Chapter 1

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Has Classical Antiquity Ever Ended?
Reception, Memory, and Cultural Evolution

Classicists working on the *Nachleben* of classical Greco-Roman literature commonly argue that ancient ideas and stories have 'shaped' modern Western culture and that they 'pervade' every part of it.[1] Even the name of the continent Europe itself is explained to be a reminiscence of the ancient Greek myth of Zeus abducting Europe, the daughter of Agenor.[2] Thus, it is argued, it is important to know the origins of our culture in order to understand its present shape. As the reader of this very book, you will probably agree with this perception or, at least, share a similar view.

In fact, this is only one side of the medal. The other side is the unfortunate truth that almost all those who are not classicists manage to live very well without having any idea about ancient mythology, literature, or history. Some associate the name of 'Apollo' not with the god of oracles, healing, arts and sunlight, but with NASA's moon mission. Others watch movies like Wolfgang Peterson's *Troy* (2004) or Zack Snyder's *300* (2007) without ever having heard of Homer or Herodotus. For them, the word 'odyssey' denotes 'a long wandering or voyage usually marked by many changes of fortune' rather than the epic poem the word stems from.[3] The best known 'Homer' is probably not the allegedly blind bard, about whom even classicists, albeit in a different way, do not know very much, but the protagonist of the American animated sitcom *The Simpsons*, Homer Simpson. One of the world's currently most valuable brands may be called *Amazon*, nevertheless our packages we buy on their website are not delivered to our homes by furious women warriors but by modern day mail carriers. One can walk around

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1   See, e.g., Demandt (2012: 89): 'Fragt man: "Was verdankt Europa der Antike?", so lautet die kürzeste und treffendste Antwort: "sich selbst"'; or Möller (2016: 100): 'Wer die moderne europäische Kultur begreifen will, der kommt an Ovid nicht vorbei.'

2   See, e.g., Demandt (2012: 89) or Möller (2016: 3–5).

3   *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary* ([2024]: s. v. 'odyssey').

whistling catchy tunes from Jacques Offenbach's *Orphée aux enfers* (1858) or one can pogo dance to Iggy Pop's *American Caesar* (1993) without recalling ancient mythology or history. Reminiscences of antiquity may be everywhere, but it is not necessary at all to understand them as such.

Some scholars even talk about 'memory' of ancient times and assume that it forms 'cultural identity'.[4] Let's face the facts once again. The moments when a nation feels most 'united' in present times is not when a new movie on their early historical predecessors enters the cinema screen, but during the football world cup.[5] In Germany, most people remember the 2014 semi-final in which Germany defeated Brazil with 7–1, but they do not 'remember' Arminius's victory over Varus in the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest.[6] As they have not experienced this event of 9 AD, there is in fact nothing to 'remember'. In contrast to what scholars on *lieux de mémoire* believe, a monument, nowadays, is not a reminder of the history that shaped our present 'identity', but it is rather an occasion for a history lesson itself. How can cultural heritage then shape 'national identity'? When Richard Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* (1876), which is an adaptation of the 13th century *Song of the Nibelungs*, was staged at the Opera Bonn in 1999 by Siegfried Schoenbohm with Siegfried fighting an excavator instead of a dragon,[7] the audience might have been surprised about such an interpretation, but they most probably wouldn't have related it to their so-called national hero Siegfried in any way.[8] They wouldn't even have experienced 'common identity' with the stranger sitting next to them. One may keep in mind that I am talking about people who are so educated that they visit opera houses – outside such elite circles there is certainly even less identification with centuries-old foundations of their cultural surrounding: If we take a step outside humanities departments and ask random people how much their lives are indebted to Achilles, Aeneas, or Zeus in his bull costume, most people won't understand the question at all. The truth may be painful, but in the real world there is no 'common Western identity' formed by 'memory' of ancient history or myth.[9]

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4   See, e.g., the collections of national and transnational *lieux de mémoire* by Nora (1984–1993), François/Schulze (2001), den Boer et al. (2012), and others. On the problems behind terms like 'cultural memory' and 'collective identity' see Chaniotis (2009).

