

Johannes Siapkas

*Antikvetenskapens teoretiska landskap II:
Från Olympia till Leonidas*

*(The Theoretical Landscape of Classical Studies II:
From Olympia to Leonidas [Reviewer's translation])*

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Review by Ingrid Berg 

It is often said that the research field known in Sweden as Classical Archaeology and Ancient History lacks an interest in theory. This is a provocative statement used by critics to dismiss the field as conservative and irrelevant and to uphold the historical divide between classical archaeology and Scandinavian prehistory in Swedish university departments. Nevertheless, disinterest in theory has developed into a trope that has been, in this reviewer's experience, somewhat internalized by many practitioners in classical studies. Of course, all research is situated; even those studies with an epistemology and ontology rooted in a positivistic tradition are products of political and social structures. This is where Johannes Siapkas' book series *Antikvetenskapens teoretiska landskap* comes in. The finished book series will result in 6 volumes, where this review concerns volume 2. The series is not a history of classical studies *per se* but an attempt to draw out the continuities and ruptures within the theoretical landscape of classical studies. Essentially, Siapkas wants to map the theoretical underpinnings of knowledge production – a component which, he claims, is often implicit in research publications from the field.

To clarify for international readers, the term 'Classical Archaeology and Ancient History' is used in Swedish universities and other research

institutions to denominate an interdisciplinary field combining Classical Archaeology, Philology and Art History. Geographically it focuses on Italy, Greece, Turkey and the coast of northern Africa with a temporal span from prehistory to Late Antiquity. There is also a small component of history of archaeology and classical reception studies within the field. Here, I will refer to this interdisciplinary field as ‘classical studies’.

Volume 2 *Från Olympia till Leonidas* covers roughly the 1870s to the 1950s – a formative time in classical studies when interpretive positions and methods which we today would consider ‘traditional’ were introduced. Culture-historical research questions answered within a positivist framework were at the research front of the time. The book is divided into four parts. The first part discusses how classical studies adopted the culture-historical frameworks of Gordon Childe and Gustaf Kossinna, exemplified through attempts to linguistically and materially trace the Indo-Europeans and with the emergence of Mediterranean prehistory as a research field. Here, Siapkas rightly points to the long-lasting influence of cultural history in classical studies. In his view, the processual and post-processual turns in archaeology did not replace the culture-historical paradigm but rather complemented it, and the theories and methods developed during the first half of the twentieth century are still fundamental to classical studies. Part two is titled ‘Idealizing Archaeology’ (*Förebildlig arkeologi*) and grounds classical archaeology’s preference for aesthetically pleasing objects in a tradition of naive realism and positivism – in fact Siapkas considers the idealizing archaeology to be the heir to eighteenth century Antiquarianism. Here, Siapkas rightly points to the lasting legacies of late nineteenth century ‘big digs’ in selecting and organizing material culture, before moving on to an analysis of idealizing archaeology within architectural studies. Part three treats art historical perspectives in classical studies where Siapkas focuses on two research areas: vase paintings and sculptures. Part four discusses ideological and political uses of classical antiquity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – from Conservatism, Liberalism and Socialism, to Fascism and Nazism. It ends with a brief discussion of the role of classical studies and its practitioners in wartime with a focus on Greece.

Från Olympia till Leonidas raises fundamental concerns about the lasting legacies of nineteenth-century research traditions. Siapkas convincingly demonstrates that despite critiques of and elaborations on the concept of culture in the last 60 years, few classical archaeological studies really challenge or diverge from a traditional path. I agree with Siapkas to a certain extent that the processual and post-processual semi-paradigmatic turns did not really change archaeological categories and concerns. I would argue that this is a relevant lesson for all of us working in archaeology. Here, I would have liked to have seen a wider discussion on heritage as a possible

hindrance or obstacle behind the slow paradigmatic change. How much did the classical heritage legacy affect the reluctance to change? In these times of increasing political use of heritage and a populist longing for the simplistic identity politics of neo-nationalism, we can all take a lesson from Siapkias' book. A return to, or a continuation of, naive realism and positivism cannot be the way forward for classical archaeological theory.

There are a few anachronisms in the book, which could have been easily avoided. For instance, Siapkias seems to suggest that the reader should be concerned that the excavations at Olynthus in Greece in the late 1920s and the 1930s, with its well-preserved domestic architecture, were not interpreted using a social-historical framework at the time of publication. Its potential was, according to Siapkias, not realized since the excavators were stuck in an idealizing archaeology fixed on studying the typological development of categories of artefacts. Considering that it was not until 1939 that Grahame Clark published his influential *Archaeology and Society*, I would not have expected the publications of Olynthus (eg. Robinson 1930, 1946) to include such new perspectives. At times, Siapkias' rhetoric also reveals a frustration with the conservatism of classical studies and with the lack of explicit theory in more recent research publications which results in unnecessarily harsh language. Instead, I would have appreciated an elaboration on the appeal of slow change in classical studies – again I suspect that heritage politics and the politics-of-belonging to the small community of classical scholars play an important role here.

All that being said, *Från Olympia till Leonidas*, and the whole book series, is a promising and thus far well-executed endeavour. It introduces concepts to the novel theorists in order for them to situate their research, which is a very commendable task. The book is well researched and Siapkias shows a breadth and depth of knowledge. In a way he is opening the black box of classical studies, a metaphor that I used when reviewing the first volume a couple of years ago (Berg 2017). A black box is a machine that produces a certain output if you insert an input, but whose mechanisms remain hidden – in very much the same way as a research publication without an explicit theoretical framework works (see Niklasson 2016). I encourage everyone working in classical studies to take a look inside the box and accept the challenge of moving towards more situated and transparent research.

References

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