

## Introduction

‘Don’t you think it’s strange that life, described as so rich and full, a camel-trail of adventure, should shrink to this coin-sized world? A head on one side, a story on the other. Someone you loved and what happened. That’s all there is when you dig in your pockets. The most significant thing is someone else’s face. What else is embossed on your hands but her?’<sup>1</sup>

This is a book about how we write history. It is also a book about why we need the history of the body. But it is not a history of the body. It is about the history written on the body – and the history *not* written on the body. In particular it is a book about how the history written on the classical Greek body rewrites the history, archaeology and art history of classical Greece. Although classical Greece, and in particular classical Athens, is my example here, I hope to engage not only those interested in ancient Greece, but also all those interested in the place of the body in history and archaeology; for my fundamental concern is with the history that we construct on the basis of oral and written discourse and how that differs from the history that can be written on the basis of the body that is seen. I explore how oral and written discourse in classical Athens constructed beliefs about the body, and how those beliefs compared with the beliefs supported by the body that was seen and sensed. I am concerned both to map ways in which beliefs about the classical body changed during the period from the sixth to the fourth centuries BC, and with changing our beliefs about the human body during that period.

We can no longer hear what Greeks said nor see what they saw. We rely upon texts to convey their verbal discourse and on sculpture and painted pottery to indicate what they saw. To write about how Greeks spoke and what they saw is to write about art and text. There has been a great deal of recent writing about the relationship between art and text, both in general

<sup>1</sup> Winterson (1992) 189.

and in antiquity.<sup>2</sup> This writing has all been concerned with how visual representations deal with stories told in literature and how literature describes what the artist represents or what the eye sees. My concern with art and text here is quite different. For my concern is with how texts write about the world as seen and experienced, not with how they write about the world as depicted in art; and similarly my concern is with the evidence the visual arts give us for how the world was perceived, not with how they react to texts. And curiously this is not a comparison with which scholars have much concerned themselves – the ‘art and text’ debate passes it by.

This book not only explores different discursive frameworks but inserts itself into several different discourses. Few readers are likely to be equally interested in all the theoretical and substantive issues that I explore, and I therefore offer a short guide here to the structure and substance of the argument, so that readers who have particular interests in one aspect or another of the book can locate quickly the part of the book in which they are interested and understand why I write about the various topics I discuss in the book as I do.

The first chapter explores the consequences of basing history upon what people say and write, investigating the peculiar character of language and the differences between the way in which words and the way in which images communicate. I argue that the structures required by language are necessarily more formal than those required by images, and that the fundamentally arbitrary relationship between words and things means that words require and produce classifications which images, which are not entirely arbitrary signs, are always liable to undermine. This matters, I maintain, for the historian since people live their lives not simply according to the dictates of the word but according to their observations of the world around them.

The second chapter explores the difference between modern classifications of the classical body, with their obsessions with its muscularity, contrasting with ancient classifications of the body, which stress its articulation. I argue that if we are to understand the place of the body in classical Greece we must understand the ways in which the different classification led to different assessments of how to treat the body properly and of what the body was good for. And I also argue that properly to understand ancient

<sup>2</sup> For the theoretical questions see above all the work of W. J. T. Mitchell (e.g. 1986, 1994). For Greece and Rome see Himmelmann (1967), Snodgrass (1982), Goldhill and Osborne (1994), Elsner (1996), Snodgrass (1998), Stansbury-O'Donnell (1999), Small (2003), Giuliani (2003), Woodford (2003), Elsner (2007), Taplin (2007), Squire (2009), Platt (2010).

representations of the body in painting and sculpture we need to be able to see the body in the terms in which the Greek artists themselves saw it. Art as well as text record reality selectively, and if we are to distinguish what history was written by classical Greeks upon the body we must understand the classificatory grid which Greek writers and artists imposed upon the world.

If the second chapter takes its lead from writers, the third chapter takes its lead from the visual arts. Here I ask which features of the human body Greek artists most regularly focus upon, and I seek to isolate which questions about individuals are appropriately answered by observing those features. I suggest that here again we can find a parallelism between the visual arts and classical texts when we look at the way in which such ancient studies of the world as Theophrastus' *Characters* are constructed.

The classifications of the world by classical Greek legal discourse have been afforded privileged status by historians who have been concerned above all with political history. In Chapters 4 and 5 I direct my attention in turn to the division between citizen and non-citizen and between Greek and foreigner. I point out how ambiguities in modern use of 'citizen' have their origin in ancient ambiguities and suggest, by a lengthy analysis of the use of citizen terminology in ancient texts, that the division between those who could and those who could not vote was of rather minor importance most of the time in a city such as classical Athens, and that what people felt that they needed to know was how a person related to the rest of the community. The failure of artists to show any interest in marking citizen status or the qualities of age required to be a citizen or perform particular citizen functions both reinforces this observation and suggests that the distinctions of law offer no indication of the distinctions by which people guided their way among those they met.