5   The importance of football in the formation of 'cultural identity' is highlighted by Gebauer (2001).

6   However, Arminius is considered a *lieu de mémoire* by Doye (2001).

7   See Schmöe (1999).

8   On the Nibelungs and Wagner see Wapnewski (2001) and Münkler (2001).

9   Thus, most topics do not meet the criterion for a *lieu de mémoire* as it was formulated by den Boer et al. (2012: I 10), that not only the academic elite, but a broader mass should consider it a piece of common heritage ('ein Punkt im Ablauf der Geschichte, an dem sich positiv oder negativ besetzte Erinnerung breiterer, nicht nur elitärer Schichten kristallin verfestigt und eine Idee von etwas Gemeinsamem – einem gemeinsamen Erbe – entstehen lässt').

However, if ancient history and mythology are declared to be supposedly meaningless for the understanding of the present world and considered some kind of very special knowledge limited to a small number of people, what is the purpose of this book? Even if we reject the idea that common people experience any feeling of common identity with their predecessors or contemporaries by the consumption of cultural artifacts, we still cannot deny that time moves on not century by century, but day by day. At every moment in time, the great mass of people alive, be it worldwide or in our hometowns, has been identical, or at least very similar, to the mass of people alive at the previous moment.[10] The single elements of a group's shared knowledge mostly stay the same from one moment to the next. Somehow, single persons learn new things sometimes and pass them on in conversations with their peer group so that the new information may or may not spread. Some pieces of information are spread regularly and therefore widely, others fall into oblivion quite soon. By passing on information orally, it is generally altered in some way; the small alteration may or may not be passed on further. Thus, time and knowledge develops from one point of time to the next. This process of transmission consisting of selecting information, passing it on, and rendering it anew in some detail is nothing but an evolutionary process applied not to genetic but to cultural information.[11] The first one to have transferred evolutionary theory to cultural processes was Charles Darwin himself, speaking about the evolution of languages, followed by his son George H. Darwin analyzing the 'Development in Dress'.[12] In 1976, Richard Dawkins coined the term 'meme' to define the cultural equivalent of a 'gene' that is transmitted by selection, imitation, and variation.[13] Henry Plotkin, laying ground for the term 'univer-

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10 See, e.g., Kallendorf (2007: 1): 'There is, of course, no one moment when antiquity can be said to have ended, and as institutions, values, and cultures moved gradually away from Greece and Rome, it took many years – centuries, actually – for people to see that they were living in a fundamentally different society'; further see Martindale (1990: 49): 'Consider the audience for French poetry on 1 January of, say, 1650: it consisted of a group of people varying in age, not of a cadre that could in any sense be considered as constituting a generation. Consider the same audience on 2 January 1650. Perhaps several members had died, but they had probably been replaced by several new members. The vast majority of the audience remained the same. Whatever habituation occurred for *them* on 1 January continued on 2 January. New members had either to catch up with or be dragged along by this process. They were in such a minority that they could not influence taste in the slightest. The same situation has existed on every day since 1 January of 1650 to today.'

11 See Campbell (1960), Dawkins (2016 [1976]: 245–260), Plotkin (1994: 59–101), Dennett (1995: 48–52), Blackmore (1999: 10–23).

