

The impoverishment of the past: the case of classical Greece

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'Dear dead women, with such hair, too – what's become of all the gold?'

ROBERT BROWNING, 'A toccata of Galuppi's'

What became of most of the Classical gold and silver, argues Michael Vickers, is that it went into the melting pot, with exceptions like the Sevso treasure recently brought to public spectacle. Classical ceramics, more commonplace and with nil potential for recycling, have been luckier in their survival. Those accidents of later history need to be remembered as Classical Greece is envisaged; and it is perhaps even more important to bear in mind the reasons why many students of antiquity have until recently chosen to downplay the rôle of precious metal.

The material culture of classical antiquity has been the object of serious study ever since the Renaissance, if not before. But the very word 'classical' has been a source of no little confusion, in that it has a specific reference to Greece and Rome on the one hand, and a general reference to enduring aesthetic values on the other. The respect in which the artistic, literary and philosophical fruits of Greco-Roman civilization were held over a long period was clearly the source of the more general meaning of the word. There is, however, a danger that modern cultural values might be unconsciously confused with, or even imposed upon, antiquity. An obvious case is provided by the widespread belief, resulting from the way the relevant material has survived, that in antiquity marble sculpture was white, any paint having been lost through the ravages of time. As a result, people today often feel uncomfortable when they see casts painted to appear as the originals did in antiquity, or when (as in one of the pediments of the Philadelphia Art Museum) statues are painted in natural colours.

There need be no problem about 'classical' so long as we are clear in our own minds whether we are discussing what actually happened in ancient Greece, or are choosing to view anti-

quity according to later principles of aesthetic or moral propriety. This distinction is not always made, but a failure to make it can only lead to misunderstanding. If we consider polychromy and gilding in their ancient context, they can be accounted for by the proximity of Greece to eastern exemplars of taste and fashion. Athens was a singularly well-placed Iron Age hill fort with an eventful and well documented history, but it has come to be regarded in the eyes of some as the unsullied fount of art and culture. Its rôle as one of the founders of the western tradition has tended both to obscure the debt owed by Greece to its eastern neighbours (but see e.g. Bernal 1987), and to conceal the real differences between the modern world and antiquity.

Archaeologists of whatever persuasion frequently find themselves making aesthetic judgements regarding the material remains of the past. Whenever a prehistorian speaks of a 'fine Bell Beaker' or a 'handsome hand-axe' he risks confusing modern perceptions, perhaps derived unconsciously from the language of sale catalogues, with what people living in prehistoric times may have thought. The danger of confusing how artefacts seem to us and how they appeared to those who knew them in their

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own times is especially great in the field of classical archaeology, for it is undeniably the case that certain categories of Greek and Roman relics have been among the most highly valued (in aesthetic, scholarly and financial terms) of all artistic traditions. Small wonder that it is often difficult to separate our respect for the inherent beauty of some of these objects, the long traditions of scholarship associated with them, and the high prices they fetch in the sale rooms, from their rôle in antiquity. Such a separation is, however, vital if we are to seek a valid understanding of ancient Greece, rather than create yet another myth to reinforce the view that ancient Greeks were enlightened connoisseurs like us.

There is nothing unusual in reversals of taste, or even in the complete invention of categories of collecting. Today's attitude to earlier pictures and bygone would probably amaze contemporary observers and consumers. W.P. Frith's *Derby Day* (FIGURE 1) was the most popular painting at the Royal Academy exhibition of 1858, with 'a policeman employed to keep people off' (Frith 1957: 93). Who today makes a point of going to see it in the Tate? Similarly, French Academic painting was highly regarded during the closing decades of the 19th century; by contrast, today's highest prices are paid for the works of the Impressionists who enjoyed little esteem at the time. No 19th-century connoisseur would have considered collecting barbed wire or medicine bottles, whereas today they both have their fancy (Clifton 1970

(whence FIGURE 2); Ketchum 1985). The mechanisms whereby one person's junk becomes another's 'collectible' (Smith 1979) can be both bizarre (Reitlinger 1963, vol. 2) and complex (Thompson 1979), as are the means whereby perfectly ordinary objects such as duck-decoys, patchwork quilts or Shaker furniture are elevated by arbiters of taste to the status of *objets d'art*.

