

Tim Rood, Carol Atack & Tom Phillips

ANACHRONISM and ANTIQUITY



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Anachronism and Antiquity

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Contents

List of Figures	vii
Preface	viii
List of Abbreviations	x
Prelude: Look to the End	1
1 Inventing Anachronism	9
Modern anachronisms	9
The origins of anachronism	11
From Byzantium to Italy and beyond	15
Anachronism from literature to chronology	18
Anachronism and related terms	22
Anachronism and the idea of progress	24
The historian's unforgivable sin	27
2 Anachronistic Histories	33
Borges and Cervantes: A chivalrous pursuit	33
Petrarch and Valla: Forging anachronism	39
Altdorfer and Schlegel: Koselleck's pasts	45
Anachronism and periodization	52
3 Anachronism and Philology	59
Creative anachronism in antiquity	59
Situating ancient criticism	62
Anachronism and philological argument	65
Anachronistic similes	69
Anachronistic names	71
Anachronism and the poet	76
Anachronistic games: Orestes at the Pythia	80
Historicizing literary anachronism	83
Interlude: Dido versus Virgil	87

4	Anachronism and Chronology	93
	Scaliger and the birth of chronology	93
	Calendars out of joint	98
	Dating systems	103
	Prochronisms and metachronisms	110
5	Anachronistic Survivals	119
	Uneven development	119
	Anachronistic traces	125
	Anachronism in the city	129
	Anachronism on the periphery	135
	Anachronism incorporated	141
6	Anachronism and Exemplarity	145
	Exemplarity versus historicism	145
	Exemplarity in theory	150
	Exemplarity in action	157
	<i>Exempla</i> in their time	163
	Interlude: Ariadne on Naxos	169
7	Anachronism Now: Multitemporal Moments	175
	Theorizing multitemporality	175
	Seizing the moment	178
	Objects in time	182
	Epic mo(nu)ments	187
	Anachronic Ajax	190
	Coda: Ariadne at Cumae	193
	Interlude: Aeneas in the Underworld	195
8	Anachronistic Dialogues	199
	Anachronism and the <i>School of Athens</i>	199
	Philosophical dialogues across time	206
	Dialogues with the dead	212
	Reading communities	218
	Epilogue: Crowning the Victors	223
	Notes	231
	References	255
	Index	271

Figures

1	Gaspar van den Hoecke, <i>Croesus showing his Treasures</i>	2
2	Letter of Aphrodite (papyrus)	14
3	Albrecht Altdorfer, <i>Alexanderschlacht</i>	46
4	Paris leading Helen away: red-figure skyphos attributed to the Makron painter	60
5	Page from manuscript of Jerome's version of Eusebius' <i>Chronicle</i>	96
6	The Parian Marble, detail	108
7	The Parian Marble, detail	109
8	Panathenaic Amphora, attributed to the Marsyas Painter	133
9	Togatus Barberini	151
10	Giorgio de Chirico, <i>The Soothsayer's Recompense</i>	170
11	Ajax preparing suicide: black-figure amphora attributed to Exekias	176
12	Hoplites riding on dolphins: red-figure psykter attributed to Oltos	183
13	Raphael, <i>School of Athens</i>	200
14	Raphael, <i>Parnassus</i>	203
15	James Barry, <i>Crowning the Victors at Olympia</i> , detail	224
16	James Barry, <i>Crowning the Victors at Olympia</i> , detail	224
17	James Barry, <i>Crowning the Victors at Olympia</i> , detail	225
18	James Barry, <i>Elysium</i> , detail	227

Preface

This book is a study both of anachronism in antiquity and of anachronism as a vehicle for understanding antiquity. We have tried to make it accessible to readers outside Classics with an interest in the history of temporality: we offer translations of all Greek and Latin (sometimes with small borrowings from published versions), and have offered guidance for further reading in the Notes rather than exhaustive documentation of secondary literature. Published translations of post-classical works have sometimes been adapted.