12 See Ch. Darwin (1859: 126–127; 1874 [1871]: 90–92), G. H. Darwin (1872).

13 Dawkins (2016 [1976]: 249): 'We need a name for the new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of *imitation*. "Mimeme" comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like "gene". I hope my classicist friends will forgive me if I abbreviate mimeme to meme. If it is any condolence, it

sal Darwinism', went so far as to state that the evolutionary algorithm could have equally been discovered in any other discipline and then applied to biology as well.[14] Susan Blackmore finally suspected memes to be not only a by-product of the evolution of the human brain, but the driving force behind its incommon growth compared to its size in chimpanzees and other near relatives of ours.[15] Nowadays, after the term 'meme' seems to have been forgotten for about a decade, it came to life anew denoting internet phenomena which are shared and altered, some more often than others – Dawkins himself is pretty content with the internet's 'hi-jacking' of his term.[16]

Considering pieces of cultural information performing their own evolutionary process using humans as their vehicle, we can finally contend that ancient literature has preserved a very large treasure of stories and ideas that have proven to be very successful in their 'struggle for existence'. Before 1960, no one associated Apollo with flying to the moon. However, due to a single person's idea of naming the spaceflight program aimed to fly humans to the moon after Diana's (the moon godessess') brother *Apollo*, it is now linked to the ancient god's name forever. Even if people associate 'Apollo' to *Apollo 11*'s commander Neil Armstrong or to Tom Hanks, starring Jim Lovell in the movie *Apollo 13* (1995), this should not be considered an indicator of the decline in education – it is just another piece of information that has entered the 'meme complex' associated with 'Apollo'. In a few years, *Artemis* will gain equal popularity as a NASA spaceflight program rather than as a Greek goddess.

It is not necessarily a whole mythological story or a whole historical account of an event that enters reception and thus receives a *Nachleben*, but it is always single elements that can be re-combined as any creator of cultural artifacts wants. This is what happened when Callimachus, Apollonius of Rhodes, and other Alexandrean authors created 'prequels' to the then standard versions of myths, this is equally what happened when several European courts legitimated their power by some ancestry from fictitious Trojan heroes; and lastly this is what is happening now when creators of novels, plays, songs, movies, comic books, video games and other media select what they consider worth a good story. In this sense, antiquity is still in progress. We are constantly surrounded by our history because we are part of it. We are, in some way, still cultural descendants of ancient Greeks: Pythagoras, Euclid, and Archimedes did lay the ground for *Apollo* flying to the moon, they just did not know it. In the same way, modern scientists need

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could alternatively be thought of as being related to "memory", or to the French word *même*. It should be pronounced to rhyme with "cream".'

14 See Plotkin (1994: 73–78).
15 See Blackmore (1999: 74–81).
16 See Solon and Dawkins (2013).

not be aware of their ancient predecessors to do their work. They are surrounded by contemporary popular culture, just as ancient scientists have been.

Although none of the following chapters draws on this 'memetic' model of eclectic reception with variation, it can be regarded as a common basis that lies behind the several approaches taken by their authors.[17]

Abstracts of the book's chapters

In his article on Marvel's *Silver Surfer* Chris Bishop (Chapter 2) suggests that in a culture saturated by a multitude of receptions, creators of new artworks are often unaware of their ancient predecessors and the mere presence of classical ideas can lead to 'unconscious reception'. It is also common that, instead of the present being shaped by the past, the representation of ancient myth-historical events is adapted to modern day circumstances. This is what Hanna Paulouskaya argues in her article (Chapter 3) where she shows how the myth of the Argonauts in Soviet cinema and TV is capable of successfully following the guidelines of Socialist Realism. She will argue that new pieces of information can be connected to elements of ancient culture to such an extent that a 'new mythology' arises which needs not to have any basis in ancient sources. Fabien Bièvre-Perrin, in his article on Nefertiti (Chapter 4), shows how this Egyptian Queen is now more and more preferred to the relatively trite figure of Cleopatra as an icon of women's empowerment by popular culture, particularly African-American, who see in her an African ancestor. Like Cleopatra, one of the reasons for her success lies in her position at the crossroads of Mediterranean cultures: the Amarna style of her famous bust makes her more compatible with the codes of classical culture than traditional Egyptian art. Anna Maria Cimino, in her article (Chapter 5), focuses on the re-reading of classical imagery by the Italian Resistance Movement, emphasizing how the *Aeneid* inspired not only the literary production of Postwar Italy but also its popular culture and the repertoires of familiar and private memory. In particular, she shows that the ninth book of the *Aeneid* – adopted as a literary model by famous authors, such as Beppe Fenoglio and Giorgio Caproni – also inspired Massimo Bubola's 1993 rock ballad 'Eurialo e Niso', thus making possible a process of 're-semantization' of Classical Antiquity in opposition to the political uses of Vergil's poetry pursued by the Fascist Regime. In her article on Conall Morrison's version of Sophocle's *Antigone,* Natasha Remoundou (Chapter 6) analyses how the play, set in the Middle East in 2003, can be read as a retelling of the Palestinian struggle and examines alternative critical trajectories of political resistance, 'savage' remembering, and the representation of the rightlessness of racialized or gendered others on the contemporary Western, especially

