

Originalveröffentlichung in: *European journal of archaeology* 10, 2007, S. 112-115; Online-Veröffentlichung auf Propylaeum-DOK (2025), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.11588/propylaeumdok.00006878>

### CLASSICAL ARCHAEOLOGY – AN EXTENDED FIELD

Amy Brauer, Carol Mattusch and Alice Donohue, eds, *Common Ground: Archaeology, Art, Science and Humanities: The Proceedings of the 16th International Congress of Classical Archaeology*. (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2006, 640 pp., hbk, ISBN 978 1 84217 183 7)

Susan Alcock and Robin Osborne, eds, *Classical Archaeology*. (Blackwell Studies in Global Archaeology, Malden: Blackwell, 2007, 447 pp., hbk, ISBN 978 0 631 23418 0)

Classical archaeology is considered the oldest of the archaeological sciences. The flourishing enthusiasm of the Renaissance for specific areas of Greek and Roman antiquity (architecture and in particular temples, sculpture, vase-painting, gems, and coins), as well as the possibility of referring to contemporary literary sources, resulted in conventions and methods of interpretation that distinguished classical



archaeology from its adjacent archaeological disciplines. The antique culture, especially the classical period (as the term implies), became the root of the European history of ideas. After the educational reforms of the nineteenth century, it also served as a guideline for the humanistic educational ideal in Germany.

Two circumstances were the main reasons for the independent development of classical archaeology. On the one hand a large number of antique works of art, images and temples survived into our times. These survivals led to the downgrading of all other contemporary finds and to their labelling as 'not worthy of research'. On the other hand the large amount of written evidence, especially inscriptions, was felt to privilege classical archaeology in comparison to archaeologies of pre-literate cultures by offering apparently authentic sources for the ancient world (sources which were sometimes even misinterpreted as eyewitness accounts). Because of these special conditions and interdisciplinary politics, classical archaeology evolved into an 'archaeology of art' or an 'ancient art history', although some classical archaeologists had considerable broader interests, more comparable with today's standards.

As a consequence, art historical methods have influenced this scientific domain heavily. The use of theoretical models as explanatory tools for archaeological phenomena, as established early on in the archaeological analysis of prehistoric cultures, appeared superfluous for classical archaeology. The ancient literary sources delivered enough information on political structures, attitudes of mind, descriptions of everyday life and so on. Therefore a feeling of security in the interpretation of material finds was ever present.

Criticisms of classical archaeology concentrated mainly on its favouritism displayed when selecting artworks worthy of analysis, its rigid examination of individual items, its positivistic, object-oriented formulation of relevant questions, and its adversity to theory. These processes have led to a deep, and up till now polemical, gap between the different archaeological sciences. The two books under review present an *extended* classical archaeology that does not confine itself to the aforementioned theme of an ancient history of art.

The 630 pages of *Common Ground* are divided into 37 chapters (reflecting the thematic sessions of the 2003 conference from which it derives),

written by over 100 international authors. Carol Mattusch and the editorial team have provided an extensive overview of classical archaeological research in this volume, thereby creating a substantial work to be dipped into rather than read from beginning to end. It carries the title *Common Ground. Archaeology, Art, Science, and Humanities*, and as such signals that art cannot remain the sole focus of classical archaeology. Rather, the need is expressed to '... bring together the various specialists working from different sides to illuminate classical art and material culture' (p. 218).

Preceding the large number of contributions, all represented by at least an abstract, is an introductory article by George Huxley. He covers the miscellaneous directions of archaeology and its connection with other sciences, although an undifferentiated admiration for antiquity and a text-oriented interpretation leads to a rather uncritical listing of the capacities and potentials of classical archaeology. An introduction reviewing new developments and explaining the move to new questions within classical archaeology would have been preferable, given that 'the search for truth is the greatest of joys in the Life of the Mind ...' (p. 6) does not any longer constitute the highest goal of scientific work.

