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A Handbook to Classical Reception in Eastern and Central Europe

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We are grateful to Wiley-Blackwell for the interest in our volume and particularly to Caroline Richards, our copyeditor, for her careful work on various details and for improving the overall uniformity of the chapters. We also owe a debt of gratitude to Shyamala Venkateswaran for her infinite patience and meticulous handling of details in the production stage for this volume.

Finally, we would like to thank our readers in anticipation for taking time to venture into unknown territory, which—it is our hope—they will continue to explore.

Zara Torlone, Dana Munteanu, and Dorota Dutsch
Introduction

Zara Martirosova Torlone, Dana LaCourse Munteanu, 
and Dorota Dutsch

Why This Volume?

This volume has been conceived in defiance of a barbed wire fence. The Iron Curtain narrowed down Western Europe’s (and the United States’) notion of Europe and its classical heritage to the West, allowing the rest of the continent to disappear in the shadow of the Soviet Union. Our essays were designed to draw attention to the rich history of classical receptions in the regions that temporarily disappeared behind the curtain. This was a few years ago. Now the year is 2016. In Hungary, Slovenia, and Macedonia barbed wire fences rise anew. They are meant to slow the progress of the hundreds of thousands of refugees from war-torn countries who have reached Greece and are now hoping to settle in the well-to-do democracies in the north. These fences put a humanitarian twist on our old question about the intellectual boundaries of Europe’s classical heritage. Who has the right to partake in Europe’s relatively prosperous present? Who has the right to benefit from Europe’s discourse of democracy and rationalism constructed on the model of the Athenian enlightenment? Today it seems that a volume like ours needs to be preoccupied with more than extending research into Europe’s uses of its classical heritage further east. We would therefore like to present the study of classical reception in Eastern and Central Europe as yet another opportunity to pose the question “Who—if anyone—owns culture?”1
Introduction

In the past several decades, classical reception studies have made impressive strides and become increasingly more visible in the field of classics, distinguishing themselves assertively from the study of classical tradition in its conventional sense of imitation and following the canon. Important theoretical studies have broadened the scope of research beyond a linear classical tradition and implied canonicity, and many scholars have focused attention on diverse cultures and geographical areas, making important contributions to classical reception studies beyond Western Europe. We as editors see this volume on classical receptions in Eastern and Central Europe as a part of this larger diversification of the classical tradition and a salutary reminder of the cultural differences within Europe.

Outside of Central and Eastern Europe, the region’s rich and longstanding history of classical receptions is largely unknown. There are three notable exceptions: a brief essay by Jerzy Axer (2007) on the classical tradition in Central and Eastern Europe; a short chapter by Asen Kirin, “Eastern European Nations, Western European Culture, and the Classical Tradition,” discussing Russia and Bulgaria (2010); and a special issue of Classical Receptions Journal edited by Zara M. Torlone (2013), which addresses the classical receptions in Eastern and Central European poetry, namely in Bulgaria, Poland, Romania, and Russia. These publications broke new ground in Anglophone scholarship, and offered a new departure in the field of reception. They, however, addressed only a fraction of the multifaceted classical reception in the region.

The present volume is the first comprehensive English-language study of the reception of classical antiquity in Eastern and Central Europe to offer detailed case studies of 12 countries that are fully contextualized historically, locally, and regionally. This project does not claim exhaustiveness of the material coverage given the wealth of data and the immensity of the subject. Our task for this collection is twofold: first, we hope to offer a significant insight into the complicated history of engagement with Greco-Roman antiquity in 12 Eastern European countries (Armenia, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Georgia, Hungary, Poland, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Slovenia); second, many essays in this volume address the role of classical reception in mediating the relationship between emerging national identities and the assumed sovereignty/superiority of Western European culture (e.g., Bažant, Kalb, Sirakova, Slavova, Tamás, Torlone). The exploration of classical reception both confirms and challenges that sovereignty, negotiating at the same time independent rights to classical antiquity for the Eastern and Central European cultures.