The writing of this book was supported by the Leverhulme Trust Research Project Grant 'Anachronism and Antiquity' (October 2016–September 2019: <https://anachronismandantiquity.wordpress.com/>), for which Tim Rood (TR) was Principal Investigator and Carol Attack (CA) and Tom Phillips (TP) Post-doctoral Research Associates; CA and TP are in addition preparing separate monographs for the project (on Plato and Apollonius respectively). Mathura Umachandran joined the project in September 2018 and provided intellectual energy and keen critical comments: the book owes a great deal to her involvement. John Marincola and Scarlett Kingsley were involved in preparing the Leverhulme application and supported the project throughout. Prior to the application, TR presented a collection of material on ancient anachronism and the history of anachronism at an exploratory workshop he organized in September 2015 with support from the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard University; papers were also given at the workshop by Kate Gilhuly, Larry Kim, Scarlett Kingsley, Paul Kosmin, John Marincola, Francesca Schironi, Valeria Sergueenkova, Barnaby Taylor and Emma Teng, all of whom made it a very fertile occasion. John Marincola in addition secured funding for a stimulating conference on anachronism at Florida State University in March 2018, where CA, TP, Emily Greenwood, Constanze Güthenke, Brooke Holmes, Scarlett Kingsley, Ellen O'Gorman, Mark Payne and Barnaby Taylor gave papers (six of which form a special issue of *Classical Receptions Journal*). We must express gratitude, too, to the project's Steering Committee (Catherine Darbo-Peschanski, Emma Dench, Jaś Elsner, Constanze Güthenke, Nicholas Purcell and Kostas Vlassopoulos) and to the editorial team at Bloomsbury, Alice Wright and Lily Mac Mahon. The Musée Communale, Boulogne-sur-Mer, and the Bancroft Library, University of

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All three authors share a connection with St Hugh's College, Oxford: TR as Fellow in Classics; CA first as Lecturer, then as Junior Research Fellow and Tutor for Equality; TP as alumnus. The college's staff (academic and non-academic), students, buildings, libraries, gardens and food make it a wonderful place to work and breathe: we would like to offer this book to all those whose dedication helps to make it so.

Abbreviations

- DK H. Diels and W. Kranz, eds, *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th edn, Berlin, 1951.
- FGrH* F. Jacoby, ed., *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, Berlin and Leiden, 1923–58.
- FGrH Cont.* G. Schepens and S. Schorn, eds, *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker continued*, Leiden, 1998–.
- FRHist* T.J. Cornell, ed., *The Fragments of the Roman Historians*, Oxford, 2013.
- OGIS* W. Dittenberger, ed., *Orientis Graecae inscriptiones selectae*, Leipzig, 1903–5.
- SSR* G. Giannantoni, ed., *Socratis et Socraticorum reliquiae*, Naples, 1990.
- TrGF* B. Snell, R. Kannicht and S. Radt, eds, *Tragicorum Graecorum fragmenta*, Göttingen, 1971–2004.

Prelude: Look to the End

Towards the start of his *Histories* (probably completed in the 420s BC), Herodotus of Halicarnassus tells of an encounter between the famously wealthy Lydian king Croesus and Solon, an Athenian poet and political leader (1.29–33). After taking Solon on a tour of the extensive treasuries in his capital Sardis, Croesus expectantly asks Solon who he regards as the most fortunate of mortals. Solon responds by praising an Athenian, Tellus, who had two adult sons, possessed enough wealth for a comfortable life, and finally died fighting for his city near Eleusis. When the incredulous Croesus proceeds to ask who was second most fortunate, Solon tells another story. Two strong youths, Cleobis and Biton, took up the yoke of their mother's cart and carried her to a festival of Hera. As all the other women admired the two young men, their mother prayed to the goddess to give them the best possible reward. They at once lay down in Hera's sanctuary and died in their sleep – the goddess showing, Solon explains, that it is better for humans to be dead than alive. Solon then explains to the now irate Croesus that any single day in the course of a human life may bring disaster and that before judging whether someone is blessed 'one must look to the end of every affair, to see how it turns out' (1.32.9) (Fig. 1).