The contributions are gathered in thematic sections that illustrate the cultural-historical bandwidth of the field of classical archaeological research (current research, new ideas and projects) throughout the world today. Also, they demonstrate the variety of possible methodological and theoretical approaches. As regards content, one may find art-archaeological or natural scientific approaches, as well as the combination of both. This comprises the strength of the publication; nevertheless, the majority of contributions are rather object-oriented and few are of a theoretical or problem-oriented nature.

The title of this volume probably expresses the desire to signal that classical archaeology must be perceived as more than just history of ancient art and be expanded thematically (in subject and questions) as well as methodologically and theoretically. With regard to this expansion, a critic might complain that it is at the cost of sacrificing the identity of the discipline and that ancient art history – which used to be at its centre – has thereby been discredited. Such fears seem unnecessary if one observes the variety of approaches – ranging



from art historical to science-oriented contributions – included in the volume.

The second book under review, *Classical Archaeology*, has a different concept. The structure preferred by the editors of the series *Blackwell Studies in Global Archaeology* guides this publication, through which 'key regional and thematic areas of archaeological study' are presented. Its target group is not 'proper' scientists, but rather teachers and students. Therefore a detailed, thorough scientific discussion is not really expected. After an introduction, ten chapters covering different subject areas represent the variety of enquiry in classical archaeology in a problem-oriented manner, always against a background of broader relevant issues. The book closes with a 'prospective' by the editors.

In their introduction, Alcock and Osborne define the term 'classical archaeology' by equating it with the archaeology of the 'classical world between the eighth century BC and the fourth century AD' (p. 1). They also elucidate why they hold on to that term, instead of using alternatives such as 'Greek and Roman archaeology' or 'archaeology of the Mediterranean' as is often the case today; 'classical archaeology' as a term includes the historical background of this discipline and the notion that we today base our work on the activity of our predecessors. But another term would not deny this fact.

Furthermore, the authors emphatically remind us that Greco-Roman culture has functioned as an ideal for the western world, for example in the fields of art, philosophy, and political sciences, and it was exploited often enough to 'justify western imperialism' (p. 1). Mention of the fact that the classical world exists as a multitude of individual objects and texts, which archaeologists reanalyse in different ways and in so doing inevitably project the perspective of their own times, constantly 'constructing' the past anew, would have completed the authors' survey. Furthermore, a definition of the 'Greek world' as well as the 'Roman world' should have been offered. The understanding that it is difficult to characterize clearly these chronologically and geographically overlapping material cultures as 'Greek' or 'Roman' has led to the pragmatic and often-used solution of defining these 'worlds' purely with regards to geography and time.

For discussion of the individual themes, contributing experts were called upon. They

manage to present their own views as well as the relevant current state of research in a comprehensible and well-written manner, thereby offering a good starting point for any attempt to look deeper into any of the described themes. The range of topics is divided throughout into separate categories of the 'Greek world' and the 'Roman world', the sole exception being in a chapter titled 'Human ecology and the Classical landscape'. The division leads to two insights. On the one hand it makes it easy for the reader to realize the differences between these two geographically and chronologically defined worlds as well as the structural changes that took place at the transition from one to the other. On the other hand it becomes clear just how diverse analysis of the same theme can be, and that this diversity directly mirrors the variation found within the scientific community. Besides personality and general socialization, a variety of factors influence a scientist, among them the time and place of his/her scientific upbringing. This informs his/her methods, questions and goals, as well as defines a researcher throughout the entirety of his/her life, as the chapter 'Doing archaeology in the classical lands' so plausibly demonstrates. In it, Davis provides a personal report from his (field)work in Greece from the 1960s onwards. Hurst on the other hand, in the 'Roman world' category, offers a critical look at the diverse quality of answers that archaeological and written sources offer, as well as their interpretative potentials and conventions. At the same time he describes the precarious relationship between archaeological and written sources.

In the final chapter the strands of classical archaeological research presented in the ten preceding ones are woven together. Thereby the fields of research are valuably combined and the potential of classical archaeology described, after which the reader may feel this has been an instructive and informative book.

