history*. Which of these two poles is the more significant? A balanced compromise was chosen: one of the columns was re-erected, giving again the sense of height and grandeur of the original building, while the rest were left on the ground, testifying to its later fate.

\(^{13}\) Lambrinoudakis et al. 2006; Kottaridi and Chondrogiannis 2007.

\(^{14}\) Best presentation in the collective volume by Bouras and Tournikiotis (2010).
The recent definition of restored monumental ruins as “scientific monuments” 15 expresses laconically but thoroughly the character of archaeological restoration and presentation: restoration and presentation are based on research; they are images recording the result of a historical study, and are therefore the historical interpretation of the cultural remains. Should we avoid such interpretations? Many arguments can be adduced in support of restoration. The care and conservation of the monuments (restoration and presentation contribute much to conservation) is indispensable; we are obliged to preserve the remains, which in this case constitute the historical evidence. Restoration and presentation make the monuments readable, revealing their otherwise unrecognizable history to society in a direct manner, for society cares about the past and its tradition and needs to know about it. 16 The intervention—in most cases necessary in order to preserve the monuments—is justified, first if the story it produces is once more as “objective” as possible (resulting from secure data), and second if it allows for potential modification (which is foreseen by the rule of reversibility of the intervention) in the event that new evidence makes this necessary.

One more field in which historical stories are intentionally created is that of educational programs produced in schools, museums, and other institutions for children. Here a great deal of simplification and animation through the use of modern elements is admissible in order to make learning attractive. But it is not at all easy for children to distinguish the naturally and

15 See note 12 above.

aesthetically modern forms that invest the historical object (often by a process of abstraction) from the real historical content to which the modern images are meant to lead them—especially in the case of the classical form and its message.\textsuperscript{17}

Figure 6.

A characteristic example of the danger of disseminating unhistorical images that these educational instruments entail is the mascots of the Olympic Games held in Greece in 2004, the

Figure 7.

\textsuperscript{17} See a risky detail in a generally exemplary case of educational programs http://www.ysma.gr/Gr/pdf/DODEKATHEO.pdf, page 35 (here fig. 6).
dolls “Phoebus” and “Athena” (fig. 7). The intent of their creation was not to educate; it was rather to advertise (although advertising “educates” in a way). But the intended simplification and modernization was in principle the same as in the case of the programs for children: I quote in translation the “source of inspiration” for their creation:

They were inspired by an ancient Greek doll.... The oldest and most desirable toys for children through the ages, from antiquity to the present day, are the dolls.... Their main feature is the movable limbs.... [The mascot-dolls] are two children, who symbolize the tight bond linking Greek history to the modern Olympic Games, and show, through the pleasure of the game, that what is important is to participate, not to win in a game.... Just as they were inspired by an ancient Greek doll, they received names connected with ancient Greece: the boy is named after the god Apollo-Phoebus, the girl after Athena, sister of Apollo....

One could accept the use of dolls as cheerful diachronic symbols of the games. But these dolls did not embody even the slightest element of the essence of the two ancient Greek gods. What kind of idea about these two highly suggestive mythical conceptions could be formed by the crowds of lay people from different cultures who attended the Olympic Games? It is the task of scholars and teachers who create educational programs to plan them in such a way that children on the one hand can get to know the historical object—as simply as is appropriate to their mental capacity—and on the other can become aware of its potential as a source of forms and ideas for new creations in the present.

**Classical Heritage: A Permanent Fund of Inspiration**

The second stream through which classical antiquity remains active in modern life is, as I have already said, its function as a fund of human experience and inspiration. This interactive approach to the classical heritage, re-forming or studying inherited images and ideas of the past and using them as vehicles with which to express modern experiences and needs, creates

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continually modern versions of, or subjectively motivated approaches to—in other words *modern stories* about—*historical* “reality.” Despite the fact that this activity often risks distorting the historical conscience of modern society acquired as a result of scholarly effort (I shall come back to this point), one has to admit that this interaction is as important for life as is the knowledge tied to scholarship, and constitutes an essential part of the notion of the *classical*. The classical legacy is present in almost every aspect of modern life (see, for example, the unit “Ancient Greece, In Us and Around Us” in a teaching program of Kennedy Center Artsedge, or the book by P. Koronakis-Rohlf and M. Batzini, *Ancient Greece and the Modern Manager*, Athens 2009).

