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Reinventing History. The Enlightenment Origins of Ancient History

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This is a very interesting volume, which aims to bring together the variety of contexts and genres in which ancient history was employed and studied during the Enlightenment. The various articles included provide a strong argument for the need to reassess our historiographies, which tend to stress the revolutionary contribution of 19th-century giants like Niebuhr, Grote and Mommsen, in order to incorporate the originality and novelty of the Enlightenment contribution to the study of ancient history. Although the focus is on Britain, a number of articles also examine the connections between British and French scholarship as well as the wider European debates of the time. The volume also features a very useful bibliography of works on ancient history published during the Renaissance and the 18th century (pp. 291?9).

The introduction, by James Moore and Ian Macgregor Morris (pp. 3?29), surveys the place and role of classical antiquity in the scholarly world of the Enlightenment. It traces the variety of genres within which the study of ancient history was pursued, and the impact of different causes and ideas, like philhellenism, on the ways in which antiquity was perceived. It examines the connection between authors who dealt with antiquity and their literary and scholarly backgrounds; finally, it charts changes over time in the course of the 18th century, like the wider dissemination of archaeological materials and the easier access to the

Ottoman lands.

Doohwan Ahn examines the place of Xenophon in 18th-century British political thought (pp. 33?55). Ahn makes a strong case for the widespread influence of Xenophon?s work, while also showing that this influence took a number of very different and not necessarily compatible forms. He shows how Xenophon?s Cyrus served as a model of the ideal ruler in a number of works, most famous of which is Bolingbroke?s *Idea of a Patriot King* and makes the stimulating claim that this model of ruler was not necessarily incompatible with republicanism. The emerging field of political economy was another area where Xenophon proved particularly influential. For 18th-century thinkers and politicians in the process of constructing a genre that linked the state with economic activity, Xenophon?s pamphlet *Ways and Means*, which advised the Athenians how to deal with the fiscal and economic adversity of the middle of the 4th century BC, was a powerful weapon and an important source of inspiration.

Peter Liddel examines one largely neglected work: William Young?s *Spirit of Athens*, originally published in 1777 and republished in 1786 and 1804 (pp. 57?85). This is a very interesting work, because it is one of the earliest works devoted specifically to Athens, in an 18th-century intellectual climate which was almost obsessed with Sparta. As the very title of the work suggests, and as Liddel carefully maintains, Young was heavily influenced by Montesquieu?s *Spirit of Laws* and it is an attempt to combine a narrative history with an analysis of the political, economic and social factors that influenced the shape of Athenian history. Liddel examines how Young adopted many of Montesquieu?s ideas, like the principle of the separation of powers, in order to analyse the structure of Athenian politics. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of this work is how Young?s perspective of history seemed to move in a backward direction with each successive edition: from the attempt to write a philosophical history of Athens on Montesqueian principles in 1777 to a *historia magistra vitae* perspective in 1804. This certainly testifies to the complexity of historical attitudes during the Enlightenment.

John Seed discusses Gibbon?s linking of early Christians with Puritans and Dissenters in his *Decline and Fall* (87?112). Seed shows how Hume?s depiction of Puritanism in his *History of England* has deeply influenced the way Gibbon conceived early Christianity. Gibbon accepted Hume?s delineation of the dangers of religious fanaticism as evidenced in modern Puritanism and Dissent; even more, as Seed shows, the successive volumes of *Decline and Fall* have to be read in the context of the attempts by Dissenters in the last few decades of the 18th century to achieve the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts. The Gordon riots convinced Gibbon that the danger of a repeat of the dominance of Christian religious fanatics in late antiquity was imminent. Seed shows how the debate between Gibbon and the leading Dissenter Joseph Priestley illuminates the conception of the later volumes of Gibbon?s magnum opus.

Carsten Lange examines the ancient accounts of the Battle of Actium and the reconstructions of the battle in 18th-century scholarly literature (pp. 115?36). Already ancient sources present two opposing views of the course of the battle: according to one, Cleopatra betrayed Antonius by abandoning the battlefield and the ?slave of passion? lost the battle and universal rule in deciding to follow her; but according to another ancient source, the flight of Antonius and Cleopatra was part of a pre-arranged battle plan. Enlightenment scholars already engaged with source criticism and opted for one solution or the other based on their assessment of the sources, thus demonstrating that the scientific treatment of the sources was not unknown during the Enlightenment. Modern scholarship has overwhelmingly opted for the second option; but as Lange shows, not only does this view have its predecessors in the Enlightenment, but there are also good reasons for which modern research should opt for an alternative solution, which was already being expressed during the 18th century.