Foreignness is, I demonstrate in Chapter 5, variously shown on Athenian monuments, but the features that discriminate the foreign are most frequently features of culture, not nature, and are deployed as often to show role-playing by individuals who there is no reason to think were of non-Greek origin as they are to indicate those who were not born in Greek-speaking families. There is much evidence that Athens was a cosmopolitan community, but neither pots nor grave stelai offer a snapshot of that community. Rather they show how the foreign was good to think with, and how Athenians and non-Athenians alike manipulated exotic visual as well as verbal vocabulary in order to make social statements negotiate particular social positions.

Those sceptical about the invisibility of these legal and popular classifications might wonder whether, however little it is flagged in images, foreignness was not in fact something betrayed by details of appearance, clothing, speech and manners. No such suspicion arises in the case of the polluted, with whom I am concerned in Chapter 6. When a man whose past actions have left him impure arrives in a community, that community has no way of seeing his state and depends entirely on his self-declaration. So why did Greek communities convince themselves that certain actions or being present in certain situations left a person 'impure' and requiring special treatment? In this chapter I explore the ways in which scholars have in the past explained notions of pollution; I pay attention to its curious history and argue that notions of pollution work hand in hand with the mechanisms of the law to reach those areas of community concern that law cannot effectively reach.

Chapter 7 turns to another, even more fundamental, distinction of religious status which was not immediately visible – the distinction between mortal and immortal, human and god. Here my concern is with how the images of the gods change over time, and with the implications of the different relationships between the images of the bodies of the gods and the images of the bodies of mortal men and women for what can be thought about the nature of the gods.

In the final chapter I look at the implications of the findings of the earlier chapters. What difference does it make to how we understand the classical Greek world that very little of what is central to conventional histories was written on the body? I try to show both the importance of the invisible distinctions to the ordering of the Greek city, and how different the social history of classical Athens looks when the invisibility of those categorical distinctions is taken into account.

The implications of this book extend beyond classical Greece. The discrepancy between what is said and written, which insists upon putting bodies into categories, and the evidence of what is seen, where no such categorical divisions are required, is one to be found in every society. Historians of every society work from texts and employ images almost only to illustrate what they regard as established from the texts. Archaeologists, or at least those concerned with prehistory, are forced to rely upon material evidence, upon interpretation of what can be seen rather than what can be read. Historians complain that archaeologists give only descriptions; archaeologists find historians exclusively concerned with politics and unable or unwilling to look at other areas of life. The different features of the different evidence used by archaeologists and historians does much to illuminate this sterile

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17670-5 - The History Written on the Classical Greek Body

Robin Osborne

Excerpt

[More information](#)

---

*Introduction*

5

debate.<sup>3</sup> But as long as history is concerned with the past as lived, and not merely the past as recorded in texts, historians need to find ways of getting beyond the limits of those texts. I hope to have shown in this book not only why that is the case, but also how that can be done.

<sup>3</sup> For recent attempts to stir up or resolve the tension compare Whitley (2001) Preface and Part I, the contributors to Sauer (2004), and Smith (2006).

## 1 | Writing history on the classical body

### The history incorporated in words, and the history embodied in images

It is conventional to observe that we talk of ‘history’ in two quite different senses. ‘History’ is the past, but it is also writing about the past. Not only writing about the past, but writing based on past writing. What distinguishes historians from archaeologists is that they study the past on the basis of the evidence of texts, rather than of material remains.<sup>1</sup> Even when historians do the ‘cultural history’ of material culture, they either study texts about material culture or treat the products of material culture as texts, as documentary evidence. Archaeologists, on the other hand, when they do cultural history, describe those cultural products.<sup>2</sup> The past that archaeologists and historians study is not the same past.

The different approach of archaeologists and of historians is masked by the fact that most of the time they study different periods of the past. Archaeologists concentrate their efforts upon those periods of the past for which there is little or no textual evidence, upon what is sometimes called ‘prehistory’.<sup>3</sup> Historians operate only with those past societies which have left written records. This distinction applies even to the History of Art. For the History of Art as a discipline studied in university departments of that name concentrates upon the art of literate societies. Study of the art of non-literate societies is left to courses in ‘the anthropology of art’ or courses in ‘world art’, whose comparative framework requires art objects to be withdrawn from their detailed context, treated as if outside history.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. ‘Histoire se fait avec des textes’, Fustel de Coulanges cited by Marrou (1954) 77, cited by Hartog (1980) 381; ‘History is developed in the continuity of signs left by scriptural activities: it is satisfied with arranging them, composing a single text from the thousands of written fragments in which already expressed is that labor which constructs time . . .’, de Certeau (1988) 210.

