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1 – The Archaeological Museum of the Republic of North Macedonia in Skopje at the time of its construction. Photo by Maja Gori, 2008.
2 – Roman gladiator. Part of a statuary group in Rruga Taulantia, Durrës, Albania. Photo by Filippo Carlà-Uhink, September 2019.

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Preface

Studies on the "uses of the past" have steadily and consistently advanced and developed the field over the past twenty years. Initially, the concept of a "usable past" was used to elucidate what kind of lesson, valid for the present moment, could be learned through the study of history. After the turn in the conceptualisation of historical science represented by Haydn White's work, and the subsequent increased focus on the ways in which the past is narrativised, it has been ever more prominently highlighted that "accounts of the past serve present purposes; histories have innumerable functions and are of countless types".[1] The crisis of positivistic approaches in the study of history have therefore brought into focus all the possible ways in which history/ies are deployed to construct, reinforce and promote identity, i.e. "how the past is transformed and mobilised for the present [...], as a resource to give meaning to present actions and groups as well as to imagine collective futures".[2]

This direction of studies has been further enriched through the contribution and the parallel development of work on "collective memory", as it had been called by Maurice Halbwachs in his posthumously published work *La mémoire collective* (1950), as well as on "cultural memory", a concept that has met with large success following its treatment by the Egyptologist Jan Assmann and the English Studies scholar Aleida Assmann in the 1990s.[3] Pierre Nora's seminal study on the *lieux de mémoire,* with all the literature it generated, contributed

1 Kalela (2012) 1.

2 de Saint-Laurent & Obradović (2019) 1–2.

3 e.g. Assmann (1992); Assmann (1999).

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a further crucial impulse for the study of the role of historical narratives in the foundation and reinforcement of identities. A further important cross-fertilisation has also taken place within the German-speaking world, namely in the field of the *Geschichtsdidaktik*—the didactics of history—within which concepts such as *Geschichtskultur* ("Historical Culture") and *Geschichtsbewusstsein* ("consciousness of history") have been thoroughly discussed since the 1980s. This has permitted, amongst other things, a stronger concentration on history teaching in schools; such teaching has been investigated as one of the privileged channels of transmission of those historical narratives relevant to identity construction.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, then, fostering identity through historical narratives meant that History (with a capital H) was deployed in the service of national identities, those "imagined communities", to adopt Benedict Anderson's phrase,[4] which require a set of symbols and narratives to foster a sense of common belonging. Consequently, Eric Hobsbawm introduced, in a crucial collective volume co-edited with Terence Ranger, the concept of "invention of tradition".[5] In so doing he sought to explain more clearly how historical narratives—and sometimes completely fictional characters and events—can result in "traditions", shaping a sense of belonging in those who listen to and reproduce such narratives.

Always more energy has also been dedicated to the role of antiquity in such "usable histories". One need only think of Johann Gottfried Herder's *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (1775), a work which looked to the Germanic peoples and the period we call late antiquity in explaining the origins of Western European states.[6] Addtionally, claims of autochthony or primordialism or simply of "older possession" of a region, frequently linked to nationalistic issues and clashes between nations, generally find their legitimation in historical narratives concerning the centuries before the Common Era. Crucially, important research has been done not only on the ways in which ancient history has been "used", but also, and often earlier and in more refined terms, on how archaeological artefacts have been "narrativised" and deployed in structuring identity. Archaeological material can, indeed, precisely because of its materiality, generate the impression of a higher "objectivity" and is thus particularly important in this kind of discourse; "archaeology's greatest asset was"—and re-

4 Anderson (2006).

5 Hobsbawm (1983).

6 Geary (2002) 22–24. See also Wood (2013).

mains—"the heightened and immediate sense of connection with the past that material objects can provide".[7]

The concept of a "use" of the past should not, as yet, generate the impression that such narrativisations and "deployments" are always intentional, put into practice by an elite of those who hold political power, who may eventually manipulate the masses (especially in undemocratic contexts), as "use of history" transforms into "abuse of history". While it is undeniable that similar forms of intentional manipulation of historical narratives have occurred—for instance in the case of measures for "nation-building" decided in a planned and rational way—it is much more often the case that historians, archaeologists, politicians, journalists, teachers, school pupils, organisers of exhibitions and their visitors—i.e. everybody who receives, reformulates, shares, transmits such narratives—are embedded into a discourse, in the Foucauldian sense, without necessarily being aware of its origins and its consequences.