Modern literature continues to refer abundantly to classical Greece. It suffices to mention here the paper on “The Influence of Classical Greece on American Literature—An Overview,” delivered by A. Karanikas at a conference held in Boston in 1993, or the Open University’s online program “Classical Receptions in Drama and Poetry in English from c.1970 to the Present,” or even the *Percy Jackson* series of fictional adventure and fantasy books (fig. 8), based predominantly on Greek mythology, which as of July 5, 2010 has been on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for children’s books for 155 weeks. How unexpectedly wide the range of modern experiences seeking expression through classical archetypes can be is manifested by an ode written early this year by the British poet laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, for England’s leading football player, David Beckham: Beckham tore his Achilles tendon (fig. 9) and was going to miss the World Cup in June; Duffy imagines him as the Greek hero Achilles who was dipped as a baby by his mother Thetis into the River Styx and became invulnerable, except for his heel, the part of the body she held him by (fig. 10).

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20 http://www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/.
22 http://www.guardian.co.uk/culture/charlottehigginsblog/2010/mar/19/poetry-classics.
23 *Achilles Wounded in the Heel by Paris*, statue by Charles Alphonse Gumery, 1850.
Figure 8.
Figure 9.

Side view of lower leg

Gastrocnemius muscle

Achilles tendon with inflammation

Soleus muscle

Tibia

Surgical view of torn achilles tendon
With regard specifically to classical art as a source of inspiration, modern poets and writers continue to produce works in which they present their own world with reference to or in contrast with material remains of the classical era. A good example of such creations is the notion of “classical tourism” in works of leading American modern poets, as described in a recent article by Marsha Bryant and Mary Ann Eaverly under the title “Classical tourism in Debora Greger’s poetry” (a relevant interesting statement in this text: “Interacting with ancient artifacts and sites through a process we call ‘Classical tourism’ can provide women poets a greater flexibility than the scripted characters of literary ‘monuments’”). In Greece, ancient works of art continually inspire a broader circle of writers in a more direct way, due to their sense of classical antiquity as national heritage.

It would be beyond the scope of this overview to explore even some of the aspects of inspiration that ancient Greek masterpieces and forms generate in the production of modern art. Contemporary artists go back to classical art to feel its presence in our life, to comment on

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it in modern terms, to explore actuality through, or in contrast to, the “established” classical material, creating their own visual “story.” It is sufficient here simply to mention some collections of this kind of art exhibited recently in Athens (K. Veinoglou, *O You, Land of Pnyx*, Hellenic Society, Plaka-Athens, 2006; European artists in *Mythos: Myths and Archetypes in the Mediterranean*, Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens, 2006; Anna Chromy, *Mythos Revisited*, Garden of the National Museum, Athens, 2007; Vana Xenou, *The Soul of Land*, National Garden, Athens 2010; *The Myth of Erysichthon*, Center “Leonidas Canellopoulos,” Eleusis, 2010). This approach to re-forming classical images within the context of contemporary story-telling is well represented in a comment concerning the exhibition *The Myth of Erysichthon*. King Erysichthon of Thessaly had cut down trees in a grove sacred to Demeter. The goddess punished him by giving him an unrelenting and insatiable hunger. He sold all his possessions, including his daughter Mestra, to buy food, but was still hungry. Mestra was freed from slavery by Poseidon, who gave her the gift of changing her shape in order to escape her bonds. Erysichthon sold her numerous times to make money to feed himself. In the end he ate himself in his hunger. The comment reads (in translation) as follows:

Sooner or later one would rediscover the myth of Erysichthon, because [this myth] is about the lack of measure in consumption, about irresponsibility and impunity and … about their consequences. It is, perhaps more precisely, about

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28 Cf. her own comment on one of the sculptures (*Europe and the Bull*, fig. 11): “With my interpretation of the Rape of Europe I intend once and for all to give this tale a contemporary significance away from the old image with the bull. In my sculpture, the God in form of a white bull has already drowned and a charitable wave of history brings the princess back to our shores where her crystal ball predicts a radiant future for our continent” (http://www.annachromy.com/exhibitions/mythos-revisited-athens-2007/).