Nor can there be anything wrong with such reappraisals; indeed they are the very stuff from which art history is made (e.g. Haskell 1976). Nor should we criticize unduly those who see an opening and succeed in filling it (*cf.* Behrman 1953). Nor can any blame be attached to those who treat as art objects things which contemporary consumers would have passed over without a second thought. Problems only arise when, in the manner of *Motel of the Mysteries* (Macaulay 1979), present regard is confused with historical reality. Few archaeological disciplines can escape the influence of the present over the past, but the situation is especially acute in classical archaeology. Here, workers have too often sought, not so much to describe and analyse the place of pottery, sculpture and metalwork in the ancient scheme of things, as to impose on classical Greece attitudes and values which have their origins in later periods.

This can perhaps best be illustrated by reference to the way in which gold and silver plate has been regarded by students of classical Greece. Until recently, it was believed that 'for



FIGURE 1. *Derby Day* by W.P. Frith. (Courtesy of the Tate Gallery, London.)

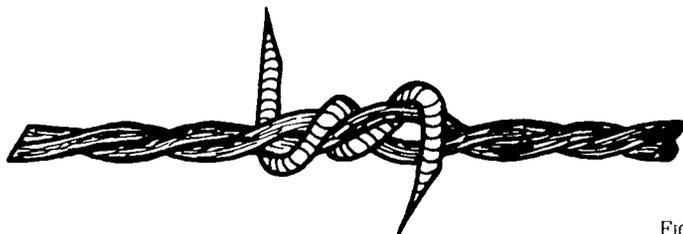


FIGURE 2. Barbed wire (Clifton 1970: 113).

most of the fifth century no plate was manufactured for private domestic use in Greece' (Strong 1966: 74), and even that a fear of *hubris* inhibited such use of gold and silver (Strong 1964). It might be suggested in all seriousness that individuals in antiquity might value equally a golden *phiale* and a pottery cup (Beazley 1947: 158), or that painted ceramic might be regarded as 'best plate' (Boardman 1980: 17). There has been a change of late, and it is now allowed that Greek élites regularly used plate at their symposia (Vickers 1985a; Robertson 1985: 29; Gill 1986; Boardman 1987: 289; Cook 1987: 170; Gill & Vickers in press). The interesting question, however, is why it should have taken so long for such a shift to have occurred, and why there should ever have been any discrepancy at all between the values of pre-Christian antiquity and those of many recent students of the material remains of the classical past.

Frederick Ahl has noted in another context that 'we don't laugh, at least openly, at the absurdities of Aristotle's physics or biology, because if we are to grasp Aristotle's thought and times, we know we must see why he thought as he did, not make fun of him for doing so' (Ahl 1988: 42), and T.M. Leary quite properly enjoins the modern reader of Ovid to 'put aside his own expectations and literary values and try to put on those of someone living in the high society of Augustan Rome' (Leary 1988: 140). Students of Greek religion have a similar approach; they treat the religious beliefs of the societies they study with respect. Without themselves accepting those beliefs, they try to understand the attitudes and values of people in the past (e.g. Burkert 1985; Vernant 1983; Parker 1983; Durand 1986; Sourvinou-Inwood 1988).

Why should students of the material culture of Greek antiquity ever have taken a different standpoint? Why should they have turned ancient values on their head, and ignored or under-

estimated the ancient regard for precious metal? The answer lies, I believe, in the intellectual tradition of antiquarian studies during the past few centuries. There are several strands, the most obvious of which are Utopianism, Puritanism, Positivism, Utilitarianism and Nationalism.

In 1516, Thomas More painted in his *Utopia* a picture of a society whose way of life contrasted strongly with that of the court of Henry VIII, a society in which 'plates and drinking vessels, though beautifully designed, are made of quite cheap stuff like glass and earthenware', whereas 'silver and gold are the normal materials, in private houses as well as in communal dining-halls, for the humblest items of domestic equipment, such as chamber-pots. They also use chains and fetters of gold to immobilise slaves, and anyone who commits a really shameful crime is forced to go about with gold rings on his ears and fingers, a gold necklace round his neck, and a crown of gold on his head. In fact they do everything they can to bring these metals into contempt' (Turner 1965: 86–7).