James Moore examines how 18th-century thinkers thought about ancient mythology and its importance for Enlightenment efforts to create a universal theory of religion (pp. 137?67). This is a particularly important topic, which has been unfortunately rather neglected, and Moore offers here a timely contribution. He focuses his article on the life and work of Baron D?Hancarville and the reception of his thought in late 18th- and early 19th-century Britain and Europe. D?Hancarville?s efforts to understand the iconography of Athenian vases and other ancient objects were informed by an analysis of the symbolism of myth.

D?Hancarvile?s sexual interpretation of myth had a rather limited reception, for various reasons that Moore examines; but the attempt to overcome the theory of the Biblical origins of religion in favour of a universal and natural form of religion was a widespread phenomenon in Enlightenment Europe and ancient myth and iconography played a significant role, as Moore reminds us, which deserves to be studied in more detail.

Malcolm Wagstaff studies the works of Colonel Leake and his contribution to the historical geography of Greece (pp. 169-183). Leake spent many years in Greece in a military-diplomatic capacity during the first two decades of the 19th century and he subsequently published his *Travels* to various parts of the country. These works combine, as Wagstaff shows, a traditional concern with identifying the ancient ruins with ancient settlements and sanctuaries preserved in classical texts, which Leake perfected to an extent which still inspires admiration to modern scholars, with a novel interest in the contemporary 19th-century circumstances and economic and political developments.

Gareth Sampson examines the Roman historical tradition during the 18th century (pp. 187?218). Sampson aims to challenge the view that the scientific study of Roman history originated with Gibbon and Niebuhr; on the contrary, he shows the extent to which 19th-century Roman historiography was dependent to its Renaissance and in particular Enlightenment predecessors. He examines exhaustively the different genres within which Enlightenment scholars studied Roman history and the key topics around which debate centred. Around 1700 the scene was dominated by antiquarian works focusing on the methodological problems of the reliability of early Roman history and the origins of Rome, or on specific aspects of Roman history, like the Roman magistracies. The second quarter of the century saw the emergence of the first large scale narratives of Roman history; as Sampson shows, the quality of these works diverged widely, but some of them, like the *Roman History* of Hooke, were pioneering in incorporating the insights of source criticism gained in the earlier methodological discussions into historical narrative. Finally, while already since Machiavelli Roman history played an important role in early modern political thought, it was mainly around the middle of the century that the great political works of Montesquieu, Mably and Rousseau put Roman history at the centre of the political debates of the Enlightenment and the French and American Revolutions. The complexity of Enlightenment writing on Roman history emerges as an important conclusion of this article.

Andrew Bayliss discusses the place of Macedonians in the historiography of the Enlightenment (pp. 219?46). His central argument is that the current purported marginalisation of Hellenistic history within the study of ancient Greece is the result of the racial and political prejudices of 19th-century scholars, with Niebuhr, Grote and Rawlinson singled out as the culprits: for them, Hellenistic history was not part of Greek history, the Macedonians were not Greeks, and the Hellenistic period had little worthy of historical interest. On the contrary, Bayliss argues, 18th-century historiography reserved a significant place for Hellenistic history and Hellenistic authors; Enlightenment historians largely accepted Macedonians as Greeks but not ?Grecians? (Bayliss makes an interesting distinction between ?Greeks? and ?Grecians? in Enlightenment parlance) and saw in the Hellenistic period a fascinating spectacle of the struggle to preserve freedom against the Romans. These are very interesting claims, but they are somewhat marred by the recurrent identification of 19th-century historiography with Grote and Niebuhr; other influential 19th-century scholars, like Droysen, Beloch and Meyer (not to mention Mahaffy), had very different views of the Macedonians and the Hellenistic period, but they are never mentioned in the article, thus creating a rather schematic distinction between 18th and 19th-century attitudes.

