# *Introduction*

> Everything clever has already been thought, one must only try to think it again.
>
> Goethe

The original idea for this book came to me when I was working in a family-run manufacturing company in the 1980s. The constant pressure to innovate in products, designs and organisational structures aroused in me a mixture of feelings, positive and negative, about the generation and reception of novelty. This experience led me to wonder whether the Greeks in classical times had encountered a similar ambivalence about innovation. It seemed likely that, although the acknowledged artistic and intellectual innovations attributed to the ancient Greeks fell into a different category from novelty in a modern commercial context, the principles of innovation and the range of human responses to it would at some level have been similar. Above all, I was bound to learn something interesting and useful about processes of innovation, the nature of novelty and the sensibility of newness from studying these things in the ancient context.

My initial investigations showed that although the exceptionally innovative nature of the Greek achievement was taken for granted by students of Greek history and culture, little scholarly consideration was given to how the Greeks felt about and reacted to the new in its wide range of manifestations. One reason for this neglect appeared to be the general consensus among classical scholars and historians that the Greeks were averse to innovation and shunned the new. I regularly found views to this effect expressed, if only *en passant*, in books, articles and commentaries. The supposition that the Greeks did not care for the new seemed strikingly at odds with the widely acknowledged innovativeness of classical Greek thought, art and literature. 'If novelty had been as much detested by the Greeks as it is by us, what classics would there be?' Horace asks in his *Epistle to Augustus*

(written *c.*12 BCE).[1] The Roman poet's focus is on literary novelty, but the same question could be asked in respect of the other classics that comprise the Greeks' enduring legacy of art, science and philosophy.[2]

This apparent dissonance recalled to my mind the episode that had inspired E.R. Dodds' classic study *The Greeks and the Irrational*, the book of his 1950 Sather Classical Lectures. Dodds tells how a viewer of Greek sculptures in the British Museum commented to him that classical statuary was 'so terribly *rational*', rousing him to wonder 'whether the Greeks were in fact quite so blind to the importance of nonrational factors in man's experience and behaviour as is commonly assumed'.[3] In similar vein, I doubted that the Greeks could have been as unconcerned with the new or as disinclined to innovate as had generally been supposed.[4] Two decades after Dodds' book, when Hugh Lloyd-Jones published *The Justice of Zeus* (also derived from a series of Sather Lectures), Dodds wrote to him: 'I stressed the element of change in Greek beliefs, you stress the element of continuity; we are both of us right, though both of us at times exaggerate the partial truth we are stressing.'[5] It seemed to me that the natural scholarly tendency to seek continuity rather than change, to identify historical links rather than ruptures, might be partly responsible for the dismissal of the Greeks' innovationism – their deliberate pursuit of novelty and acclaim of the new.[6] Coming from a decade of varied experiences outside academia, I wondered if a new approach to the ancient evidence might help to dislodge inherited assumptions and prejudices about Hellenic traditionalism. What was needed, I felt, to redress the emphasis was a thorough reappraisal of the Greeks' responses to the new, beginning with an attempt to distinguish those spheres in which novelty was rejected from those in which it was welcomed. While the body of evidence itself was not new, a new perspective could be brought to the interpretation of familiar texts if one read them with an eye to what novelty meant for their authors.

[1] Hor. *Epist.* 2.1.90–1: *quod si tam Graecis novitas invisa fuisset / quam nobis, quid nunc esset vetus*?

[2] The wider scope of the question is implicit in Horace, who goes on (93–100) to pinpoint the period after the Persian Wars (*positis bellis*) as one in which the Greeks began to 'trifle and play' (*nugari*, *ludere*) in areas ranging from athletics and horsemanship to art and music.

[3] Dodds (1951) 1.

[4] Of Athens, Dover writes (1974: 111) 'it may seem surprising that a culture which had itself made so many innovations in the arts and in political organisation should have reacted with such undiscriminating hostility against innovations in morality and religion.' Few scholars have sought to go beyond such expressions of surprise.

[5] Lloyd-Jones (1971) xi.

[6] Cf. Foucault (1989: 23): the notion of tradition 'allows a reduction of the difference proper to every beginning, in order to pursue without discontinuity the endless search for the origin; tradition enables us to isolate the new against a background of permanence, and to transfer its merit to originality, to genius, to the decisions proper to individuals'.