<sup>2</sup> For a case for turning archaeology into cultural history see Morris (2000) 3–17, but Morris seems to me to neglect the biases built into basing history upon texts.

<sup>3</sup> Such a limitation of archaeology to periods for which oral or written evidence is lacking goes back at least as far as Thucydides. See Hornblower (1987) 91–2.

The Greek and Roman worlds have long been a strange anomaly here, the object of attention both of a special breed of archaeologists, ‘classical archaeologists’, often regarded with suspicion by ‘real’ archaeologists, and of a special breed of historians, ‘ancient historians’. ‘Real’ archaeologists regard classical archaeology as too dominated by the agenda set by ancient texts.<sup>4</sup> Rather than interpreting the remains of antiquity in the context of archaeological assemblages, it is suggested, classical archaeologists interpret them according to an agenda derived from Pliny’s *Natural History*, the Roman encyclopaedia which includes histories of both sculpture and painting. This Plinian agenda privileges the creator over the creation and the aesthetic over the functional. Art historians regard classical archaeologists as antediluvian because their art history has remained so largely formalist, since they are kept both by surviving material and by their own inclinations from making the study of works of classical art the study of contemporary written evidence about them and their creation. Meanwhile ‘modern’ historians regard ‘ancient’ historians with suspicion because they have so little archived material and spend so much time rewriting literary histories.

Precisely because of the peculiar development of ancient history and of classical archaeology, however, the Greek and Roman world provides an ideal ground for the investigation of the effect of privileging a particular source material when writing about the past. In this book I want to ask what is at stake in the claim that *History*, the story of the past written on the basis of the evidence of texts, is *history*, is the past itself.<sup>5</sup> What would the past look like if we took as our evidence not what people said but what people saw?

From classical antiquity onwards, some historians, at least, have been very conscious that what they do is produce literature. Indeed in the wake of Hayden White, historians have become more self-conscious about the writtenness of history, and more prepared to acknowledge that it is the historian who gives the past a plot.<sup>6</sup> But acknowledgement often substitutes for analysis of the nature of the issue. Historians, and this is equally true of ‘ancient’ and of ‘modern’ historians, still rarely discuss, in anything more than a desultory way, the effects of drawing upon texts as the sole source, or at least the highly privileged source, for knowledge of the past.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> See further Osborne and Alcock (2007).

<sup>5</sup> My question and my answer are related to Joan Kelly’s famous question ‘Did women have a renaissance?’ (Kelly 1977).

<sup>6</sup> White (1978), (1987).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Marrou (1954) 77: ‘si l’histoire ne se fait pas uniquement avec des textes, elle se fait surtout avec des textes, dont rien ne peut remplacer la précision’.

Meanwhile archaeologists, including classical archaeologists, often write as if the strongest claim material culture has is that it fills a gap in what we happen to know from texts, for instance by giving evidence for the lower classes.<sup>8</sup>

My concern in this book is to draw attention to the ways in which we limit our understanding of the past if we restrict ourselves to, or unduly privilege, what we can know from texts. For all that textual communication holds a central place in our lives, we do not know the world in which we live purely on the basis of what we are told in speech or writing, and we need not know the past purely on the basis of written texts. We live in a sensuous world, and it is worth trying to understand how their sensuous world impacted upon people in the past, their relations and their actions.

The problem with texts with which I will grapple in this book is not, primarily at least, the problem that any text is crafted by an author, and so any description an act of persuasion. Important though it is to acknowledge the partiality of all writing, such partiality is an inevitable and happy consequence of texts being personal, not impersonal products. We should celebrate, rather than regret, that our engagement with texts is an engagement with people, with the authors of texts, just as we should celebrate, rather than regret, that we only ever interpret the world that we hear with our own ears or see with our own eyes.<sup>9</sup>

The problem with which I will grapple here is rather that an author is crafted by his or her text.<sup>10</sup> The world of writing is always a world that is already classified. The giving of names, the putting into language, is classification. A language which made no distinctions would not communicate. But the distinctions made by language have to be based on distinctions

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Clarke (2003) for the pursuit of the lower classes in Roman art; Given (2004) 162 gives a strong theoretical justification for uncovering the strategies of the oppressed through survey and excavation: 'Thanks to the archaeology of the colonized, it is possible to understand the lives and experiences of people like this. They were not statistics or the objects of some deeply implicated bureaucrat, but real people who used actual material culture in tangible contexts. The objects, structures and landscapes that enveloped their lives were the means of their repression and the tools of their resistance.'

<sup>9</sup> It is vain to try to know the world only through objects, to the exclusion of texts, or to deny that artists and other creators of material objects also craft a world-view into the objects that they create. For a powerful critique of the possibility of knowing the world through the senses see Plato's famous analogy in the *Republic* between our perception of the world and the perception of shadows projected onto the wall of a cave. For a useful review of ancient appreciations and critiques of the power and limitations of the sense of sight see Jay (1993) ch. 1.