Although the countries represented in this volume have no common vernacular or cultural denominator, classical antiquity has always been manifest in their modern intellectual and artistic output. In this volume we aim to unveil ways in which specific national cultures have engaged with classical Greece and Rome and to understand, in turn, how classical antiquity contributed to the idea of nation
building in many of the countries represented. Our focus on the role of classical reception in the formation of nationalisms is a useful one because it yet again brings to the fore the local and regional nationalist and supranational debates about the entity of Europe. Studied in the light of classical antiquity, these debates address the complex negotiation of European identities in the regions that traditionally have been seen as the outskirts of Europe (Russia) or even not Europe at all (Armenia and Georgia).

This volume, following the example of Stephens and Vasunia’s work (2010), prompts readers to revise assumptions about the classical tradition and its reception within Europe and question the very concept of the image of classics and classical antiquity centered on the West. By producing this volume, we hope that studying the dissemination of classical influences within the whole continent of Europe all the way to the Black Sea, the very outskirts of the Greek concept of oikoumene, will remind us that there is no center or privileged site for European classical reception studies. We hope that this publication will finally open the long overdue floodgates of inquiries into the classical receptions in the parts of the world that have been previously ignored and demonstrate the potential of Greek and Roman texts and myths to cut across national and cultural limitations.

Any unified approach to the reception of classics in Eastern and Central Europe, a vast area covering many different linguistic and ethnic populations, over several centuries, remains in itself problematic. However, it may not be pointless to identify certain trends, some of which are already familiar to our readers and some specific to the region. In the East of Europe, as in the West, Latin represented the lingua franca in which scientists (for example, Copernicus), historians (Romanian Cantemir), and poets (Hungarian Rimay) would write for broad audiences during the Middle Ages, Renaissance, and Enlightenment. In a majority of regions covered in this volume, classical languages and education became part of school and university curricula, a large body of literature and art drew inspiration from Greco-Roman models, and classical texts have been invested with political meaning.

Without insisting on pan-European similarities, we shall focus next on a few aspects of reception that seem to be unusual in our geographical part of the continent: (1) challenges: competition, Marxist demotion, pragmatism; and (2) reinstatements: imaginary realms and redefinitions of the classics.

**Challenges: Competition, Marxist Demotion, and Pragmatism**

The role of classics in education and culture has been questioned at different times with intensity. Reasons have varied. Even though the field provided educational and cultural unity across the continent, it was sometimes viewed as a Western imposition. That Latin was not among Anton Chekhov’s favorite subjects in school finds reflection in his writing, as we may read with amusement in one of our essays on Russia (Starikovsky). This could appear to be an isolated case. Yet, it may
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Outline a deeper sense of frustration, spread more broadly in the region. While adopting the classical tradition aligned the Central and Eastern European countries with their western neighbors, the West did not make a similar effort to understand the unique cultural treasures of the other side of Europe. Yet, some of those local traditions appeared older and sometimes more valuable than the Greco-Roman heritage, especially from the eighteenth century onward, as national identities started to form. To compensate, scholars, writers, and artists have tried to revive and make known their particular cultures, not always in opposition but often in competition with the classics. In this vein, Czech architects wanted to develop a style independent from the classical cannon (Bazant’s essay), Romanian philosopher and poet Lucian Blaga wrote The Revolt of Our Non-Latin Nature (Romanian introduction), and Brodsky composed bucolic poetry placed in the Russian winter, in contrast with Vergil’s Mediterranean summery meadows (Torlone). In elevating the regional heritage, may it be Scythian, Thracian, or Slavic, Eastern European thinkers sometimes propose a democratization of culture which should include a broader spectrum of traditions besides the classics. By assimilating the classical tradition and often writing in a language of circulation, Eastern and Central European intellectuals found a way to make themselves known to the world in a predictable jargon, through a Western lens, but that meant sometimes dimming an untranslatable part of their culture, veiled in the obscurity of the ante-classical, if not anti-classical, past.

Marxism brought a different way of thinking about the classical tradition. Overall, as an intellectual movement, it offered a new perspective for looking at classics, drawing attention to neglected aspects of scholarship: slaves, women, class tensions, and so on. Its legacy remains important to modern thought. Independently, however, for many countries of the Soviet bloc from 1950 to 1989, Marxism coupled with cultural indoctrination and propaganda raised a problem for classics, as well as for Western thought broadly understood. Why should young people study Greco-Roman history and culture, which relied on social injustice, exploitation, and imperialism? In answer to the moral decadence of the classics, the foundation of corrupt Western capitalism, Soviet communism promoted “better” myths and narratives as the legitimate standards in art and literature. Sometimes the official rhetoric would further appropriate classical myths or imagery to sustain new societal goals. So, for instance, a New Man, through hard work and fraternal cooperation, was to reach the “Golden Age” of humanity.