When I embarked on doctoral research in the 1990s, I initially proposed to explore how the Greeks had spoken and felt about novelty. This broad objective immediately raised confusing preliminary questions. Which Greeks, in which period? Intellectuals or peasants, soldiers or traders, men or women, inhabitants of the Greek East or residents of southern Italy and Sicily? What kind of novelty – small-scale or large-scale, literary or artistic, scientific or cultural? Should I take into consideration new sights, sounds and experiences, as well as new ideas, techniques and institutions? It would be hard for a researcher using carefully designed questionnaires to find a uniform and meaningful answer to what novelty means to people in contemporary society. Answers would vary depending on personal circumstances and inclinations, on how the inquiries were framed, on the prevailing social, intellectual and political conditions in which people found themselves at the time of asking, and on a multitude of other factors. These considerations point to the ineluctably subjective aspect of the idea of newness, of which my own personal experience made me constantly aware. I wanted to find a way of interrogating the textual witnesses so as not to lose sight of the underlying complexity and subjectivity of individuals' experience of newness.

Our access to the Greeks is selective and uncertain, our worlds separated by a gulf of time, language and cultural difference; and it is increasingly recognised that a monolithic notion of 'Greek culture' is untenable.[7] Nonetheless, sufficient evidence exists to make such an investigation feasible. The Greeks' legacy of innovation in art and drama, logic and mathematics, medicine and historiography is embodied in surviving artefacts, living traditions and an unparalleled assortment of written texts. The latter indicate, implicitly and explicitly, numerous ways in which people thought about and reacted to the notion of the new in matters great and small, and in relation both to lasting innovations and fleetingly ephemeral novelties. In view of the wealth of evidence that survives for Athenian history and culture from the mid fifth century on, it was practical to make classical Athens the initial focus of a doctoral investigation of the 'dynamics' of innovation – that is, the way attitudes to the new both affected, and were affected by, the incidence of novelty and innovation in the chosen period.[8] The city's unprecedented sociopolitical trajectory, exposure to new ideas and experiences, and acknowledged receptivity to innovative pursuits, were

[7] Dougherty and Kurke (2003) 1–6.

[8] The title of my thesis, *The Dynamics of Innovation: newness and novelty in the Athens of Aristophanes* (Ph.D. Lond. 1998) echoes that of Storr's psychoanalytically informed study of creativity (1972), *The Dynamics of Creation*.

noted in antiquity, and make Athens potentially unrepresentative of Greek views generally.[9] But attitudes to the new were by no means uniform in Athens, and from the fifth century on non-Athenian intellectuals and artists had a significant presence and influence in the city. My aim was to consider divergent viewpoints, those of ordinary citizens as well as intellectuals, of laymen no less than specialists. What did it feel like to be surrounded by new objects and ideas? What did it mean to be conscious of new experiences and eventualities? Did all these forms of novelty encourage the seeking out of new paths of thought and action, or were they a disincentive to innovation?

I eventually restricted the scope of my doctoral thesis to roughly the half century 430–380 BCE, for which surviving written evidence is particularly plentiful. The chronological bounds of the inquiry were chosen to coincide with the half century during which Aristophanes' brilliant comedies were written and performed. While other sources reflect and report non-elite viewpoints, Old Comedy does so with a particularly unselfconscious freshness and immediacy. For all their humour, absurdity and potential unreliability as raw data, the surviving plays constitute an indispensable body of source material for popular thought and everyday experience in the city.[10] As well as indicating different viewpoints on specific innovations in fields such as music, philosophy and science, the comedies mostly revolve around larger themes of old and new in Athenian society – moral, political and generational. Supplemented with other texts from the fifth and fourth centuries, they provide a core of vital evidence for ways in which Greeks of the time thought, felt and acted with regard to the new.

An initial survey of words for 'new' and expressions for 'newness' in the chosen texts guided the choice of areas in which I might pursue evidence for Greek innovationism and the experience of novelty.[11] I then sought to find other ways in which novelty and innovation might be expressed or implied. The way a society experiences the new may be indicated, for instance, not only by what people say about it, but by the sounds and sights

[9] In this respect it is ironic that the oft-noted (and often inevitable) Athenocentricity of classical Greek scholarship has done so little to counteract the assumption that the Greeks rejected novelty. Ober (2008) singles out Athenian democratic institutions as uniquely effective for distributing information and generating new kinds of knowledge.