29 http://aisxylia.gr/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=377&Itemid=43; see figure 12.
the inconsiderate exploitation of natural resources and the devastation of the
environment. Today the myth of Erysichthon is revived in the work of 61 artists.

A special field of art in which the classical legacy directly or indirectly remained vividly
productive is architecture. Instead of listing the different aspects of its diachronic influence, I
quote from Wikipedia’s short article on “Neoclassicism in the 21st century”:

After a lull during the period of modern architectural dominance (roughly post-
WWII until the mid 1980s), neoclassicism has seen somewhat of a resurgence. In
the United States some public buildings are built in the neoclassical style as of at
least 2006, with the completion of the Schermerhorn Symphony Center [in
Nashville].

In Britain a number of architects are active in the neoclassical style. Examples of
their work include two university Libraries: Quinlan Terry’s Maitland Robinson
Library at Downing College [Cambridge] and Robert Adam Architects’ Sackler
Library [Oxford]. The majority of new neoclassical buildings in Britain are
private houses.

As of the first decade of the 21st century, neoclassical architecture is usually
classed under the umbrella term of “traditional architecture.” Also, a number of
pieces of postmodern architecture draw inspiration from and include explicit
references to neoclassicism, the National Theatre of Catalonia in Barcelona
among them.

These buildings create their own monumental story with reference to classical monumental
forms. The creators of the Sackler Library (fig. 13) which succeeded the old Ashmolean Library
explained, for example, that the entrance of the building is based upon the Doric Temple of
Apollo at Bassae, first excavated by Charles Robert Cockerell, the man who designed the
Ashmolean Museum, while the National Theatre of Catalonia (fig. 14) envelops a modern

construction, where modern materials such as glass prevail, in an architectural wrapper in the *monumentalizing form* of a Roman temple.

Figure 11.
Figure 12.
A very influential branch of art production, namely theatre and cinematography, deals frequently with classical antiquity. Especially relevant to the subject discussed here is the “revival” of ancient Greek drama, whose essence is best described in an article by G. Sifakis on the Web site of the Encyclopedia of Death and Dying.\textsuperscript{32} I quote:

Productions of Greek tragedies have increasingly carved a considerable niche in contemporary Western (and Japanese) theater, so much so that one may wonder what it is that ancient tragedy has to say to modern audiences that have no familiarity with or belief in Greek mythology and religion. It seems that the basic shape of the stories, the examples of heroic defiance, and above all the uncompromising dignity with which tragic characters accept the predicament

\textsuperscript{32} G. M. Sifakis, \textit{Greek Tragedy}, http://www.deathreference.com/Gi-Ho/Greek-Tragedy.html.
imposed on them by superior powers which they cannot overcome or avoid, hold a universal message of humanity that is as valuable for modern men and women as it was for ancient ones.

As characteristic, on the other hand, of the motivation of modern “translators” of ancient plays or dramatic myths, I quote here a comment by a leading modern Greek scenographer, Dionysis Photopoulos, concerning his collaboration with Peter Stein for the performance of John Barton’s *Tantalus* in Denver, England, in 2000.33 “Tantalus is a work that speaks about the foolery of war and contains characters very familiar to me throughout my life; I feel as if I belong to these families.”

