

APPROACHING THE ANCIENT WORLD

ART, ARTEFACTS,  
AND  
CHRONOLOGY  
IN CLASSICAL  
ARCHAEOLOGY



WILLIAM R. BIERS

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# Art, Artefacts, and Chronology in Classical Archaeology

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The study of art history and archaeology depends substantially on dates which are given to artefacts and works of art. Very few students, however, have an understanding of matters of chronology or of the source material that determines the dates. In this study Professor Biers sets out to explain this crucial facet of classical scholarship.

Short introductory chapters outline the archaeology and chronology of the ancient Greek and Roman world. The core of the study is two chapters on Relative and Absolute Dating which seek, by use of specific examples, to convey the principles behind how dates are assigned to archaeological and artistic artefacts. Professor Biers presents examples from architecture, sculpture, and painting to illustrate how stylistic analysis is used to determine relative dates. Self-dating objects, such as coins, as well as the interpretation of written evidence, are explored to show how specific, absolute dates are deduced. The final chapter examines selected problems in chronology that involve the interpretation of the various kinds of evidence presented in the previous chapters.

William R. Biers is Professor of Art History and Archaeology at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

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The sources for the study of the Greek and Roman world are diffuse, diverse, and often complex, and special training is needed in order to use them to the best advantage in constructing a historical picture.

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## Preface

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This book grew directly out of a seminar on Greek chronology that I was privileged to direct at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens while Whitehead Visiting Professor during the 1989–1990 academic year. I had previously explored the subject of the chronology of the Greek period, at first specifically in relationship to Greek vase-painting and later more comprehensively for Greek art, in graduate seminars at the University of Missouri-Columbia, but the Athens course offered a chance to study with advanced students, many of whom had become interested in the subject of chronology in general as well as in particular problems they had encountered in their own work. Moreover, the suggested new chronology for the early Greek period propounded by E. D. Francis and Michael Vickers had reached a stage where a considerable bibliography had been built up, and the subject had reached an overall notoriety not often accorded such a seemingly dry subject. It had become popular, of course, because the question of the placement in time of individual objects, buildings, or whole sites, and their chronological relationships to one another and to our own time is important, indeed basic, for the study of the ancient world. As Barbara Tuchman wrote from the point of view of an historian: “Dates may seem dull and pedantic to some, but they are fundamental because they establish sequence – what precedes and what follows – thereby leading toward an understanding of cause and effect” (*A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous 14th Century*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1978, p. xv). The topic, of course, also tends to take on a certain immediacy for advanced graduate students about to launch out on their teaching careers, for they would like to be certain what to teach in this significant area! A re-examination of the evidence underlying our dating of the ancient world is also an ideal subject for a seminar for graduate students, providing insight not only into how one handles the difficult and often fractured evidence from

antiquity but also as an introduction to the way scholars think – and argue.

The participants in the seminar were fortunate to hear directly from scholars who were actively involved with chronology of the early Greek period. T. Leslie Shear, Jr, the Director of the American School of Classical Studies' excavations in the Athenian Agora, took time from his busy schedule to discuss the evidence from the Agora with us. We were also honored to have Michael Vickers take part in a session, giving a presentation and then fielding, with good humor, a number of pointed questions on the subject of his proposed new chronological scheme. I remain indebted to Michael Vickers for agreeing to come to the seminar (and later suggesting that I write this book) and to the American School and its Director, William D. E. Coulson, for making his visit to Athens possible.

One of the first questions that people often raise when faced with an antiquity is "How old is it?" This is probably also one of the most frequently asked questions by students in courses that deal with the art and artefacts of antiquity (after "what's on the test?"). It is a natural question and one that is easily answered by the instructor, usually as "so many years BC," or perhaps "so many years ago." Little consideration is given on either side as to how such a deceptively precise numerical answer can be given, and this aspect of antiquity, or rather our understanding of this facet of classical antiquity, is never explored in any depth. Students usually accept dates given to them in textbooks without thinking about where the dates are derived from or on what sort of evidence they are based. An historical sense is not a characteristic of most of today's students, who can often consider as contemporary objects or actions hundreds, or sometimes even thousands, of years apart. The specifics of the ancient world are seen through a haze, or fog, depending on where one looks, and chronology can be one of the more hazy areas. Often, it is as if antiquity is being viewed through a telescope backwards; the image in the lens is tiny, only shows a portion of the scene, and there is no depth or perspective in the picture.

When one looks into the question of dates and how they are determined, one sees that all is not as cut and dried as the acceptance of a specific numerical date for a particular object or event might allow us to believe. This book is intended to provide the student and the general reader with some appreciation of the complexities and uncertainties involved in trying to assign dates to objects of art and to the artefacts of everyday use that are more commonly found in excavations in classical lands. The determination of chronology can be an involved and complex

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undertaking, sometimes hard to explain. I have tried to handle the difficulties involved in as direct a manner as possible in the hope that this will lead to a clearer understanding of the subject. An introductory chapter defines the discipline of classical archaeology and the types of information that can be derived from it and provides an introduction to the chronology of classical antiquity. Chapter 2 explains how the Greeks and the Romans measured and recorded the passing of time and how our own calendar developed. The following three chapters deal in some detail with the various methods of dating individual objects from the Greek and Roman world and the difficulties and uncertainties that are involved. A number of specific examples are included as illustrations of how one goes about determining dates.

It has been my goal to make this short study as useful and informative as possible. With this purpose in mind, the notes that accompany the text are usually designed to lead the reader deeper into the subject of Greek and Roman art and archaeology and the study of chronology, and they thus often contain more information than is usual in a standard reference note. The notes are also somewhat idiosyncratic in that a selected, annotated bibliography is usually provided that might not list all the possible references but does include those that I consider useful, accessible, and, in many cases, well written and easy to read. From these, the dedicated reader will be able to get back to all the necessary bibliography concerning a particular subject. Full bibliographical references to books and articles are given in the notes, so a separate bibliography has not been included. Since this work is designed primarily for English-speaking students in the broadest sense, I have tried to keep most of the references to works in English, though the occasional foreign title is to be found. A deeper penetration into any one of the topics brought up in this book will quickly indicate that classical studies is still truly an international undertaking.

A number of scholars have taken time to discuss this project with me or even to read parts of the unfinished manuscript. A simple listing of their names must suffice to convey my gratitude for their help: Jane Biers, Eugene Borza, John Camp, Eric Hostetter, Thomas Howe, Carolyn Koehler, Peter Kuniholm, Albert Leonard, Jr, Susan Rotroff, Kathleen Warner Slane. Finally, appreciation must be expressed to the editor, Richard Stoneman, and the staff of Routledge for their efficiency and patient responses to my endless questions.

