

Jaakkojuhani Peltonen & Jussi Rantala

Introduction

The significance of ancient culture for contemporary affairs has been a subject of debate in recent years. Some voices have deemed it a somewhat irrelevant phenomenon, a topic with little to offer modern people or societies. This collection of papers contributes to the ongoing discussion, reminding us that the influence of ancient culture has been a profound source of inspiration not only in centuries past but also in our own time, when it continues to play a similar role.

For centuries, universities have been at the heart of preserving the knowledge of ancient Greek and Roman cultures. Much of the debate surrounding the “usefulness” of Classical Antiquity has centered on whether classical studies still deserve a place in universities around the world. Accordingly, the volume concludes with an article by Timo Sironen, who discusses the teaching and research of ancient history at the University of Oulu from the early 1970s to the present day.

Although the papers in this volume focus on the modern era, ancient culture has long inspired scholars and artists from both the premodern and the modern age. Antti Lampinen’s paper represents the early modern period, examining Beatus Rhenanus, a classicist and humanist of the early 16th century. Lampinen focuses on the reception of a classical topos in Rhenanus’ *Res Germanicae* (1531). As the paper demonstrates, classical texts were highly relevant and actively, though selectively, read in the context of contemporary political situations. Ancient texts truly mattered.

While the foundation was laid by Rhenanus and countless other scholars, the main focus of this volume is the influence of ancient culture in the modern era. Perhaps the most visible and well-known example is architecture. This topic is explored by Juhana Heikonen, who examines the classical language and architecture of Helsinki’s 1920s housing companies. He presents a selection of these buildings and their founders, interpreting architecture as a manifestation of Roman republican ideals.

As Nikolai Paukkonen notes at the beginning of his paper, Sparta was a Greek city-state that was both widely admired and hated during its time. Its legacy has endured into the modern age. Paukkonen explores Sparta’s role in Finland from the 19th century onward, when Finnish nationalism emerged and used ancient culture as a tool in the creation of a Finnish state. The influence of ancient culture was not limited to cultural matters; as Visa Helenius points out, it also impacted natural science. Helenius discusses the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius (c.99–55 BCE),

arguing that his concept of atomism was a key precursor to modern astronomy—something that, according to Helenius, has not been properly acknowledged.

Ancient history has influenced not only science, art, and high culture but also popular culture. The following three papers explore the relationship between ancient culture and popular music. While references to ancient history and culture are not uncommon in modern heavy metal, it is black metal that has most deeply integrated ancient mythology into both its music and broader cultural framework. Jussi Rantala examines the role of Hesiod's *Theogony* in Greek black metal, showing how national mythology is often fused with music, sometimes resulting in collective or even nationalistic narratives.

From one extreme of the musical spectrum to another, the papers by Jaakkojuhani Peltonen and Maria Jokela focus on rap music lyrics. Peltonen studies the way the Classical past has been presented in American rap music composed from the early 1990s to the early 2000s. He shows that the references to the Classical tradition in rap lyrics promote Afrocentric views and points out that in these songs Classical tradition is seen as a past falsified by the bias of the White Europeans.

Maria Jokela, in turn, analyzes Finnish rap lyrics, exploring references to ancient history and culture in the 2010s and 2020s. By combining lyrical analysis with historical context, she traces the connections between ancient figures and modern expression. As she concludes, ancient culture is also our culture, and its imagery serves as a powerful tool for poetic expression in rap.

The final chapter is firmly rooted in the present—and the future. Samuli Simelius explores how artificial intelligence can generate depictions of ancient social stratification. Focusing on the Roman world, Simelius investigates how AI visualizes ancient inequality based on textual prompts and examines the biases embedded in these AI-generated images. This has important implications for our historical understanding.

While this collection of papers only scratches the surface, it clearly demonstrates the enduring importance of Classical Antiquity in our culture. Ancient culture is, indeed, very much our own—it continues to manifest itself throughout our societies and the world around us.