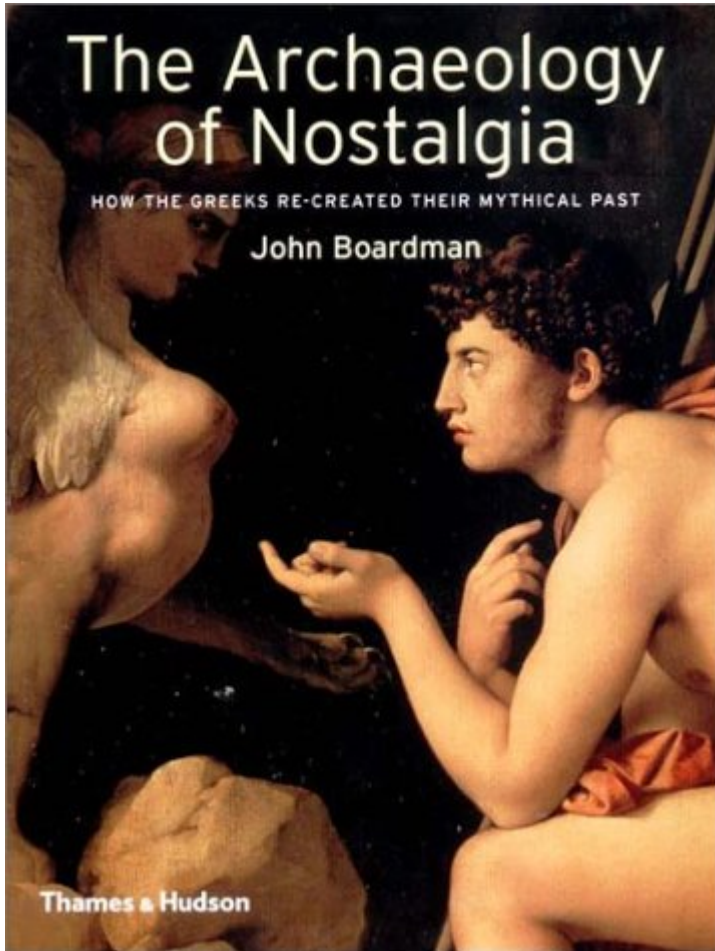


THE MISSION OF CONTEMPORARY CLASSICS



– some thoughts on reading Sue Alcock ...

The past is manipulated by people who come after. Memories and re-collections – traces of the past – help make us what we are.

The importance of the past is so clear in the spate of books and articles about the ancient Olympics and their relation to the gathering this month in Athens. A major component of Greek ideology of identity – what is it to be Greek? – hinges on ideas that Greeks today are heirs of the achievements of ancient Greeks who, some say, invented democracy, science, literature, drama, and ... amateur athletics.

Are we to believe this? I referred last week to an intelligent piece in the NYT

that made a case for the ancient Greek Olympics being fundamentally different to those reinvented at the end of the nineteenth century. This mirrors what some Classicists are arguing and holds enormous implication. There is no fundamental continuity with Graeco-Roman antiquity in the sense of ethnic, national or cultural identity. We are not heirs to any kind of Graeco-Roman achievement by virtue of our identity, however conceived.

What are we to do about such social memory and manipulation?

Often it doesn't matter much – falsification, selective and biased recollection are everyday matters of memory. We prop up our senses of self worth with all kinds of rationalization. And what is wrong with Greek pride? Nothing.

But it is surely appropriate to realize that the case for continuity of identity is an absurd one.



A satirical antidote to the Olympics from [FontShop.com](#) – [Link]

