TRAJ | THEORETICAL ROMAN ARCHAEOLOGY JOURNAL

Dozier, Curtis. 2025. Beerden, Kim and Timo Epping (eds). 2022. *Classical Controversies: Reception of Greco-Roman Antiquity in the Twenty-First Century*. Leiden: Sidestone Press; 978-94-6427-036-5 paperback €35 digital Open Access. *Theoretical Roman Archaeology Journal* 8(1): 1–5. DOI: https://doi.org/10.16995/traj.24329

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Book Review

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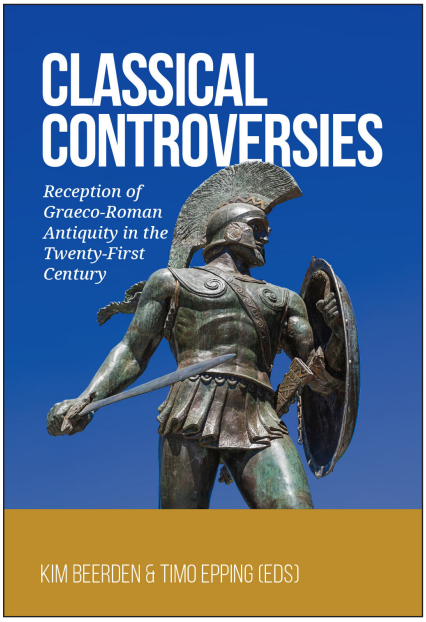

This volume collects eleven chapters that present scholarly perspectives on the relationship between twenty-first century politics and Greco-Roman Antiquity. Some chapters focus on the deployment of ancient symbols in support of particular political positions (primarily, but not exclusively, reactionary or 'far right'). Others treat the politics of the study of the subject, or those implicit in popular attitudes toward the ancient Mediterranean world. Each chapter may be read with profit by those interested in its particular topic, but since the publisher has made the book freely available to read online, I forego summaries of individual chapters and refer readers to each chapter's useful abstract and the volume's introduction (p. 11–13). In this review, I focus on the contribution the volume makes as a whole to the question of the relationship of history, scholarship, Classical reception and contemporary politics. The refreshingly activist tone of the volume, and the contributors' willingness to treat 'recent receptions' that others might avoid for fear their analyses might become dated or irrelevant is as welcome in 2025 as it was innovative at the time of the volume's publication in 2022. This is especially the case as illiberal and authoritarian political parties continue to attract increasing support and electoral success in the United States, Europe and elsewhere.

I begin with the volume's treatment of an issue that is fundamental to anyone who, like me, studies how white nationalists, misogynists and other hateful movements invoke Greco-Roman Antiquity to legitimize their politics, namely, the relationship between what might be termed 'historical truth' and the political uses to which Greco-Roman Antiquity has been, and is being, put (disclosure: one of the contributors to this volume, Stephen Hodkinson, has contributed to the website where I document examples of such appropriations).[1] Müller's chapter on classicism in European Identitarian movements addresses this most directly, arguing that such appropriations should be understood as 'pop-cultural' rather than historical, but several other chapters engage the question. Both Janssen and Gay analyze contemporary invocations of Antiquity across a wide range of political ideologies — Janssen focusing on the Roman persecution of Christians, and Gay on Virgil's *Aeneid* as a narrative of immigration. Both discussions reveal that all such invocations, including progressive ones, have to suppress aspects of ancient history; both suggest that it is the political orientations of those invoking this history, and not that history itself, that conditions such invocations.

The collective message to historians is, I fear, no more encouraging than the current geopolitical climate as I write this review (Spring 2025). None of the chapters embraces the heroic and well-considered effort of Naerebout's introduction to demarcate the objective practice of history from a politicized form. Instead, the chapters collectively, if sometimes indirectly, suggest that scholarly approaches to political receptions of Antiquity that seek to correct errors are, at best, incomplete because they presume a distinction between history and politics that the pervasiveness over time and political variability of such appropriations renders moot. Indeed, in their chapter on political appropriations of Sparta in Sweden, Siapkas and Sjösvärd determine that several decades of critical scholarship on Sparta, undertaken as a response to the rhetorical use of Sparta by Nazi sympathizers (including academics) during neighboring Finland's period of collaboration with Germany, did little to change public perceptions of Sparta. Half a century later, the conception of Sparta that this scholarship sought to correct has resurfaced, as Siapkas and Sjösvärd show, as a potent rhetorical tool for xenophobic politics in the twenty-first century.

It is worth pondering why this might be. On my reading, one explanation might be found in Gay's chapter. His analysis shows that both progressive and anti-immigration activists suppress aspects of the *Aeneid* in their invocations of it, but to me, at least, the latter find a stronger footing in the ancient text than those who deploy it in support of extending welcome to refugees. However attractive it may be to characterize Aeneas and the Trojans as immigrants or even 'refugees', they brought violence and political upheaval to the inhabitants of Italy, thus providing historical fodder for Islamophobic political commentators who claim that contemporary African and Middle Eastern

migrants will do the same. Naerebout's impassioned call in his introduction to 'stop the steal' of history by conservative and reactionary political ideologues seems to underestimate the possibility that the material preserved in the 'Classical canon', by nature of the political perspectives of those who generated it and preserved it, is inescapably more congenial to reactionary politics than to anything the contributors to the volume might endorse. If this is so, it explains the apparent durability of such perceptions of Greco-Roman Antiquity, not just among illiberal activists but among the broader public.

