

Re-imagining the Past: Antiquity and Modern Greek Culture

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The Centre for Byzantine, Ottoman and Modern Greek Studies of the University of Birmingham organised an international conference on 'Re-imagining the Past: Antiquity and Modern Greek Culture' held on 27 and 28 June 2011. The conference was a wide-ranging and exciting event, bringing together speakers from the UK, USA, Australia, Greece, Cyprus, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, Georgia and Turkey. The conference was the first of its kind and its scholarly importance is attested by the fact that more than 120 scholars have responded to the call for papers and submitted abstracts for peer-review selection. It was also multidisciplinary, including contributions from historians, archaeologists, classicists, art, drama and literature specialists and others. It was attended by delegates who travelled from the USA, Australia, Canada and other countries.

The aim of the conference was to offer new perspectives on the relationship between Modern Greece and Antiquity by exploring strategies of engagement with, appropriation, or even rejection of the ancient past. The conference offered an opportunity to engage imaginatively with and critically examine various approaches to the ancient past which date back as far as the fifteenth century. It also invited delegates to look at different uses of the past both in and outside Greece, which can range from the classroom to advertising and from high art to design.

Another aim of the conference was to move beyond the 'continuity syndrome' which has dominated earlier discussions of and approaches to the relationship between ancient, medieval and modern Greek culture and re-assess this connection in a critical, imaginative and inter-disciplinary manner, informed by the new findings and methodologies developed by a variety of disciplines. The continuity approach was particularly popular at the University of Birmingham in the past, propagated by scholars such as the classicist George Thomson (1903-1982) and the linguist Nikolai Bakhtin (1894-1950) who both taught Classical and Modern Greek here. In June 1938 the first issue of the journal *The Link*, edited by Nikolai Bakhtin, began its editorial by emphasizing the diachronic unity of Greek culture: 'The main object of *The Link* is to interpret the past of Greece through its present and its present through the past, and thus to reveal the basic unity of Greek civilization in all its manifestations and throughout its whole development'. A few decades later the history of the lament as a poetic form from the Homeric era through the classical and Byzantine periods to modern times was traced by Professor Margaret Alexiou in her influential study *The ritual lament in Greek tradition* (1974) while the role of the classical tradition in Byzantium was the theme of the Thirteenth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies held in Birmingham in 1979.

This diachronic approach has re-emerged in different forms in recent publications such as the Norton anthology *The Greek Poets: Homer to the present* (2010) edited by Peter Constantine, Rachel Hadas, Edmund Keeley and Karen van Dyck, the book by Stylianos Alexiou *Ελληνική λογοτεχνία: από τον Όμηρο στον 20ο αιώνα* (2010), the study by Vasilios N. Makrides, *Hellenic Temples and Christian Churches: A Concise History of the Religious Cultures of Greece from Antiquity to the Present*, (2009) and the volume edited by Katerina Zacharia *Hellenisms: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity from Antiquity to Modernity* (2008).

By covering a time-span stretching from the fifteenth century AD to the present day and looking at a variety of cultural practices, the conference aspires to be a landmark in the re-imagining of the past and the re-thinking of the role of antiquity in shaping modern Greek culture and its institutions. However, the scope of the conference went beyond Greece since it included a number of papers with a comparative perspective examining, for example, the role of Italian culture and Neoplatonic Academies in Venetian Crete, discussing Nobel laureates such as George Seferis, Seamus Heaney and Derek Walcott or looking at attitudes to antiquity in other European countries (UK, France, Germany and Italy). The keynote lecture was delivered by Professor Lorna Hardwick who is a pioneer in Reception Studies in Antiquity in this country and worldwide. In preparing their contributions, participants have been encouraged to take account of the scholarship and current debates in this emerging field. The conference and the publications which are likely to result from it will constitute a major contribution to Modern Greek Studies and to the growing field of the reception of antiquity.