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17 The following abstracts have been sketched by M. Stachon and A. Lipscomb, and approved or reworked by the chapters' authors.

Irish, stage through the prism of Achille Mbembe's theory of necropower. AARON
SEIDER's article (Chapter 7) focuses on two 21st century adaptations of Greco-
Roman epic, Kae Tempest's *Brand New Ancients* and Tessa Hadley's 'Dido's La-
ment'. He argues that both *Brand New Ancients* and 'Dido's Lament' foreground
their reimagination of the relationship between memory and gender and, in doing
so, showcase the newfound agency with which the works' non-male characters
and authors create memory and contest it. IRENE (RENA) FATSEA's article (chapter
8) focuses upon the contribution of famous Dane architect Theophil von Hansen
to an important plan: to build his very professional agenda upon the idealized no-
tion of *hellenism* conceived as an ecumenical project. By critically discussing and
analyzing Hansen's exemplary building of the Athenian Academy as a *lieu de
mémoire*, i.e. a product of history's self-conscious mechanism of generating new
meaning, the article argues for the poetic qualities of this building which elevated
it to the status of an international monument of romantic classicism. Furthermore,
it presents it as a thick symbol of the new country's reconstitution in which mem-
ory, drawing on her antique inheritance, legitimized it as one of Greece's most
prestigious and endeared national monuments. In her article on Picasso's illustra-
tions of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* SOPHIE EMILIA SEIDLER (Chapter 9) explores how
the artist's re-reading of the canonized pretext represents a modernist mediation
of classical myth as a living organism offering various ways of transferring an-
tiquity to a different age, public and artistic medium. HELENA GONZÁLEZ-VAQUE-
RIZO (Chapter 10) analyses how today's tourists' photographs of Greece are still
reproducing typical motives from the early days of photography in the 19th cen-
tury, when Ancient Greece has been idealized as the cradle of Western Culture. In
her article she argues that such a continuity in representation makes it hard for
contemporary Greek culture to get out of its history's shadow. On the other hand,
Greek mythology is employed to bring an unusual landscape feature to life, as
RICCARDO GINEVRA shows in his article on the Gurfa Caves near the town of Alia
in Central Sicily (Chapter 11), where the modern adaptation of an ancient myth is
linked with issues of touristic economy, environmentalism, and local identity.
JOSÉ MANUEL LOSADA, in his theoretical essay (Chapter 12), proposes a coherent
academic definition of 'myth', examines the impact of various contemporary fac-
tors that significantly affect the reception of myths, and describes the principal
functions of mythological texts. Finally, he concludes by detailing the methodo-
logical criteria for Cultural Myth Criticism, ensuring a structured approach to the
discipline.[18]

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18 This project, much like a protean myth in progress, has evolved over the past few years, tak-
    ing various paths until reaching its current form. The majority of the participants first came
    together in 2017 when Penelope Kolovou (Bonn) and Efstathia Athanasopoulou (Patras) ini-
    tiated and organized the international *Classical Antiquity & Memory* Conference at the Uni-
    versity of Bonn. Subsequently – upon invitation by Penelope Kolovou – Antonella Lips-

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