In Pursuit of Ancient Pasts: a History of Classical Archaeology in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, by Stephen L. Dyson, 2006. New Haven (CT): Yale University Press, ISBN-13 978-0-300-11097-5 hardback £30 & US$45; xv+316 pp., 40 ills.

Nicola Terrenato

Classical Archaeology is the only field of archaeology for which the qualifying adjective is a value judgment. So it is not surprising that its history can be told in isolation from the rest of the discipline without too many problems. What was perceived as the hallowed past of the dominant Western powers could not be safely confused with that of decadent Orientals or of savages from the new worlds that were being colonized on the strength of a postulated cultural superiority. White marbles could not be in the same discourse as African bronzes without risking a miscegenation that awoke profound anxieties. This was especially true in those places, like Prussia or America, where there were no Classical remains to embrace as sources of identity and standing in history.

Steve Dyson's book is a wide-angle picture of this peculiar scholarly universe, embracing two centuries and many different national traditions in classical studies. Beginning with the awakening of a systematic classical archaeology in the second half of the eighteenth century, the author takes his readers to the UNESCO excavations at Carthage in the early 1970s. The lower chronological limit is a reasonable, if perhaps predictable, choice, especially given the existence of Alain Schnapp's excellent work (1993) on archaeology in pre-modern times. The decision to leave out the debate of the last few decades is a bit disappointing in a book that healthily makes no tall claims to being a dispassionate account. In fairness, though, Dyson has not shied away from speaking his mind elsewhere about the recent history and present condition of classical archaeology (e.g. Dyson 1993; 1985). Indeed, this book comes after two other major book-length contributions of his to the history of Classical archaeology (Dyson 1998; 2004). It is worth observing in this context that reflexive accounts of the history of the discipline have been and are increasingly among the very few Trojan horses that can smuggle some measure of abstract thinking in a chronically under-theorized and empiricizing discourse such as the classical one. Dyson clearly understands this well and must be commended for a lifetime of tireless effort at bringing the archaeologies of Greece and especially Rome a little closer to those of all the other parts of the world.

Given the prominence of classical education in many Western nations, the book needs to cover a vast range of local scholarly traditions and academic structures, from German state-funded central archaeological bureaucracy to British amateur societies or agenda-heavy Vatican archaeology. The reader is transported across Europe and North America at a breathless pace, meeting larger-than-life characters such as Wolfgang Helbig or Eugenie Sellers Strong only to have them disappear from sight in order to move on to the next sketched context or debate. While such a fast-moving discursive landscape may induce a sort of reflexive motion sickness, the rewards are considerable. It is only when the whole modern phase of the discipline is painted in broad strokes that its strange, unique nature can be fully appreciated.

Long envied and resented by other archaeologies, Classics is really a victim of that very centrality that has entailed lavish funding, great museums and

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academic visibility and prominence. These resources actually came at a steep price in terms of ideological independence and freedom of opinion. The budding and booming nation-states that needed the Classics as a propaganda prop always at hand, like a well-groomed lapdog that could consistently do useful legitimizing tricks, kept it on a much shorter leash than most other disciplines. Dyson correctly emphasizes that while the Fascist and Nazi regimes made a particularly blatant use of, respectively, the Roman and Greek past for their turgid claims of cultural and racial superiority, other late nineteenth and early twentieth century Western governments were simply a little subtler and less direct in pressing the Classical past into their service.

There is, of course, no such thing as a neutral archaeology of Greece and Rome (or of any other place) in Western on non-Western culture, but there are definitely different degrees of proximity and coupling between dominant ideologies and certain specialist discourses about the past. There is little doubt that Classics has always been at the worst end of the spectrum. This is, paradoxically, the only aspect of it that makes it still arguably relevant in our post-colonial and globalizing world. Why else should we care so much about what happened in two Mediterranean peninsulae during a paltry millennium and a half at most? There is only one only vaguely defensible answer to the embarrassing question that world archaeologists (and, worse, deans ...) around the globe are posing, implicitly or explicitly: at least for a short while, we all still need a strong and intellectually free-ranging archaeology of what went under the name of the Classical world, if only in order fully to deconstruct the many received ideas that still hang over from the scholarship of the Romantic period. This will not only have the local value of redeeming bits of the human past from interpretive norms dictated by out-dated modern political concerns but it will also, more importantly, undermine cross-cultural paradigms that originated in the Classics but have become global conceptual straitjackets for many other archaeological discourses. State, citizenship, democracy, to name but a few, will be understood differently once we take away most of their classical foundations.

Works like the one reviewed here undoubtedly advance the cause of political and epistemological self-awareness among classical archaeologists. Dyson authoritatively explores a number of unsavoury issues whose long shadow is still influencing current practices. Antiquarianism and the related antiques trade are clearly exposed as being responsible for the decontextualized approach to collection-quality portable artefacts. Indeed, an entire chapter is devoted to the emergence of the 'Great Museums'. Once again, no other archaeology has the highly dubious honour of such a close intertwining with nineteenth-century Western history. It is a sobering narrative of nationalistic competition, espionage, colonial exploitation and outright looting that, taken in its entirety, explains a lot about the later developments (and lack thereof) of the discipline.

Dyson, for instance, competently retraces the rise of the 'big dig' paradigm. In the late nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries, the main Western nations rushed to occupy most of the major urban sites in the eastern Mediterranean, in a sort of miniature imperialistic expansion. What emerges clearly is the virtual absence of any real hypothesis-driven strategy. Museums need to be stocked, coloured flag pins need to be planted on maps and 'beards' need to be provided for spies. While the fieldwork can at times be of excellent quality, not much space is left for the formulation of autonomous research agendas. These big digs, which have now often run for many decades practically uninterrupted, are still key landmarks in the academic landscape of power, in ways that are foreign, if not inconceivable, to other archaeologies. To this day, rising in the ranks of big dig hierarchies can often make careers just as easily, if not more, than having luminous ideas. The fate of Italy, in this context, is of particular interest and brilliantly brought out in the book. It was, early on, prime real estate in the big dig game but, with the advent of nationhood in the late 1800s, it tried instead to become an active player in places like Crete or Libya, while essentially closing down its own archaeological frontiers to foreign missions. As a result, the archaeology of Italy lagged behind that of Greece or Turkey even as its own economic conditions were drastically improving. Paradoxically, the theoretical advantage of being the only industrialized nation with an internationally coveted archaeological heritage turned out to be a severe handicap, illustrating perfectly the perverse effects of Classical archaeology being politically charged to the extreme. Aspiring archaeological colonialists could not allow themselves to be colonized at the same time.

In Pursuit of Ancient Pasts is by far the best available compendium in any language, and its appearance should be saluted as an important step in the slow, ongoing process of the normalization of Classical Archaeology. It also whets our appetite for more, namely for the first explicit attempts at new theoretical movements in our rather mummified discipline. Sooner or later, the golden chains that have kept us tied so closely to high-level politics will be completely

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shaken off. Dyson is spurring us on by rubbing our noses in the peculiar and somewhat unedifying past realities of the discipline.

Nicola Terrenato
Department of Classical Studies
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, MI 48109
USA
Email: terrenat@umich.edu

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