Alcock and Osborne do not neglect to mention the discrepancy between the declining prominence of the classical world in the educational curricula of many countries and the increasing interest towards these themes 'on the popular radar' (p. 426). Films, books, television-series, and lately even computer games concerning the ancient world are popular throughout the world. Unfortunately I am afraid that this current popularity of the



ancient times (or other historical periods) is not a real sign of an increase in interest concerning history (perhaps because it is conveyed only in a restricted form in schools). It rather seems to result from the fact that historically inspired environments offer a popular, and perhaps even arbitrary, stage on which rather fantastic worlds can be set.

Presenting classical archaeology in all its facets was not the goal of this book. Yet the one facet that has been dominating research for such a long time is missing: ancient art history. For the critic of *extended* classical archaeology this should be a welcome confirmation of the loss of professional identity. The critic would only be correct, however, if he/she expected an object analysis to be restricted solely to chronology and iconography. If artworks are to be understood as part of a specific form of expression by any society on the other hand, then this part of the archaeological identity is indeed found in this book. It is integrated within the wider context of its use (religious, political, and social).

It is also regrettable that there is no chapter on visual images. Such a chapter could have been the correct place to discuss questions on the use and function of visual language, its change over time, the relationship between artist/craftsman and the viewer. Especially concerning the latter point, the so-called 'iconic turn' has produced new insightful and inspiring ideas concerning the interpretation of images and sculpture. Images are important vehicles for a variety of goals and refer (in)directly to social behaviour and intention, as is so impressively demonstrated by today's visual 'flooding'. Yet the editors were to an extent bound by the publisher's conditions, dictating that certain priorities had to be adhered to and focal points covered, thus partly excusing the omission of some other themes.

One issue that certainly will influence classical archaeology in the long run does not play a part in either of the books under review. I am referring to the recent geographical spread of research fields, which have expanded eastwards to a substantial degree. This is, in my opinion, due to the following reasons. The political shift following 1989 allowed an intensification of existing co-operations and easier acquisition of new projects in countries behind the former Iron Curtain. The financial and administrative aspect is also highly relevant. The high costs (of living,

local staff, fees and so on) and the introduction of restrictive administrative guidelines concerning approvals for the fieldwork of foreign schools in the 'traditional' countries of the classical world, favour a decision to work in those countries that still offer less complicated procedures, as well as less restrictive financial circumstances. Perhaps the often-mentioned adventurousness of archaeologists in discovering 'new land' might also be a relevant factor. The description 'nomad archaeology' comes to mind, which seems appropriate against the backdrop of today's globalized world.

From this arises another aspect: the political dimension of archaeology that is only marginally mentioned in either book. Anchoring of the *ethics of archaeology* in the general perception and strategies of classical archaeology has to be enforced and should become a self-evident subject in teaching. This should not only include newsworthy incidents such as the damaging raids during the Iraq war, lootings and the processes that accompany reclamation of (alleged) loot. Of equal relevance are less spectacular everyday disputes concerning reconstructions and archaeological tourism, as well as the financing of archaeological emergency digs in the context of major construction projects. Last but not least, the exploitation of archaeology by diverse interest groups must be considered along similar lines.

The diversity of classical archaeological research becomes more evident in the conference volume *Common Ground*, as its synopsis offers a comprehensive overview of the archaeological fields of work. *Classical Archaeology* offers useful queries and points of view to provide a good approach to the antique legacy. Thereby both books are complementary and constitute a good starting point for a student.

Classical archaeology today is much more than just being engaged in artwork. Out of the wide spectrum of archaeological methods and interpretations researchers can choose the ones that are adequate and fitting for their particular investigations. This choice is not only affected by personal interests, but also by the researcher's scientific socialization as well as the underlying success-orientated science-political strategy.

Franziska Lang  
Department of Classical Archaeology  
Technische Universität Darmstadt, Germany