That More's conceit was regarded as scandalous by many is clear from Andrea Alciati's famous emblem of 100 years later, entitled 'Those who sin against Nature' (Alciati 1621: 353; cf. Heckscher 1981: 291–311; 1985: 481–501), in which a naked man empties his bowels into a golden vessel, while an earthenware pitcher and a glass goblet stand on a table (FIGURE 3). There were, however, those who accepted this challenge to current material values. Pierre Ronsard, for example, wrote an ode to glass in a poem which, formally at least, is an imitation of Pindar. Yet whereas for Pindar 'gold gleameth more brightly than all other lordly wealth' (Pindar *Olympian Ode* 1.1), Ronsard recites a long list of mythical battles which broke out over gold. He contrasts it with the simplicity of glass in a reversal of Pindar's scale of values (Silver 1967: 346–7):

Aduersus naturam peccantes.

EMBLEMA LXXX:



FIGURE 3. 'Those who sin against nature' (Alciati 1621: 353).

Mai toy verre joly ... tu es plus agréable qu'un vaisseau d'or, lourd fardeau de la table.

But you, pretty glass, ... you are more acceptable than the gold vessel which oppresses the table.

We now find ourselves in an age in which many of the things More described in his 'blue-print ... for a perfect society' (Turner 1965: 13) have come to pass. There are many who sincerely believe that 'it is foolish of men to desire barren metal, ... wicked of men to cheat and bully one another for so empty a reward' (Croome 1956: 13). Who does not eat and drink from ceramic and glass? Not only does it become progressively more difficult to appreciate the change in values since the 16th century, but it requires a great effort of the imagination to envisage a world which had not gone off the Gold Standard, and still possessed the values which More wished to challenge.

In the kind of society which More and others criticized, relative poverty might be disguised by the show, if not the reality, of wealth. Pliny, a Puritan *avant la lettre*, was very much at odds with the prevalent luxury of imperial Rome. Amongst many other things, he found offensive

the use of veneer, 'of covering up one tree with another and making an outside skin for a cheaper wood out of a more expensive one' (Pliny *Natural History* 16.223). Even more so, the practice of 'causing turtle shell to lose its natural appearance by means of paints and to fetch a higher price by imitating exotic wood' (Pliny *Natural History* 16.223). In the 17th century, we find Francis Bacon taking a similar stance. His *New Atlantis* was in many respects a model for the Royal Society, and by extension the Society of Antiquaries; there Bacon's spokesman states (Bacon 1627, quoted from Matheson 1922: 158):

But we do hate all impostures and lies, insomuch as we have severely forbidden it to our fellows, under pain of ignominy and fines, that they do not show any natural work or thing adorned or swelling, but only pure as it is, and without any affectation or strangeness.

Again this ideal world was very much at variance with the flamboyant luxury of Caroline England, but again there are many today who prefer the honesty of bare wood over painted and gilded furniture. Students of the material remains of antiquity have not gone out of their way to look for glitter and gold (*cf.* Raby & Vickers 1986).

One of the results of Positivism has been 'to say that "only what can be measured can be known", or that one's ambition should be "to measure everything that can be measured, and to make everything measurable that cannot now be measured"' (Hermerén 1984 19–20). Since it is easier to measure, describe and analyse what has survived, there has been an inevitable neglect of gold and silver in antiquity, most of which has gone into the melting pot. This places the positivistically-minded archaeologist at a disadvantage when reconstructing the total picture of ancient society. This is especially the case with classical archaeology where the surviving marbles, bronzes and ceramics have come to be regarded as the norm in the past, and gold and silver exceptional.