[10] Ehrenberg's (1951) useful compilation suffers from treating Aristophanic data as plain fact: Dover (1987).

[11] Dover (1974: 46–50) indicates the virtues and limitations of the lexical approach in studies of this kind. Schmidt (1967 [1876]: 77–123) provides a comprehensive schematic analysis of Greek words for 'old' and 'new'.

to which they are exposed, and by the evidence of material changes and associated behaviours.[12] In the course of the first millennium BCE, social innovations included the introduction of 'silver and bronze coins, money taxes, chattel slavery, writing, schools, written contracts, commercial loans, technical handbooks, large sailing ships, shared risk investment, absentee landlordism'.[13] Such matters are rarely identified as 'innovations' by Greek authors, but they will have contributed to the general consciousness of novelty in their environment no less than demographic changes, linguistic shifts and intercultural borrowings. Rather than attempting to construct a uniform Greek 'attitude to novelty', I compiled recurring themes that had a bearing on the Greeks' receptivity to new ideas and experiences: notions as disparate as artificiality, brightness, chance, commercialism, diversity, excitement, fashion, memory, play and youth. The list of associations to newness indicates the richness and complexity surrounding the meaning of 'new', as well as the potential for confusion owing to the scope of the word's connotations.

The wealth of perspectives revealed by my doctoral research called for a wider investigation of the Greeks' responses to 'the new'. Novelty in manifold guises – change and metamorphosis, emergence and genesis, strangeness and wonder, difference and plurality – inhabits a key place in the landscape of Greek imagination. In classical Greek writings an engagement with novelty can be discerned that is usually subtle and sometimes intense: epic and lyric poetry, tragic drama, medical and philosophical treatises, historiographical and oratorical prose all evince an imaginative commitment to the new in both their form and content. The Athenians were and are singled out as lovers of novelty (see Chapter 9 below); but the Panhellenic outlook of Greek poetry and literature from Homer onwards makes it reasonable to suppose that, local differences notwithstanding, ancient Greeks in general experienced a similar range of thoughts and feelings in respect of, among other things, the new. Unlike with the much-debated question of 'progress', a word for which no satisfactory equivalent exists in classical Greek, the two main Greek words for 'new' (*neos* and *kainos*) are explicit and commonly found. However, the awareness of the new in thought, word and deed also revolves around and embraces a range of other lexical signifiers – 'first', 'different', 'unprecedented', 'original' and

[12] In D'Angour (2007) I suggest ways in which new auditory stimuli may have contributed to the sense of novelty experienced by Athenians in the late fifth century.
[13] Hopkins (1983) xv.

so on.[14] Naturally, the Greek equivalents of these terms had domains of signification that often differ from the way they are used in modern contexts. 'Innovation' in particular, signifying the intentional pursuit of novelty and the products of that pursuit, has lexical counterparts in Greek terms such as *kainopoiiā*, *kainotomiā*, *kainotēs*, *kīnein*, *metabolē* and *neōterismos*; but the technical and political spheres in which these terms are generally found differ from the scientific and material technologies with which the term 'innovation' is so heavily associated nowadays.[15]

Aristotle cautions that 'it is the mark of a trained mind never to look for more precision in the treatment of any subject than the nature of that subject permits'.[16] One can only pursue the question of what 'new' means in the directions in which our sources point, and attempt to avoid overprecise categorisation of the admittedly select and selective evidence. It requires consideration not only of what Greeks did in relation to novelty, but how they felt about it and imagined it. Newness inhabits a complex, timeless and ultimately indefinable fusion of ideas, symbols and fantasies (a domain comprised by the French term *l'imaginaire*).[17] How are the lineaments of human imagination to be adequately captured and represented? The exploration of the vagaries of collective fantasy deals with indeterminate phenomena which are not obviously conducive to the establishment of historical or even psychological 'facts'. Historians may seek to present and evaluate evidence and sources; literary investigators may aim to illuminate the meaning of a text through analysis of such elements as verbal structures and intertextual relations; but the investigator of the Greek 'imaginary' who attempts to combine empirical and hermeneutic methodologies risks straddling the opposite poles of positivistic rigour and imaginative flexibility. This topic is not susceptible to the confident (or naive) historicism expressed by the nineteenth-century German historian Ranke's *wie es eigentlich gewesen*, 'how it actually happened'. The focus cannot only or even principally be on the realities, such as they are, of novelty and innovation, since these are largely matters of perception, whether

[14] Edelstein (1967: xxx) observes that 'in tracing the history of a concept one cannot be bound by lexicographical considerations but must look for identity of content'. But on the whole neither verbal nor conceptual identity is to be found, and one must be content with Wittgensteinian 'family resemblance'.