This reincarnation, however, of images of ancient life in our modern world is not without problems. Intense criticism is often expressed of modern theatrical interpretations of ancient tragedies and comedies, as just two examples out of many can show: Antony Keen argued, commenting on Peter Stein’s production of Aeschylus’ *Oresteia* (Edinburgh, 1994), that “the hopes for grand drama were partially fulfilled, at least in *Agamemnon* and *Choephoroe,*” but “in the *Eumenides* it all [went] horribly wrong,” because “it soon became obvious that Stein was deliberately playing the *Eumenides* for laughs,” while “*Eumenides* is not a funny play. It is a deadly serious examination of the debate between two standards of justice, one based on equity and one on revenge, a debate as relevant today as it was two-and-a-half thousand years ago.”34

On the other hand, Kraounakis and Hatzakis’s production of Aristophanes’ *Acharneis* (Epidauros, 2010) has been described by spectators as “Acharneis” without Aristophanes, because they saw a rich show, with many elements of modern reference and satire, but missed Aristophanes.35 Obviously there is a problem with the reception of this movement of ancient theatrical revival: are modern plays renderings of the classical stories with allusions to present

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34 http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol1no5/stein.html
circumstances, making use of the **universal messages of humanity** that these plays contain, or are they free, more or less discordant adaptations of the ancient works to present-day realities?

![Figure 15.](image)

A similar problem troubles cinematography. Here the demand for originality, commerciality, and relaxing entertainment leads frequently to stories which have nothing, or very little, to do with the classical characters and situations they allegedly reproduce. An indicative example is the recent hit—as a comic book, a movie, and a TV series—of Hercules and Xena (fig. 16), which has been presented as a *renaissance* of ancient Greek myth (“watch the old Greek tales with a new spin, as they are resurrected weekly for us”), but at the same time as *destroying myths through myths*.\(^3^6\) The series, very loosely based on the tales of the classical Greek cultural hero Heracles, is set in a fantasy version of ancient Greece not precisely located in historical time. Although set in ancient Greece, the show also has a mixture of

\(^{3^6}\) [http://www.liberator.net/ulc/HercandXena.html](http://www.liberator.net/ulc/HercandXena.html).
oriental, Egyptian, and medieval elements in various episodes. It is interesting to navigate through the great number of sites and assess positive and negative references to this production. Negative criticism concerning its complete falsification of ancient myths comes mainly from the side of Greek viewers, as a result of their feeling themselves to be heirs to the genuine myth, but perhaps more than that because of their developed sense of familiarity with the classical myth. Internationally reactions are generally positive, finding the characters “extremely thoughtful at times and self indulgent, pleasant time-wasters at other times.”

Some spectators report that they were prompted by characters featured in the series to learn more about ancient Greek mythology—but this is exactly the point where the danger of mixing knowledge with entertainment is hidden, especially with regard to children.

![Hercules & Xena: The Battle for Mount Olympus](image)

Figure 16.

It is of great interest to explore the ethics of artistic creation especially in this important field of theatre and film. One cannot begrudge anyone’s drawing from the classical tradition

37 http://www.liberator.net/ulc/HercandXena.html.
the elements that they find suit their creative imagination, and reshaping them in any direction their vision or their needs lead them. On the contrary, one would say that this is desirable: in the end, the ever-active, unbounded power of inspiration is the essence of the classical. On the other hand a clearer distinction between heritage and creation, between ancient history—as well as ancient stories belonging to history—and our modern stories, is imperative. Should not people whose work is inspired by a classical play or a mythical image, but strays too far from it, abstain from entitling their work with the ancient writer’s or hero’s name? Or at least should they not entitle it in a way that makes clear the modern different version they themselves have created? This and surely other proposals—which one would welcome in the “Athens Dialogues”—could deal with the problem effectively. A constraint on what was said above concerning the freedom of inspiration should be accepted in the case of staging performances in ancient theatres: it is important here to give serious consideration to the damage or disturbance modern staging can cause to the irreplaceable remains of ancient monuments.