In connection with Marxist rhetoric, a common line of rejection of the classics invoked pragmatic considerations. Beyond evoking the unjust world of the classical past, learning Greek and Latin would bring no practical benefits, whereas sciences and technical skills would both be useful in the training of the young and ensure social progress. Neither new nor limited to the Soviet bloc in time and space, this line of thought continues in our time. Nevertheless, maintaining the classics in schools and universities appears nothing short of a miracle in some Eastern European countries during the Soviet era. Reminiscent of colonialism, Russian
science and culture dominated the region for almost half a century, as Russian became briefly the lingua franca of the region, mandatory to learn in schools and used in scientific communications in Eastern Europe. Under the Soviet scientific revolution, Latin appeared outdated and ancient Greek entirely useless.

Reinstatements: Imaginary Realms and Redefinitions of the Classics

During the Middle Ages, southern, eastern, and central Europe, under constant Ottoman pressure, embraced the classics as a tradition cemented by Christianity. Later on, as clusters of political and military powers, such as imperial Russia (1721–1917), the Austro-Hungarian monarchy (1867–1918), and the Soviet state (1949–1989), imposed their domination, the classics became, at times, a vehicle to express independence, to return to a prior, freer identity, or, finally, to escape politics altogether. The monuments and artifacts of Roman conquest and Greek colonization in the region represented a steady source of scholarly interest (see the chapters on material culture, Russia, and Romania) and were seen as valuable testimonies to the past, despite differences in scholarly interpretations; classical models also found compelling reimagining in the hands of artists (e.g., Hungarian sculptor Ferenczy).

At various times, staging classical plays could provide both a cross-cultural exploration of universal themes and an outlet for incorporating political allusions that would not be permitted otherwise (see the essays on staging Greek tragedy in Bulgaria and Czech lands). In the isolating world of the Soviet era, in which one could not officially travel west, or exchange ideas with the other side of the Iron Curtain, exile came from within. Since many intellectuals felt imprisoned metaphorically (and sometimes not only so) in their own countries and confined by the narrow official ideology, they longed for a return to a tradition no longer venerated. A book then, such as Ovid’s *Tristia* (1.1–14), could take one to an imaginary trip to Rome or anywhere else where one could not physically go or publicly enunciate. Reading classical texts, therefore, in this context had less to do with interpreting them and more with entering another world, through secret linguistic codes (for example, learning ancient Greek). Overall, teaching classical languages was tolerated as a branch of linguistics, and reading classics in translation remained acceptable as part of the literature of the world. Philosophy enjoyed less lenience, since Marxism-Leninism held a monopoly on the truth. A few men reading Plato and Hegel, away from standard classrooms, in the Carpathian Mountains, discovered an oasis of freedom from immediate politics (Antohi 2000). But lending even one blacklisted book, especially if it dealt with pernicious metaphysics, could provide a pretext for beatings and persecutions in an absurd regime (see essay on Noica by Gabor), (Noica 1990). Fortunately, such repressive actions remained infrequent, but they granted the field a certain aura of mysterious attraction to
the young. Since 1989, learning classical languages has no longer constituted an act of defiance and deliverance from an oppressive reality. The twenty-first-century generations will have to shape anew their ways of receiving and reimagining the Greco-Roman heritage.

Trajectory

The chapters in the present volume form a whimsical guidebook, combining travel through the contemporary—post-Iron Curtain—political landscape of Central and Eastern Europe with time travel. On the modern map of Eastern-Central Europe we find points of entry into the different national cultures’ engagement with the Greco-Roman past. Through these points, the reader enters deeper into the past to discover networks of exchange that overwrite the confines of modern national identities. We will follow two major, often intertwined trails, shaped very loosely by the historical spheres of influence of empires, gravitating either toward the West or toward the East. The western trail leads to Rome via what once was the Western Roman Empire and then became the Holy Roman Empire. The eastern trail leads to Constantinople and Istanbul, first the heart of Byzantium, then, of the Ottoman Empire. These “trails” do not constitute fixed historical or cultural entities. Rather, they are loosely inspired by history and are creations of convenience and imagination.