[15] See further Chapter 7. The terminology in English for demarcating the general area of this study, whose scope and complexity I further indicate in Chapter 1, is markedly unsatisfactory. 'Novelty' has specific and often pejorative associations, 'innovation' is linked to technology, and 'newness' is an awkward-sounding abstraction. I have settled on 'the new' (equivalent to the Greek *to neon* or *to kainon*) as the most neutral and convenient term for the range of notions under investigation.

[16] Arist. *EN* 1094b23–5.

[17] On the use of this term see Buxton (1994) 4–5.

contemporary or retrospective. Insights provided by modern psychology and psychoanalysis regarding the perceived salience of stimuli, the role of play and competition in human life, the creative impulse, the innate desire for understanding or unconscious sense of loss can offer some help in understanding how to think about the genesis, production and reception of novelty. While such notions have informed my investigation at every stage, and seem no less pertinent to ancient Greek behaviours and attitudes to the new than to modern ones, I have not sought to apply them in any systematic way. Where the psychoanalytic mode of inquiry has had its strongest impact is on my supposition that texts and verbal expressions reveal unconscious as well as conscious assumptions and preoccupations.[18]

My aim, then, is not so much to try to determine the historical vicissitudes of newness or of its conceptualisation as to present and elucidate its manifestations and intimations in ancient texts. Any account is destined to be partial and diffuse; but by observing the interplay of texts and ideas one may recognise the richness and variety of the landscape of novelty in the classical Greek context.[19] Philological and historical inquiry need to be combined in such a project, which is akin to the anthropologist's 'searching out and analysing the symbolic forms – words, images, institutions, behaviors – in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves as themselves and to one another'.[20] The heterogeneous scope and subject matter of the investigation raise questions that may be assigned to different approaches and methodologies as follows:

1. *Logico-lexical*
   How did the Greek words for 'new' arise and what is their etymology? What is the range of meanings of 'new' and related words in Greek (*neos*, *kainos* etc.)? In what contexts are these words found, and with what different significations (original, recent, young, modern etc.)?
2. *Psychological-philosophical*
   What impact does the new have, positive or negative, on different percipients? How do specific reactions inform us about the Greeks' feelings about novelty? How is a sense of 'newness' unconsciously indicated, and

[18] Unlike some uses of intertextuality, this approach supposes that we may posit relations between signifiers and what may be *unconsciously* signified; cf. my discussion (2003) of Horace's 'Archytas ode' (*Odes* 1.28), where I delve beneath the surface of the poem to explore implicit sources of meaning. Oliensis (2009: 5–11) gives an elegant exposition of what she calls the 'textual unconscious'.

[19] 'Classical' here roughly covers the period 750–350 BCE. Much remains to be said about the Hellenistic period, with its sophisticated and multifaceted approach to innovation in art and literature, for which see e.g. Fowler (1989), Fantuzzi and Hunter (2004).

[20] Geertz (1983) 58.

how is it exploited for rhetorical purposes? To what extent is the perception of novelty engendered by a shift in the position of the perceiver?

3. *Literary-symbolic*
   How is newness imagined and represented in Greek? What symbols of novelty may be found in myth, art and literature? How does the new relate to metaphors of birth and enlightenment, or to notions of youth and change, emergence and recurrence, diversity and multiplicity?
4. *Social-historical*
   What narratives of innovation exist in technical and intellectual domains? What do accounts of new inventions, discoveries and institutions tell us about the impact of the new? What part is played by the historical introduction (acknowledged or otherwise) of ideas and techniques from 'outside'?

The different and often unrelated methodologies that may be brought to bear on the notion of the new can lead to discussions which appear to have scant bearing on one another. Linguistic analysis of 'new', for instance, may seem to have little in common with consideration of the impulse towards political or medical novelty; and mechanisms of artistic and technical originality may be felt to have few points of intersection with the way 'new' is invoked in narratives of social and historical change.