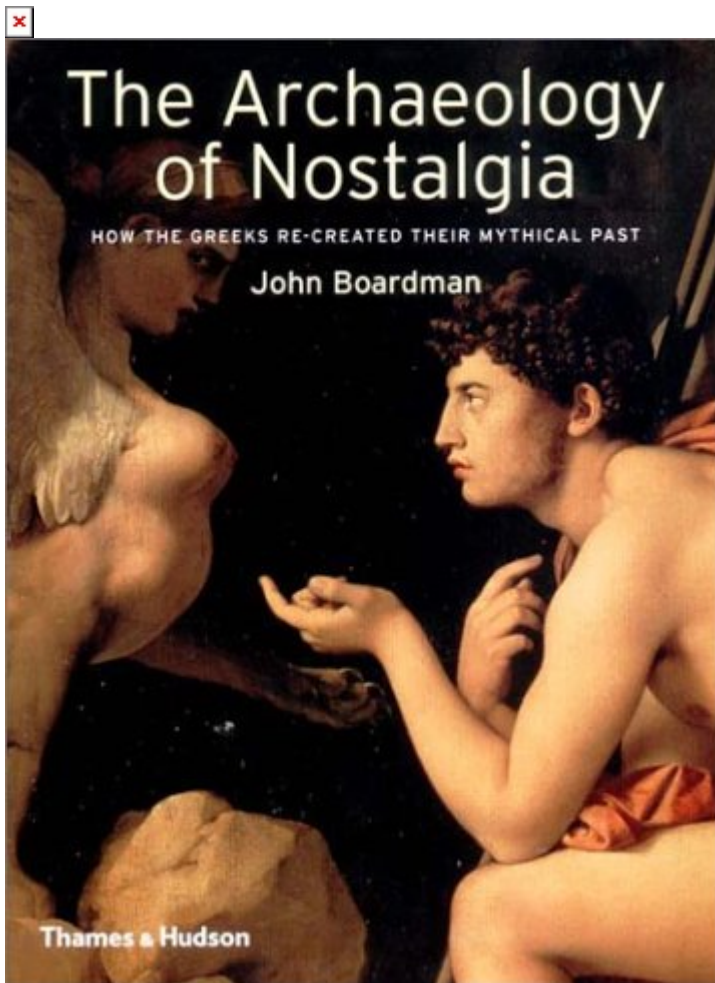
These perhaps unexceptional insights are taking hold in archaeology. First. The archaeological past is as much about invented tradition as what happened in the past. Second. People have always fiddled with their pasts. I have worked hard in my own writing to emphasize that these are at the heart of history and archaeology. And with the Greek Olympics in mind I have had a look again at some recent books on my shelves.

In a critical academic line Keith Brown and Yannis Hamilakis, old colleagues of mine at University Wales Lampeter, have edited (2003) a rather esoteric collection called [The Usable Past: Greek Metahistories](#). – the case for contemporary and contested identities shaping the past. [Link] It is excellent and represents a healthy critical trend, though an unpopular one – people don't like their sense of self being questioned and detached from pasts held so dear.

There is another trend to comment on how Greeks and Romans similarly manipulated

their own pasts. Ancestors mattered back then too. Hardly surprising perhaps, but some societies do pay little attention to their history or past, and the form that the relationship takes can vary considerably. It is an old theme – archaeologists and art historians have long been fascinated with cultural traditions. But the trendy intellectual vogue of the last ten years has been the connection between “social memory” and “identity”.

John Boardman, one of the grand old men of classical art history, who specialized in churning out turgid but cheap and accurate guides to all aspects of Greek art, has topped his career with a fine book called [The Archaeology of Nostalgia: How the Greeks Re-Created their Mythical Past](#).



[Link]

And then there is Sue Alcock's [Archaeologies of the Greek Past: Landscape, Monuments, and Memories](#). [Link]

She does a great job of connecting memory with material traces, with monuments and

“landscapes” (a heavily charged and ideological concept). Presents case studies from Graeco-Roman antiquity – the Greeks and Romans did indeed manipulate the past for political and ideological ends. She looks at early Roman Greece, the land of the Messenians (where Sparta’s slave helots came from) and Crete (after the Minoan bronze age).

But in spite of her introduction which outlines a comprehensive case for scrutinizing past-present relationships, she confines her thoughts to antiquity. While she argues that archaeology can shed light on ancient attitudes towards the past she does not seem to appreciate that this demands we scrutinize our own archaeological relationship with the past – if only for the sake of intellectual coherence.

She does not **treat archaeology symmetrically – archaeology is something we practice now as part of our relationship with the past, as well as being about the traces of past societies.**

This is disappointing. For I only see two respectable attitudes to the archaeology of the ancient Greek past. One that questions the continuity and stresses difference. The second that uses the past ironically, symmetrically, as a mirror, to help us see ourselves for what we are – manipulating, for good or bad, what is left of the past, even if we think it is archaeological or historical science telling us that the ancient Greeks invented amateur athletics.

And this is the only respectable future for Classics. Not a celebration of how we are heirs to the amazing ancient Greeks and Romans. But a reflection upon how our relationship with Graeco-Roman antiquity has been so important to us, and often quite blind.