Athletics is yet another field of modern life in which the classical legacy plays a significant role. Interest in the training of the body and care for its physical condition, which has developed very widely since the nineteenth century, has much to do with classical ideals. I quote on this matter a characteristic passage from a volume edited by James Porter in 1999, whose texts “attest to the particular richness of the body in classical antiquity and as an object for study today”:

38 Theodoropoulos 2010; note 32 above.


40 See e.g. the controversy on allowing live sheep to appear in the theatre of Epidauros during the performance of Sophocles’ Electra in 2007, staged by Peter Stein. The Greek Archaeological Service, responsible for the protection of the monument, did not accept this proposal, taking into consideration the risk of uncontrolled movements of the animals on the fragile remains, TA NEA, August 10, 2007:19–21.

41 Porter 1999.
Classicists may query any definition of a Greek ideal of physical culture that regards ancient athletes as a “celebration of the human body,” pure and simple. They see Greek athletics, rather, as a social institution of the ancient city-state, which fully integrated the aesthetic ideal of the beautifully formed male physique (the kalos) with the moral and political ideal of the good male citizen (the agathos). Yet ... as product of the nineteenth century, bodybuilding—the practice of putting highly defined musculature on public display—drew its initial context and much of its validation from the ancient world.

Modern activity inspired by ancient Greece came to a peak with the “revival” of the Olympic Games in 1896. Pierre de Coubertin idealized the Olympic Games as the ultimate ancient athletic competition. Wikipedia\(^\text{42}\) summarizes Coubertin’s advocacy of the Games as follows:

> [It was] centered on a number of ideals about sport. He believed that the early ancient Olympics encouraged competition among amateur rather than professional athletes, and saw value in that. The ancient practice of a sacred truce in association with the Games might have modern implications, giving the Olympics a role in promoting peace. This role was reinforced in Coubertin’s mind by the tendency of athletic competition to promote understanding across cultures, thereby lessening the dangers of war. In addition, he saw the Games as important in advocating his philosophical ideal for athletic competition: that the competition itself, the struggle to overcome one’s opponent, was more important than winning.

Also summarized are the differences and similarities between the ancient and modern Olympics: The ancient Olympics were rather different from the modern Games. There were fewer events, and only free men who spoke Greek could compete. The Games were always held at Olympia rather than alternating to different locations as is the tradition with the modern Olympic Games. There is one major commonality between the ancient and modern Games: the victorious athletes are honored, feted, and praised. Their deeds were heralded and chronicled so that future generations could appreciate their accomplishments. One could enlarge the list

of similarities by citing political interventions, violations of the rules and ethics of competition, etc. that happened in antiquity as well as today. Yet the “revival” of the Olympic Games is supposedly based not only on their historical reality, but also and especially on the ancient story about them, that is, the ideal conception that the ancient Greeks shaped for them. Inasmuch as the modern Olympics and their new story, or ideal, continue to be inspired by the ancient ideal and allow it to guide their function, they will be one of the most genuine and most influential cultural activities of today inspired by ancient precedent (fig. 17).

A final issue to be addressed is the broad use of the classical heritage by modern societies in defining social identities. Even small local societies in countries with a classical past feel the need to link their identity to glorious moments of history. The recent restructuring of municipalities in Greece with names that refer mostly to antiquity is a good example. But unhistorical stories can be produced in different places. Thus, for example, the inhabitants of the Peloponnesian village of Karyai erected in their village a full-scale copy of the porch of Caryatids on the Acropolis of Athens, with the intention of proving the importance of their ancestry (fig. 18). This is evidently an unsuccessful “historical” story. The Erechtheion as work of art and as a temple has nothing to do with the history of the village. Even the ancient

43 Large sand creation with an ancient Greek Olympic athlete throwing the discus, on Zhujiajian Island, East China’s Zhejiang Province, Sept. 29, 2007. This and other sand sculptures were made by thirty artists from ten countries, including China, the U.S., and Russia, to welcome the 2008 Beijing Olympics (Xinhua photo).

