FOREVER YOUNG: WHY CAMBRIDGE HAS A PROFESSOR OF GREEK CULTURE

An A. G. Leventis Inaugural Lecture given by Professor Paul Cartledge in the University of Cambridge
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Introduction

It is a very great pleasure, and a huge honour, for me to deliver this Inaugural Lecture as the first ‘A. G. Leventis Professor of Greek Culture’. My thanks for facilitating this bold and innovative appointment must go, especially, to the A. G. Leventis Foundation, on the one hand, and to the Cambridge University Development Office, on the other, as well as to the Faculty of Classics and especially its Officers past and present. I thank all concerned very warmly indeed, as I thank all of you for taking the time off from doing other better things in order to be here this February evening.

I tried to pick as auspicious a time of year as possible: just four days after Charles Darwin’s 200th birthday, two days after St Valentine’s Day, and one day after the Lupercalia. But one can never be quite certain about
astral and other heavenly conjunctions – or at least I cannot, despite what I have been trying to learn about astronomical and calendrical prediction, both ancient Greek and much more recent, as we shall see. At any rate, it is crystal clear that the A. G. Leventis Foundation, whose name my chair bears, was born under a lucky star. It was founded in 1979, and named in honour of Anastasios G. Leventis (d. 1978). Originating in Cyprus, it now enjoys virtually worldwide links, with especial connections to West Africa, to the pale of Hellenic settlement ancient and modern (‘Hellas’ in the broad sense), and, happily, to this University. This is thanks not least to the late Constantinos (‘Dino’) Leventis, who matriculated at Clare College in 1956, and read Classics, and to whose memory this Inaugural Lecture is dedicated.2 He would, I am confident, have been as delighted as we in the Classics Faculty all are to know that the Foundation’s immense beneficence was playing such a key role in Cambridge’s 800th campaign and in the promotion of the Arts and Humanities side of our operation. For, difficult as all fundraising is, especially in these straitened times, it is particularly so on the Arts and Humanities front.3

There are many advantages and blessings in being the first postholder of a chair. Not the least of them is that one does not have to be scrupulous to namecheck all one’s predecessors. The downside, though, if it is a downside,
is that one cannot just fall back on the tried and tested inaugural formula of revisiting an old scholarly battleground, lining up and duly praising or burying one’s allies and foes, and then retiring behind the parapet, as if the battle – or skirmish – had never occurred. Instead, as an Inaugural professor, exposed and without much cover, one has to be very careful indeed how one surveys the scene and marks out one’s terrain – or territory. For the Leventis Chair of Greek Culture is in my conception not just a new chair (the first to be endowed within the Classics Faculty at Cambridge since World War II), but also and more importantly a new kind of chair – in ancient Greek terms, a kathedra that is not just nea, but kainê or even kainotomos. Hence, the bulk of this particular Inaugural Lecture – not entirely unlike a certain other Inaugural delivered in Washington, DC, last month – will be about the Chair’s meaning and purposes, as I see or envision them.4

Culture and causation
I begin with a seeming paradox. There have been Professors of Culture or Cultural History before, including in this University, but to my knowledge there is only one other Professor of Ancient Greek Culture anywhere else in the world.5 Yet all but one word of my title are not Greek in etymology, but Latin, even though so much
else of our English vocabulary (gigabyte, terabyte . . .) is Greek-derived. But such was the cultural and ideological as well as military and political power of the ancient Romans and their Latin language that typically we speak of ancient ‘Greece’ and ‘Greeks’, not ‘Hellas’ or ‘Hellenes’ (which is what they called themselves then and call themselves today). In fact, the only non-Latinate word of my title is ‘Leventis’: Greek, though borrowed from Ottoman Turkish. But thereby hangs a tale, a suitably punning one, as I would not want to disappoint those of you who know of my fatal addiction to paronomasia: for ‘Leventis’ connotes youth.

The second half of my lecture title, ‘Why Cambridge Has a Professor of Greek Culture’, is rather more obvious etymologically, but perhaps a bit more complicated conceptually and semantically. It is borrowed from and modelled on a very different kind of work of art: not a pop song, but a general-interest academic volume aimed at a wide audience: *Why Humans Have Cultures*, by Michael Carrithers (1992). Carrithers, suitably enough, is an anthropologist (a good Greek-derived word), and his book is explicitly about ‘anthropology and social diversity’. Which, in a way, is exactly what this lecture, and my title, are also all about, in a comparatist — ancient/modern, ancient Greek/contemporary world — cultural perspective or conceptual framework.
The ‘Why’ of my subtitle can be read either retrospectively (‘how come?’) or prospectively (‘what for?’). Modern Greek, not always the richest of languages, in this case gets that distinction rather nicely, using three words that together capture the salient nuances of our English ‘why’: *aphou* = from what (origin)?, *dioti* = on account of what?, *giati* = for what purpose(s)? The short answer to the retrospective ‘why’ is the exceptional, indeed phenomenal generosity of the A. G. Leventis Foundation. This is not the place, and there is not the time, to do anything like justice to the reach and the penetration of the Foundation’s beneficence and benefactions: perhaps I could just say that in this University there is in the Fitzwilliam Museum an A. G. Leventis Gallery of Cypriot Antiquities and at Clare College a Leventis Graduate Scholarship in pre-Byzantine Hellenic studies; that elsewhere in this country the Hellenic Society distributes grants for various purposes to secondary schools of all kinds owing to the generosity of the Leventis Foundation; and that abroad the Foundation’s scholarly and civic interests extend as far and as variously afield as the long-established Metropolitan Museum in New York and the recently revived Archaeological Museum of Odessa in the Ukraine. The answer to the prospective sense of ‘why’ in my title constitutes most of the rest of the lecture.
First, let me make some attempt to pin down the butterfly word ‘culture’, a protean term of many possible meanings. I start with what might properly be called its ‘anthropological’ sense, as used non-judgmentally by Carrithers.¹⁰ By this is meant a society’s regime or social regimen, a way of life, taken as a whole – although I am only too well aware that there can be cultures within a culture, not least in the case of ancient Greece.¹¹ But ‘culture’ may also be used, or taken, in a broadly aesthetic sense as equivalent to ‘civilisation’, which can soon acquire an evaluative, or judgmental, connotation as meaning civilisation (or a civilisation) as opposed to barbarism, or as high (versus low) culture, or elite (versus popular, mass) culture.¹² The modern Greek word for ‘culture’ in this evaluative sense – as in The Foundation for Hellenic Culture – is politismos, which is a word adopted into modern Greek, not through Latin or Ottoman Turkish, but by attraction from the ancient Greek word polis (the root of our ‘politics’, etc.) and its implication, following Aristotle, that citification was civilisation.¹³ The all-conquering sub-branch of History labelled ‘cultural history’ – there is an International Society for Cultural History and in this University, for instance, a Modern Cultural History Seminar – can usefully embrace any one or all of these various and contested meanings.¹⁴
Myths