Can the elusive and many-sided aspects of the Greeks' imaginative understanding of novelty be productively explored, rather than reductively anatomised? A unifying perspective on this Protean subject is hard to achieve. While a focus on 'the new' avoids the linguistic and conceptual obstacles of the question of 'progress', it raises definitional problems that are no less problematic. It is not easy even to determine the relations between the disparate categories, ideas and experiences signified by the word 'new', if these are taken to include recency, modernity, youthfulness, otherness, diversity, the unfamiliar, the unexpected and the future. In view of such terminological and semantic indeterminacy, no tidy anatomisation of the concept can be made without arbitrariness or artificiality, and despite some provisional schemas (such as that on p. 22) this book makes no attempt to do so. One can only hope for a more or less coherent and illuminating picture to emerge cumulatively from a composite methodology that takes into account an appropriately disparate range of questions, texts and analyses.[21]

[21] An increased (and welcome) critical self-consciousness among classicists has tended to shift the focus away from studying innovations *in* antiquity to generating innovations *of* antiquity (Hexter and Selden 1992); the scope of this study embraces both objectives.

Given the potential scope of their interpretation, newness and novelty may be found in most areas of ancient life. I have selected areas where either explicit indications or suggestive indications permit some productive consideration of the notion. In Chapter 1, I outline previous approaches to Greek creativity and innovation, and indicate the breadth of the investigation by discussing issues of logic, psychology and imagery that surround the notion of the new. In Chapter 2, I propose that newness may be imaginatively reconceptualised in ways that challenge the traditional view that the Greeks were held 'in the grip of the past'. Chapter 3 links the broad notion of metamorphosis to the linguistic and cultural transformations out of which emerged a principal (and arguably, at one stage, new) Greek word for 'new', *kainos*. In Chapter 4, I consider 'new' in relation to its antonym 'old', and explore different aspects of the opposition, arguing that it is less straightforward in Greek than in English because of the close linguistic association of 'new' with 'young'. In Chapter 5, discussion of the familiar proverb 'there's nothing new under the sun' connects the sentiment to the views of Presocratic thinkers, which leads to a consideration of the sources of new ideas and knowledge. In Chapter 6, the imagery associated with the birth of Athena and other Greek divinities is the basis of an exploration of literary and psychological associations to novelty (in particular those of genesis, light and wonder) and of attitudes to innovation in the visual arts. In Chapter 7, I consider the link between innovation and competition, and explore its elusive manifestations in various contexts in ancient Greece. In Chapter 8 I focus on Greek *mousikē*, which presents a notable 'tradition of innovation' in the explicit claims of musico-literary artists from the time of Homer onwards, but requires us to draw distinctions between claims to be doing something new in music and poetry. In Chapter 9 I consider the way novelty relates to literary constructions and discuss how the Greek literary imagination was both an expression of and a spur to innovative developments, particularly with regard to the 'innovationist turn' that characterises late fifth-century Athens.

The composition of this book itself illustrates approaches to innovation that can be derived from an examination of the ancient Greek experience: the criticism and contestation of earlier ideas, the recombination and reinterpretation of familiar material, the presentation of existing evidence in a new light, the novelty produced by profusion and variety, and so on. In writing about novelty, I naturally hope to say something new; but there are always new things to say and new ways of saying them – and since the passage of time itself brings about the new, the newest thing is what remains to be said. The topic potentially covers innumerable areas of thought and

investigation, and I am conscious of having only touched the surface of many areas, texts and periods in which innovation of various kinds featured in antiquity – religion and politics, architecture and theatre, the Hellenistic era, the Second Sophistic, etc.[22] My omissions and inadequacies will be a spur to me and, I hope, to others to explore new avenues. But it may be that, to misquote T.S. Eliot, humankind cannot bear very much novelty, and what is true for humankind will go for me and my readers.

[22] Whitmarsh (2005) comments briefly on rhetorical *kainotēs* in the Second Sophistic (54–6) and in the Greek novel (86–9). The latter draws attention to itself owing to its homonymy, though 'novel' in this sense derives from the sixteenth-century Italian *novella storia*. Tilg (2010: 164–97) examines how Khariton and other novelists draw attention to their own originality in developing their 'novel' genre.