Whether one views it as 'puerile' (Voltaire) or as 'clear and judicious' (Gibbon),¹ Solon's observation at first sight seems to fit a common characterization of the temporal consciousness of classical antiquity. It is often claimed that the Greeks and Romans had a timeless view of human nature and so were concerned to derive useful lessons from the past while remaining blind to the distinctive historical character of different periods. The exemplary character of ancient historical thought seems to be caught by the moral that Solon draws – and by its instantiation in the fate of Croesus, who thinks Solon foolish for ignoring present goods and telling him to look to the end, but whose own prosperity is soon to be upset by the death of his son and his subjection to the Persian king Cyrus. The ancients' lack of attention to historical detail seems to be shown, moreover, by the very existence of an anecdote which is hard to square with the chronology of



Fig. 1 Gaspar van den Hoecke, *Croesus showing his treasures* (1630). The meeting of Solon and Croesus was a popular topic in Dutch golden-age art – a confrontation between Solon’s civic mindedness and the Croesus-like wealth acquired by Dutch merchants in the Orient. The pyre in the background points to the end that awaits Croesus; the juxtaposition of two time-periods underlines Solon’s wisdom in not counting Croesus blessed until his end. M.Ob.577 MNW, National Museum of Warsaw.

its protagonists’ lives (the general view is that Solon left Athens after his political reforms in the 590s BC, while Croesus’ conquests belong in the 550s).²

A similar lack of temporal consciousness seems to be shown by the joint appearance of Solon and Croesus in the dialogue *Charon* composed by the prolific satirist Lucian (second century AD). In the spirit of the self-consciously nostalgic culture of his age (known as the Second Sophistic), Lucian’s engagement with the past in *Charon* is mediated through its literary canon. He presents the god Hermes conversing with Charon, ferryman of the underworld, after Hades has given Charon permission to go up to the world above for a single day to see what humans make of their time while they are alive. Hermes and Charon pile mountain on mountain, imitating the action of the Giants in their attempt to overthrow the Olympian gods. But the concern of Hermes and Charon as they look down and eavesdrop on men in Asia and Europe is the futility of mortal aspirations. Hermes conveniently knows what lies in the future as they gaze at Cyrus preparing to attack Croesus, unaware that his expansionist dreams would lead to his death at the hands of the queen of a nomadic tribe; at Croesus himself talking to Solon;

at Polycrates, the tyrant of Samos, as he cuts open a fish only to find the gold ring he had thrown into the sea in his fruitless attempt to ward off misfortune; and finally at the Battle of the Champions, fought between 300 Spartans and 300 Argives hoping to gain possession of a plain in the Peloponnese, but destined to occupy in death a narrow patch of earth (26.9–10, 14, 24). Lucian draws all these scenes from Herodotus, but he plays fast and loose with history (it was Croesus who attacked Cyrus first) and in particular with chronology: on Herodotus' own showing, the story of Polycrates and the ring (3.40–3) belongs in the reign of Cambyses, successor of Cyrus on the Persian throne, while the Battle of the Champions (1.82) is synchronized with Cyrus' counter-attack on Croesus, which happens at least two years after his conversation with Solon. Lucian even changes the Herodotean version of the conversation between Solon and Croesus by making Solon rank Cleobis and Biton the most fortunate, with Tellus second. The historical sense missing in Herodotus' depiction of Solon seems just as absent in the use Lucian makes of the Athenian sage some six hundred years later.³