In the standard work on Greek gold and silver, we find Donald Strong willing to use the surviving ceramic remains of the Greek Bronze Age as an aid to the reconstruction of vessels of precious metals, quoting Arthur Evans with approval: 'It is to the existence of ... ceramic copies

that we owe the best evidence of the wealth of Minoan lords in precious metals in the palmy days of the Middle Minoan age' (Strong 1966: 29–31; Evans 1921: 241). For the Greek Iron Age, however, he took a different stance, and maintained that little plate was made for private use (Strong 1966: 74). There is, however, enough evidence to suggest that things were otherwise – plate was manufactured for domestic purposes. But the very fact that Strong's position has remained unchallenged until very recently (Vickers 1985a; Gill 1986; Gill & Vickers in press) indicates how deep-rooted the 'positivist fallacy' has become.

'Necessities come always before luxuries,' wrote Jeremy Bentham (Bentham 1780: chapter 18, section 17, note), but this Utilitarian approach to the material remains of the ancient world has led to a devaluation of the word 'luxury'. *Truphe* and *Luxus* were words which applied to high living, and that alone. Eratosthenes neatly distinguishes luxurious practice from what was not when he describes how some men in the past had set up a wine crater made from clay to honour the gods, and 'not one made from silver, nor one set with jewels' (in Athenaeus 11.482b). 'Silver and jewels' belong within the range covered by luxury in the ancient meaning of the word, and clay clearly belongs in another category. But this modern usage of 'luxury' has come to overshadow discussions of the classical world, especially of ancient trade. It is in this sense that Johannes Hasebroek used the word in his influential *Trade and politics in Ancient Greece*, stating, 'decorated pottery was an article of luxury' (Hasebroek 1928: 52; 1933: 51), and he has been followed in this by many others (e.g. Boardman 1980; Cartledge 1983: 14).

Nationalism creates further difficulties. Since Montesquieu, enlightened men and women have come to regard ancient Greece as the embodiment of a Europe 'characterised by the rule of law, a spirit of liberty and the relative dominance of society over the state'. Opposed to this was an Asia that was despotic, totalitarian, its aristocracies devoted to luxury (Rowlands 1984: esp. 148; Wolf 1982: 5, 10–11). This Greece became the ideological counterpoint to a contemporary Europe still ruled by an equally oppressive and luxury-loving *ancien régime* (cf. Vickers 1985–86: 154–5). In the early 19th century, these ideas were adopted by Phil-

hellenes who equated the damage done to ancient Greece by the Persians with damage done to modern Greece by the Turk (e.g. Ross 1863: 30–1), and likened recent heroes to the *Marathonomachoi* (e.g. Curtius 1903: 100). Democratic Greeks whether ancient or modern were placed in the balance against despotic Persians and Turks, and the stories of 480 and of 1820 were irrevocably intertwined. Much of Greece 'medised' (gave earth and water as a mark of submission to the Persians) in 480, but this is not the message that comes across in the secondary literature for the general public. It became a short step from regarding the gold which the Persians used as bribes (e.g. Herodotus 9.41) as evil to regarding gold itself as somehow out of place in the proper picture of ancient Greece.

There are other considerations. The occasional discovery of gold hidden in antiquity acted as a spur to excavation, in the crudest sense of the word; for an early reference, see Philostratus (*Life of Apollonius* 7.23), where Apollonius speaks of ill-gotten riches 'gained by violating tombs of ancient kings which are full of gold and like treasure houses'. Officialdom, however, would usually take what was found for the exchequer or, more recently, for public museums. This is why in England and Wales there are laws relating to Treasure Trove (Hill 1936), or why there was in the Middle Ages a royal steward appointed to oversee Mont Lassois in France, quite recently the source of the Vix Treasure (Joffroy 1954; Chaume 1987), and who knows what else in times gone by. In 1715 Scythian gold from Siberia was forwarded by local officials to Peter the Great's new *Kunstkammer* in St Petersburg (Piotrovsky 1975: 11; Neverov 1985: 55). In an earlier age, it would doubtless have been melted down and the profits accrued to the state. The view that one excavates for gold is still prevalent in the Soviet Union today. Some years ago there was, by usually accepted standards, a highly successful joint Soviet–West German excavation at Chertomlyk in the Ukraine. I remember talking to a colleague at the Hermitage about it. '*Malheureusement*', she said sadly, '*Ils n'ont pas réussi; ils n'ont pas trouvé de l'or.*' Contrast this with the Swedish archaeologist who recently apologized to an audience for showing a gold object which he had happened to find in his excavation in Cyprus (information from Andrew Oliver, Jr and Diana Buitron).