<sup>10</sup> I am not here concerned to explore ancient Greek views on the power and limitations of texts; on that see recently Männlein-Robert (2007), Tueller (2008) ch. 1.



always already made. ‘In linguistic communication “world” is disclosed.’<sup>11</sup> When we convey to others, who are not present, what we see or hear or taste or smell or feel, then we must find a way of linking our sensations to the sensations experienced by others. To do that involves breaking down the continuum of sensation, placing our sensations within a structure that is already understood. It is the beauty, but also the limitation, of language that it provides that structure.

This need to give things an order if we are to share experiences was famously stressed by Foucault in *Les mots et les choses*. For Foucault, it was only once the visible world of natural history had been limited and filtered by having a structure imposed upon it that it became possible for it to be transcribed into language.<sup>12</sup> And that structure, as he illustrated in his preface with the famous discussion of the ‘certain Chinese encyclopaedia’ of Borges, must itself be part of a larger structure. The individual categories of the Chinese encyclopaedia are none of them unreasonable – ‘sucking pigs’, ‘sirens’ and ‘stray dogs’ can all potentially find a place in a taxonomy dividing real and imaginary animals according to species and relationship to men. But to find such categories alongside ‘innumerable’, ‘drawn with a very fine camel-hair brush’, ‘having just broken the water pitcher’ or ‘that from a long way off look like flies’ defies comprehension, because we can devise no broader structure in which all these groups can be made to relate to each other. We can imagine perfectly comprehensible discussions of each of these categories individually, but put together they offer us no understanding of the class of animals as a whole, or indeed of any world which they might inhabit.

Borges’ fantasy encyclopaedia causes both laughter and unease. As Foucault observes, ‘*Heterotopias* are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language . . . because they destroy “syntax” in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to “hold together”.’<sup>13</sup> Our unease with Borges’ encyclopaedia has two roots. One is the thought that there might be a world which is so incommensurable with ours that we cannot conceive of the larger structure in which structuring knowledge in this way would make sense. The other is the thought that actually this world is not so different, that

<sup>11</sup> Gadamer (1975) 404.

<sup>12</sup> Foucault (2002[1970]) 147; cf. 150 ‘Structure is that designation of the visible which, by means of a kind of pre-linguistic sifting, enables it to be transcribed into language.’ We might, however, question the existence, indeed the possibility, of a sifting that is entirely ‘pre-linguistic’.

<sup>13</sup> Foucault (2002[1970]) xix.

the structures of our knowledge, which we think self-evident, are really just as artificial, except that we cannot see that. But our laughter comes from our awareness that Borges' encyclopaedia could not really exist, that there can be no such world because language is made up not simply of names that categorise but of a syntax that establishes relations between words. It is syntax which guarantees that if one category is constituted by animals 'drawn with a very fine camel-hair brush', it must be possible to have another category of animals not drawn with such a brush, or drawn with a less fine brush, or with some other implement, or not drawn but otherwise depicted. It is syntax which guarantees that if there is a category of animals 'having just broken the water pitcher', there must be a category of animals which have not just broken the water pitcher, or have done something else to a water pitcher or have simply just done some range of other things.

Borges' encyclopaedia illustrates by reversal the way in which language creates a world both of possible things and of possible relations between things. When we look at a male person and decide how to refer to him we have no choice but to slot him into, or at least relate him to, one or other preordained categories. If current language offers us 'boy', 'youth' or 'man', we will write onto this figure the distinctions that those terms imply. The world transcribed into, and constantly reinforced by, this language is a world where boys and youths and men are, for all their potential overlap, distinct groups. That becomes a truth about the world, a truth established by definition but not arbitrarily. Where we put the line between a boy and a youth, or a youth and a man, may be arbitrary, and the boundaries may be fuzzy, but the possibility of being 'not a youth' requires there to be boys and men. Of course, we can signal our difficulties about classification in any particular case, but the linguistic tradition in which we participate requires us to segregate.

It is not by chance that Borges' fantasy encyclopaedia is itself classified as Chinese. If we are tempted to think that there might be a world with such a classificatory system, we are so tempted because we know that different linguistic communities classify the world differently. Given that Chinese characters work quite differently from Western alphabets, the temptation to think that their language might be quite different is particularly strong.<sup>14</sup> The German philosopher Gadamer noted that 'learning a foreign language . . . gives one a new standpoint in regard to the view of the

<sup>14</sup> On the question of whether Chinese does work differently and whether one can translate, in particular from ancient Greek to Chinese, see Reding (2004) esp. p. 48; Wardy (2000).