44 See again Lowenthal 1998; note 14 above.

female figures serving as architectural supports, inspired by, or likened to, female worshippers of Artemis in the ancient town of Karyai, have nothing or very little as an artistic invention to do with the past of this village. The importance the copy of the Parthenon acquired for the image of Nashville in the United States could be considered an exaggerated extension of this kind of reference to classical antiquity.\footnote{46 Tournikiotis 1994:223–224.}

Classical antiquity has supplied the nucleus of the modern Greek state’s identity, a state formed at a time when Europe was still strongly influenced by idealism.\footnote{47 Damaskos and Plantzos 2008.} It is still understood as a major component of this national identity, not as a hereditary gift, but rather as the experience of a language with an extraordinary richness of notions, which developed uninterruptedly down the centuries, an experience of living in the same places in which ancient Greek culture developed and among its remains, of being the natural guardians of the multitude of these internationally praised material remains and the recipients of an education strongly influenced by this environment. One cannot criticize the Greek authorities who

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image18}
\caption{Figure 18.}
\end{figure}
designed the current Greek passport, on whose pages faint representations of monuments representing different periods of the country’s history tell the story of the national identity of modern Greeks. While some nationalistic conceptions of identity based especially on the legacy of classical Greece still exist, the sober conception I have just described is by far the most prevalent. The same components, apart from language, played a similar role in the local identity of the inhabitants of Magna Graecia in Italy, or in a more casual way in other places where classical culture flourished.  

Beyond national identities, broader cultural groups define themselves by referring in a greater or lesser degree to the legacy of classical Greece: Even Duroselle, whose book on European history has been strongly criticized for setting the origins of “Europe” much later than antiquity, clearly registers the Greek sources of modern “European culture.” Furthermore, European culture has been widened as “western culture” or “civilization.” The identity of this globalized cultural entity is characteristically defined as the culture which began with the Greeks, was enlarged and strengthened by the Romans, reformed and modernized by the fifteenth-century Renaissance and Reformation, and globalized by successive European empires that spread the European ways of life and education between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. 

The modern Olympics, among other things, are a universal manifestation of this culture. Another manifestation of its universal influence is the use of images symbolizing it to represent international and intercultural activities. The logo of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization is a case in point, imitating an ancient Greek


49 Duroselle 1993.


temple (fig. 19), but representing legacies and monuments of many different cultures. An analogous phenomenon is the symbolic use of classical images in publicity all over the world to advertise merchandise as purportedly possessing enduring value (fig. 20).\textsuperscript{53}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{unesco.png}
\caption{UNESCO}
\end{figure}

A final word should be added concerning the current image of modern Greek national identity outside Greece. Especially instructive on this point are the cartoons which appeared recently in the international press, commenting on the difficult financial situation of the country: almost all of them did so with reference to classical Greece, representing modern Greece (and of course modern Greeks) in the form of an outstanding classical Greek work of art. I will comment briefly on two examples out of many: the first is a front cover of the German magazine *Focus* (edition of 3 May 2010) representing the Aphrodite of Milo *draped in the flag of modern Greece* and extending her hand in the characteristic gesture of a beggar (fig. 21). The famous statue of the ancient Greek goddess stands for modern Greece asking for money from her partners in Europe. The second example is a cartoon by Chappatte under the

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title “Greece in Debt” (International Herald Tribune of February 2, 2010; fig. 22). The Discus-thrower of the famous ancient sculptor Myron has in his hand a euro instead of the discus. He throws the euro-discus out of a building with classical features in which he is housed, after having broken the glass pane of a window. Outside the window earlier throws have accumulated a pile of coins. The meaning is evident: modern Greeks, who live among the remains of classical Greece and experience its precious heritage, have betrayed it in the current situation and have foolishly spent the resources they once had.

Figure 21.

Two statements can be made on the basis of publications of this kind. First, in the mind of the broad international lay public there still exists a latent feeling that the classical past represents a major component of modern Greek identity (in spite of the contrast with the current state suggested by the cartoons). One should study this phenomenon on the one hand in relation to international criticism that Greece places too much weight on its classical past, and on the other to the efforts of Greeks today to balance the different components of their identity, that is their history and their recent and present creations. The second statement is that the perception of the classical as an ideal paradigm of life (which in the present situation—so the cartoons imply—Greeks have ignored) is still vividly alive in the international community.

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