To the flourishing literature on the subject of the role of classical antiquity in modern identity formation we have added this issue of *thersites,* the first one in which the journal assumes its new "corporate identity" and graphic appearance. Our aim is of course not to repeat what has been said by multiple scholars, but to contribute further and to deepen the discussion on two different levels. The first is through a substantial section containing reviews of recent secondary literature, which aims at discussing and presenting some of the most interesting and most exciting publications dedicated to this topic of the past few years. This section is intended to bolster and harmonise with the articles section and should not—as unfortunately often happens with journals—be thought of as a sort of appended attachment.

For the second level, we focus on several specific topics that have been only lightly considered, or directly neglected, until now. First of all, we do this by focusing not only on national identities, but on what we have called "multiple identities". These include, for instance, local identity and the sense of "geopiety" for one's own town or region,[8] impulses that might press one to believe it more ancient, or historically more important than it might otherwise be, as analysed by Maja Gori and Alessandro Pintucci in their contribution on Alatri in central Italy. Yet there are other kinds of identity that are built through classical reference, for instance political identities, including that of the so-called "alt-right";

7 Trigger (2006) 249.

8 On geopiety, the reference work is still Tuan (1976).

their use of the classical past is the topic of a monograph by Donna Zuckerberg reviewed here by Anđelko Mihanović.

Such focus on "multi-layered" and segmentary identities means also giving particular attention to the supposed "clash of identities", which is so frequent when national identities come into contrastive contact. Yet, in this case too, scholarship has mainly focused until now on studies describing the evolution of historical narratives within single countries, even if such evolution is presented in relation to conflicts with neighbours, or more generally with reference to their political actions in the international field. Much less attention has been dedicated to analysing how the specific evolution of "uses of the past" should be understood as a dialogue in which historical narratives developed in a country can cause shifts and responses in other "historical cultures" and "historical politics". This is the topic of Filippo Carlà-Uhink's contribution, which seeks to analyse the presence of the Romans in nationalistic discourse in Serbia and Romania as a dialogue running along the Danube. Jessica Clementi's paper moves in the same direction, showing how the analysis of a particular kind of archaeological material became embedded in the New Macedonian Question and in particular in the political dispute between North Macedonia and Greece.

The remaining articles concentrate on aspects that have been until now neglected, since they have been obscured by more prominent research themes. While secondary literature on the use of classical antiquity in the Balkans, and in particular in relation to Macedonia, is abundant, it generally concentrates on the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Charalampos I. Chrysafis throws here light on the precursors of these debates, on the Macedonian question in the nineteenth century, as visible in the work of Margarites Demitsas. Operating within a similar frame of understanding, Andrea Avalli focuses on the way in which sword-and-sandals movies operated after the end of Fascism in Italy, and how the heavily weighing Fascist reception of "Romanità" was elaborated and processed in the years after World War II.

Loretana de Libero's contribution, which begins the issue, moves to Germany in the final moments of World War II and presents us with a deep insight into the use of classical references in Nazi propaganda, with particular reference to the Battle of Stalingrad. The article investigates not only the "official" use of such references, but the ways in which they were received, understood, redeployed, or contested by the population, through an investigation of the letters of German soldiers. It is a study that opens new avenues of analysis and discussion on the importance of the reception of classical antiquity in political discourse, as well as in war.

We hope that the articles and the reviews provide, in the broadest sense, a further contribution to this growing field of study, and assist in stressing once again that antiquity, in being relevant and of importance today, can hardly said to be antiquated.

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