Rather than prolong the etymologising or definition-grinding, let me try to explain, using examples from my own and others’ research, what sorts of cultural artefacts I think a (any) Leventis Professor could or even should be concerned to analyse, explain and promote. I shall do so using the good old English (Greek-derived) word ‘myth’, not in any academic sense but in its popular or vulgar sense of something believed to be true, but in fact more or less false. In Aristotelian vein\(^{15}\) I shall give four examples, the common theme of which is difference: for although the ancient Greeks (or some of them) are in many fundamental ways key cultural ancestors of us in the ‘West’ today, their culture(s) was/were often very different in no less fundamental ways.\(^{16}\)

**Myth 1. That there really ever was an entity properly called ‘Ancient Greece’**.

In fact, during the period usually understood to be covered by that phrase – say from 1500 BC(E) to the conquest of Greece by Rome (in the mid second century BCE) – there were lots of often very dissimilar Greek communities/cities, about 1,000 at any one time, scattered from one end of the Mediterranean and Black Seas to the other; they usually were radically self-differentiated, and
typically thought of themselves as, say, ‘Athenians’ or ‘Spartans’ first, and ‘Greeks’ (or rather ‘Hellenes’) quite a long way second. In a little book that is forthcoming this autumn, entitled *Ancient Greece*, I have selected just eleven out of the 1,000 or so, precisely in order to illustrate just how diverse ‘Ancient Greece’ really was. I begin with Cnossus in Crete, because that is where the earliest texts in the ancient Greek language have been found – though we learned that only in 1952, when the script unromantically labelled ‘Linear B’ was finally deciphered as recording the earliest known form of Greek by architect Michael Ventris, aided indispensably by Cambridge philologist John Chadwick. I first heard Chadwick lecture on the subject when I was a schoolboy, because he happened to have gone to the same school as I (St Paul’s in London, a mere 500 years old this year), but I first met him properly when I came to Cambridge in 1979 and he was exceedingly kind and helpful to me as a struggling ‘metic’ (resident alien). It therefore gives me especial pleasure that the New Greek on-line Lexicon currently being prepared in the Cambridge Classics Faculty is both inspired by him and funded by, among other principal donors, the Leventis Foundation.

I end my little history of Ancient Greece with the city of Byzantion, founded in the Golden Horn sometime early in the seventh century BCE, which in 324 CE became
Constantinople and in 1453 Istanbul (the name possibly derived from a good ancient as well as modern Greek phrase meaning ‘to or at the City’). Within that one geographical frame are encapsulated in miniature many of the most interesting aspects of the characteristically urban experience of the ancient – and not so ancient – Hellenes. But I devote chapters also to among others Athens, Thebes, Alexandria and Sparta, bringing out what I take to be their most salient contributions to the remarkable cultural amalgam that was – or rather is now seen as – Ancient Greece.

Myth 2. That the ancient Greeks were utterly technologically backward.

The burden of this claim – or accusation – is that, although they or some of them were outstandingly brilliant in theory (Greek word), and especially in the field of mathematics (ditto), they had little or no notion of practical applied technology (ditto). Now, by comparison to us, they were indeed backward in all sorts of ways – to call a spade a spade. Indeed, to continue the horticultural motif, they may not even have had a word for a wheelbarrow . . . However, recent truly scientific research – the international Antikythera Mechanism Research Project, which uses the latest technology including an X-ray machine weighing 8 tons specially
designed to deliver 3-D X-ray computed tomography (CT) – has transformed our understanding of one particular piece of ancient Greek technology, and maybe also of ancient Greek mentality and culture too. The ‘Antikythera Mechanism’ is so called because that is where it was serendipitously found, by a team of temporarily marooned Greek sponge-divers in 1900, in a wreck lying off a small islet between the southern Greek mainland and northwest Crete. I first heard of the object during the early 1970s, when I was researching an archaeological doctoral thesis that took the whole of Laconia and its offshore islands for its geographical province.²³ Few others had heard of it then. Today, the Mechanism is famous enough to justify the publication of articles in the leading science journal, *Nature*, and an exhibition and one-day conference held at Cambridge’s Whipple Museum of the History of Science.²⁴

Scholarship remains divided over the Mechanism’s ultimate purpose and function: was it a proto-clockwork mechanism, or might it justly even be dignified by the title of ‘proto-computer’?²⁵ At any rate, the Mechanism, crafted probably in around 100 BCE, in what we call the Hellenistic period of ancient Greek history, was unquestionably devised for making astronomical calculations and predictions of an extremely sophisticated kind, further developing sightings and insights achieved hundreds