Gold brings out the irrational in people. Nowhere is this better expressed than in Sir Walter Scott's *The antiquary*, where the author presents with irony and insight two attitudes to the past and its relics. The antiquary is Jonathan Oldbuck, who is proud of his descent from an early Reformation German printer, which places him 'in his own eyes far above the status of the hereditary aristocracy' (Brown 1979: 49; cf. Vickers 1985b: 224–5). But it is a member of the local hereditary aristocracy who acts as a foil to Oldbuck, Sir Arthur Wardour, also interested in the past, but from a wholly different standpoint. His main concern is to restore his greatly reduced family fortunes by searching for buried treasure in a ruined monastery with the aid of an alchemist. His academic predilections are for 'old tomes containing lists of ancient dynasties; not only can he recite the full roll of mythical Scottish kings . . . he also defends their existence absolutely, sensing that the rights of inheritance themselves are in some way undermined by Oldbuck's objectionable

scepticism on this subject' (Brown 1979: 51). Wardour complains that Oldbuck had 'a sort of pettifogging intimacy with dates, names and trifling matters of fact' and 'a frivolous accuracy of memory which is entirely owing to his mechanical descent' (Scott 1816: chapter 5; cf. Brown 1979: 51). Wardour's love of gold and his alchemical company were not at all to Oldbuck's liking. They were irrational, beneath contempt. And although the character of Oldbuck is exaggerated, he belongs to a familiar type, a type which sees its own intellectual roots in the tradition of the Royal Society whose first members were resolute critics of the alchemists – those who tried to find ways of transmuting base metals into gold (Nussbaum 1953: 9; Thomas 1971: 770–71). Scientists' mistrust of charlatantry spilled over into mistrust of the gold itself.

It requires a great effort to put these anachronistic considerations behind us, and to attempt to look at classical antiquity through the eyes of the Ancients, using their scale of material



FIGURE 4. *The Rogozen Treasure.* (Photo courtesy the Bulgarian Committee for Culture.)

values. This is an exercise of fundamental importance if we are to understand what the classical world was like. We do not have to share the values in question, but we should at least be in a position to recognize them for what they are. We know enough about the cost of various commodities in the 5th and 4th centuries to be reasonably certain that the ratio between the prices for painted pottery, bronze, silver and gold was in the order of 1:10:1000:10,000 (for the ratio of pottery to silver, see Vickers 1984; of bronze to silver, Price 1968: 103; of silver to gold, Lewis 1968: 109; cf. Gill in press). For some years now I have asked audiences, mostly academic, to guess at what the ratio might have been. They record the results on slips of paper, which I save. The median of the guesses to date is 1:6:15:25. Bronze is fairly accurate, but silver and gold are out by factors of 66.6 and 400 respectively.

The time was when I should have scored equally badly, and indeed should have regarded the matter with a certain indifference, but an increasing awareness that the Ancients were far from indifferent to the intrinsic value of pre-

cious metal (Vickers 1984 [1988]; 1989; forthcoming; cf. Cahn 1960; von Bothmer 1962–1963; Lewis 1986), and that there was a level of ancient society in which plate might be used on a regular basis for dining, gifts or trade (Vickers in press) has caused me to wonder what the reasons for these alarming results might be. It is also doubtless the case that many people are now more receptive to the idea that the Ancients, even ancient Greeks, might have appreciated gold and silver thanks to the cumulative effect of, for example, the Panagyurishte Treasure (Tsontschev 1959; Venedikov 1961; *Gold der Thraker* 1979: 180–8, 199, 200), of the finds at Vergina (Andronikos 1984), of the Rogozen hoard (Fol *et al.* 1986 (whence FIGURE 4); Cook 1989), of Ellen Rice's exemplary study of the magnificent procession described by Callixenus (Rice 1983), and of the publication of the hundreds of pieces of gold and silver plate now in the Metropolitan (Bothmer 1984). The owner of the Sevso hoard (Mango 1990; Painter 1990) will have had his classical Greek antecedents. To believe otherwise is simply to impoverish the past.

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