Finally, Ian Macgregor Morris re-examines the tradition of modern Histories of Greece from Tourreil to Grote (pp. 247?90). He argues persuasively that the modern construct of an 18th-century anti-democratic and anti-Athenian approach exemplified by Gillies and Mitford and a 19th-century pro-democratic and pro-Athenian one exemplified by Grote is the result of a polemical rewriting of history by Grote and other liberal reformers of the 19th century. By accepting Grote?s presentation of his 18th-century predecessors at face value, modern scholarship has greatly misinterpreted the works of Enlightenment scholars and underrated their originality, while understating Grote?s dependence on them. To an important extent, the problem is created by anachronistic application of concepts. As Macgregor Morris shows, during the 18th century criticising Athens was not tantamount to criticising democracy, as it would become in later times: in fact,

many 18th-century thinkers criticised Athens not for being a democracy, but for failing to be truly democratic in the way that they conceived of democracy. The portrayal of Gillies and Mitford as anti-democratic Tories is thus highly anachronistic and ultimately misleading. And Grote?s defence of Athenian democracy was no less a defence of those aspects which were compatible with his vision of liberal democracy. The virtues that Grote identified in Athens are often the same virtues that 18th-century authors identified in Sparta. This revision of Greek historiography is clearly very important, and despite some exaggerations, it will be required reading for any future reassessment of Greek historiography.

The summaries of the various papers indicate clearly the breadth and value of the volume at hand. This is the first volume that is devoted to the role of ancient history and the classical tradition in 18th-century Britain. In my view, the volume succeeds in raising three important issues. The first concerns the genres within which Enlightenment scholars pursued the study of the past. As the introduction argues, and the various papers show, there was a variety of different genres, which often followed their own rules and were often cultivated by different authors and catered for different clienteles. The authors discuss political pamphlets and tracts of political theory, works on political economy, antiquarian scholarship, travel literature, archaeological and mythological works, philosophical history and more traditional narrative history. The sheer extent of works in different genres testifies to the widespread presence of antiquity in Enlightenment debates.

Related to the first issue is the volume?s emphasis on the connection between authors, literary and scholarly circles and the public. Most of the 18th-century works produced in Britain which dealt with antiquity did not emanate from university circles: they were the product of amateur scholars who combined a number of different roles and identities and mingled in a number of different circles. In a world where scholarly interest in the past was not identified with academic position, the various links between the circles in which the authors operated and their relationship to the reading public were of the utmost importance, as the various papers demonstrate.

But perhaps the most important contribution of the volume is its challenge of the anachronistic perspective with which later scholars have approached the works of the 18th century. There is a widespread tendency to regard the great works of Niebuhr, Grote and Wolf as the beginnings of the scientific study of antiquity and to dismiss earlier scholarship as irrelevant, or at best as the mere ancestors of the truly scientific works of the 19th century. As various papers in this volume show, this is clearly untenable. Much of what passed as novel and scientific in the 19th century was already accomplished in the 18th, and even some of the most important discoveries attributed to 19th-century scholars, like Niebuhr?s discovery of the nature of the *ager publicus*, were already anticipated in the 18th century. Furthermore, there has also been a widespread tendency to read 18th-century works in the light of later ideas and associations that distort rather than illuminate 18th-century approaches: to give only one example, Macgregor Morris shows eloquently why it is wrong to associate anti-Athenian with anti-democratic views in an 18th-century context. Finally, many of the papers rightly stress that the historiographical production of the Enlightenment is not of mere antiquarian interest. In fact, there are many aspects and approaches of these works which were later abandoned or sidestepped by 19th- or 20th-century scholarship and which still merit the attention of modern historians: the 18th-century penchant for comparative history emerges as one characteristic example among many.

Let me finish this review with a crucial question that this book raises and which future research should attempt to explore. While it is clear that the volume makes a strong case about the innovative character of the study of ancient history during the 18th century, there seems to be no forthcoming explanation of why subsequent generations perceived a clear break with the works of German scholarship initiated by Wolf, Boeckh and Niebuhr. There is no doubt, as some contributors argue as well, that part of this distantiation was the result of self-advertisement by 19th-century scholars and the difference between an 18th-century British scholarly world centred on the amateur scholar and a 19th-century German and ultimately Continental academic world centred on the University professor. But these explanations are not sufficient in themselves; and if we accept this volume?s claim about the originality of 18th-century historiography, as we should, we still have to explain what was in fact original and novel in the 19th-century works of Grote or Niebuhr. One can see some glimpses of an answer in some of the papers: Sampson e.g. suggests that the

explanation of why contemporaries thought that Niebuhr had discovered the real nature of the *ager publicus* had less to do with earlier 18th-century scholarship, where the nature of the *ager publicus* was clearly recognised, and more to do with a spate of political pamphlets around the time of the French Revolution which consciously blurred the distinction between public and private land in Rome. In other words, we have to pay much more attention to the contemporary settings and the reception of earlier works, rather than merely indicating that earlier works had already anticipated an idea or applied a technique. But these are issues we shall be debating for a long time, and this volume will be an important asset in this respect.

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