These public perceptions of Greco-Roman Antiquity are, in my view, the other major, if implicit, theme of this collection, and the one that links the essays on 'far right' or 'extremist' appropriations of Greco-Roman Antiquity to the other chapters that treat more mainstream and institutional perspectives and contexts. Hodkinson's chapter documenting the association between Spartan militarism and idealized masculinity and violence in the United States links far right and mainstream attitudes most explicitly, noting that scholarship criticizing the alleged militarization of Spartan society has unintentionally strengthened the public's (false, as Hodkinson has argued elsewhere) perception of Sparta as a uniquely militaristic state, and of its hoplite warriors as uniquely skilled. The same theme animates Holler's chapter on what might seem at first blush to be a quite different topic: representations of Classical scholars in popular novels such as Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain*. Holler shows that these and the other novels reproduce the assumption that Classical scholars are (and so 'should be') male, white and wealthy, a finding that is significant for its suggestion that however much the discipline might embrace diversity, the reading public will continue to associate it with narrowly-defined identities and, more significantly, the political investments those imply: the naturalization of whiteness and the maintenance of heteronormative patriarchy. From these associations, the volume as a whole suggests, the rioters who attacked the United States Capitol on January 6th, 2021 (some of them wearing Spartan helmets or waving *Molon Labe* flags, as Hodkinson's chapter documents) and readers of popular novels with classicist protagonists might develop surprisingly similar understandings of the political significance of the Greco-Roman world.

This tension between academic and popular attitudes toward Antiquity is particularly salient in the essays in the second half of the volume that treat the display and contextualization of material culture for museum- and site-going publics. For example, Kret's recommendation that displays of artifacts relating to Greco-Roman death should emphasize differences between contemporary and ancient burial practices recognizes that such an approach cuts against the grain of public assumptions (informed, primarily, by Christianity) about how death is and should be experienced.

Claes' chapter notes how commercial considerations shape the study, preservation and display of a Roman road that crosses four modern nations (the so-called *Via Belgica*): the popular attraction of this road derives from its symbolic association with questions of modern identity formation that archaeologists would like to complicate, but that governmental funding agencies and modern site visitors remain invested in. More explicit consideration of the pressures that public perceptions of Greco-Roman Antiquity place on institutions might have enriched the other two chapters in this section: van den Berg argues that Leiden's National Museum of Antiquities should integrate queer narratives, figures and experiences into its galleries focused on Greco-Roman Antiquity, and Soliman critiques the same museum's use, in its children's programs, of a popular book (*Dummie de Mummie*) that reproduces and propagates derogatory, orientalizing attitudes toward Egypt and, by extension, the Arab world. These are two of the more compelling chapters in the volume for their conviction and explicit articulation of the political stakes in the reforms they advocate, but neither sufficiently considers the significance of the popularity of the approaches they seek to modify or abandon, and what the consequences of doing so might be to the institution, whether in terms of government funding, ticket-sales or reputation.

I am conscious that I make this critique of a book published in Europe in 2022 from the vantage point of the United States in 2025. Van den Berg cites the Dutch 'Diversity and Inclusion Code' as the source of the guiding principles for queering the museum. The existence of such a code provides powerful endorsement of and justification for programs such as van den Berg advocates, however attached the museum-going public might be to traditional presentations. But the current, popularly elected, United States government has rescinded such policies and has threatened retaliation against institutions that continue to pursue 'diversity and inclusion', revealing the fragility of such initiatives. I leave to my European colleagues to assess whether such a backlash is possible within their own national contexts.

What, then, is our role as academics if, as some chapters in the volume suggest, scholarship has very little ability to alter public perceptions of the past, and if even institutions such as museums that speak directly to the public must take into account those perceptions? Part of our impotence derives, the volume as a whole suggests, from a misplaced focus on the remains of the past without regard for the politics of the present. If we find it difficult to change public perceptions, it is in large part because such perceptions reflect the politically comfortable attitudes of the dominant culture. Very often dominant cultures find racism, exclusion of outsiders, relegation of women to second-class status, and nationalistic triumphalism comfortable, because such attitudes ratify and uphold existing (inequitable, violent) structures of power and

resource distribution. Historical scholarship that directs itself explicitly and primarily toward these modern realities, might, over time, be more efficacious than that which makes accurate understanding of the past its primary focus.

The volume's collective argument concerning the role that historians ought to take in the face of the entanglement of dominant, popular narratives concerning Greco-Roman Antiquity with illiberal and reactionary politics is, I fear, not evident from its title or the cover image showing the monumental sculpture of Leonidas in modern-day Sparta. A cover showing one of the most beloved Classical symbols of extremist movements might reasonably be taken to mean that the volume's title refers to the political receptions of Classics that many chapters analyze. But for such receptions, the word 'controversy' is very often inapt. The January 6th attack on the United States Capitol, at which, as Hodkinson's chapter describes, several different symbols drawn from Classical Sparta were displayed, is not 'controversial'; it can only be regarded, to my mind, as a violent assault on democratic institutions fueled by conspiracy theories and white supremacist ideology. No, the best chapters in the volume do not document controversy: they seek to create it, by challenging the deeply entrenched, comfortable attitudes that make Greco-Roman Antiquity so appealing to hateful and violent actors. By providing examples of such interventions, this volume provides a valuable starting point for those who wish to cultivate this scholarly mode as a contribution to the creation of a better world.

Classical Controversies is attractively produced, with several full-color images; the editors and press are to be praised for publishing the collection open-access. I noticed several typographical errors, but only a few that affect comprehension of the text (one of the instances of 'intentionally' on p. 163 should be 'unintentionally') and a few needing correction in the notes: the book by Bolton cited on p. 24, note 42 was published in 2017; the graphic novel that inspired the film *300* was written by Frank, not Stephen, Miller (p. 27); Roche's first name is spelled 'Helen' (p. 89); Zuckerberg's *Not All Dead White Men* was published in 2018 (p. 115, note 96).

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Note

[1] https://pharos.vassarspaces.net/ (Last accessed: 2 July 2025).