Our trajectory begins with the imaginary western trail which links communities whose cultural elites during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance learned Latin, and whose populations have been and often still are predominantly Roman Catholic or Protestant. This trail takes us from the Dalmatian Coast and the modern countries of Croatia and Slovenia up north to the borders of what are now the Czech and Polish Republics. The Southern Slavs who settled in the sixth century on the Adriatic Coast in the Roman provinces of Illyricum, Panonia, and Noricum built their cultures around “their” lands’ Roman past. The chapters reveal the pride the Croats take in the influence of their Roman architecture (Gudelj) and their deep devotion to neo-Latin artistry, which they have cultivated well into the late twentieth century (Jovanovic). The Slovenian chapters highlight the country’s contribution to collecting Roman inscriptions (Šašel Kos), and the role of Venus in forging the history of a local Slavic religion (Marinčič).

From these regions, in which Rome’s presence has been felt as intimate and material, we move further north to the Czech Republic and Poland, where the classical tradition was a political transplant, a part of the process of acculturation meant to connect the Western Slavs to Western Christianity, which began in response to the Carolingian and Ottonian dynasties’ nascent Drang nach Osten in the early Middle Ages. Almost immediately, the Slavs appropriated classical ideals as paradigms for their own identity. Our Czech chapters show how, when a wave of nationalism swept Europe in the 1800s, Latin literary allusion helped forge the idiom
of Czech national identity against a Germanophone background (Čadková). The Polish essays take us farther back in time and focus on the crucial roles of the Roman Republic and principate as the models that enabled the functioning of the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth (Grześkowia-Krwawicz). An important essay by Jerzy Axer draws attention to Poland’s complex relationship with the Greek heritage.

From Poland we now move back south to countries that now occupy territories historically close to the Roman Empire, just as Slovenia and Croatia did, but which in the second half of the second millennium spent several hundred years under Ottoman rule. The eastern and western trails are interlocked in Hungary. The country occupies part of what was Roman Panonia before being occupied by Germanic, Slavic, and finally Uralic-speaking tribes, the Hungarians. This multi-ethnicity fostered a tradition of neo-Latin, lasting until the mid-nineteenth century, when Hungarian finally became the kingdom’s official language. The country’s engagement with the classics was not interrupted by the Ottoman wars (Juhász-Ormsby). For example, Horace resurfaced as an aid in thinking about the dangers of Nazism in the 1930s.

Romania’s interaction with the Greco-Roman past predates the Eastern Roman Empire, and can be traced back to ancient Greek colonies on the Black Sea and then to Roman Dacia. The connection with Rome forms the very core of Romanian identity and is reflected in the name of the country and its language. Two of our essays highlight particularly tantalizing encounters with classical cultures: Coșbuc’s poetic meditations on the curse and blessing of the Roman conquest (Fenechiu and Munteanu), and the famously perplexing Tropaeum Traiani (Emmerson). We remain in the sphere of influence of both Rome and Constantinople when we move back south to modern Serbia and Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The region lies on the important political and cultural fault line along which the Western and Eastern Empires split in 395. The Slavs settled there in the sixth century just as they did in Croatia and Slovenia, their northern neighbors, and were split between Western and Latin Christianity (in Bosnia-Herzegovina) and Eastern and Orthodox (Serbia). Their conquest by the Ottomans further separated them from their northern neighbors. In much of this region, the prolonged Ottoman rule has put its own inflection on the Greek and Roman heritage. Our essays explore the use of classical references by the eighteenth-century Franciscan friars writing histories of Bosnia in Latin (Zečević), and the reception of Homer in the nineteenth-century Serbian epic (Todorović). The latter is particularly noteworthy given classical scholars’ studies of Serbian epic as pristine and untouched by Western influences.

From Serbia, we proceed east to Bulgaria, another Slavic kingdom founded in the seventh century and remaining within Byzantium’s sphere of gravitation. Christianized by Cyril and Methodius, the Bulgarians remained a part of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Ottoman Empire (1396-1878). One of our essays delves into the most remote past to explore the history of the current territory of Bulgaria, rather than its people, and asks whether these material