Many modern historians, as we shall see in Chapter 2, posit that the sort of historical sense apparently lacking in Herodotus and Lucian was central to the formation of the Renaissance. This sense of difference is generally illustrated by alleged contrasts between medieval and Renaissance art. While medieval artists are thought to have been happy to show figures from classical antiquity in the guise of chivalrous knights, Renaissance artists seem to show a much greater sense of temporal perspective (perhaps in keeping with their greater sense of spatial perspective). The unearthing of new pieces of Roman sculpture and of fragments of ancient buildings led to a stronger interest in both the artistic styles and the historical *realia* of antiquity, and artists began to pay greater attention to precise architectural details and to nuances of clothing and hair style, all of which were at the same time subject to antiquarian curiosity. Grouped with artists and antiquarians in the typical story of the discovery of historical difference are philologists such as Lorenzo Valla (1407–57), whose proof that the Donation of Constantine (a document supposedly of the fourth century AD which gave the Pope authority over the western part of the Roman empire) was a forgery is often hailed as a key intellectual advance.

This common narrative about the discovery of a 'proper' sense of history will be challenged throughout the course of this book. A preliminary sense of some of the complexities that are found in ancient texts can be gained by revisiting Herodotus' story of Solon and Croesus. That the ancients were in fact aware of the chronological difficulties in the story is shown by the re-telling of it by the biographer Plutarch (c. AD 50–120) in his *Solon*. Plutarch acknowledges the

chronological arguments, but suggests that they are not decisive (a view still found in some modern scholars); he then justifies re-telling the story on the grounds that it is famous, true to the character of Solon, and ethically valuable in its own right (27.1).

Plutarch similarly allows the ethical claims of fiction priority over historical accuracy when he reports a tradition that Solon had been a lover of Pisistratus, later tyrant at Athens (*Solon* 1.4–5). Doubts had been cast on this relationship for chronological reasons in the *Constitution of the Athenians* (17.2), a work of the Aristotelian school written late in the fourth century BC. But, even though that Aristotelian work was certainly one of his sources, Plutarch ignores those doubts beyond prefixing the story with ‘they say’ – and even that phrase is more commonly a sign that a story is traditional rather than a strong indication of uncertainty. His concerns are again ethical: he notes that even though they became political opponents Solon and Pisistratus treated each other with consideration owing to the memory of their erotic relationship.

Whether Herodotus himself was aware of the difficulty of synchronizing Solon and Croesus is hard to say (though, as we shall see in Chapter 4, he was aware of the methodological problems of coordinating different time systems). The way he presents Solon and the stories he makes Solon tell do, however, imply a consciousness of historical difference. When Solon describes how the fortunate Athenian Tellus was buried at the site where he fell in battle (1.30.3–5), Herodotus’ audience would have seen a contrast with the procedures of the Athenian democracy in their own day, when the cremated bodies of the war-dead were brought back to Athens and buried, tribe by tribe, in a great communal ceremony (Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* 2.34). When Solon labours to calculate the number of days in a human life, his calculation (1.32.2–4) – which involves allowing 360 days for a year and then intercalating thirty-day months every other year – is based on a calendrical system which, if it ever existed, was definitely outmoded at the time Herodotus was writing.⁴ Plutarch similarly, despite his dominant ethical concerns, could portray Solon as ‘simple and archaic’ in his physical doctrines (*Solon* 3.6).

There is a further hint of historical difference in Herodotus’ description of Solon as one of the ‘sophists’ who travelled to Croesus’ court in Sardis when it was at the height of its wealth (1.29.1–2). Plutarch interpreted the term ‘sophists’ as a reference to the Seven Sages (*On the Malignity of Herodotus* 857f) – seven thinkers who were thought to have lived at the same time and were portrayed either in conversation with each other (as in Plutarch’s own *Banquet of the Seven Sages*) or else communicating by other means, most famously when a prized

object (a tripod or cup) that was to go to ‘the wisest’ was sent around from one sage to the next until finally it was dedicated to Apollo, either by Thales, who began the circulation, or by Solon, its final recipient.⁵ What united these Seven Sages was a pungent wit, a competitive spirit, and a practical and political orientation. As expositors of traditional wisdom, they were even credited with what were clearly later sayings: thus Diogenes Laertius (third century AD) reports that an earlier biographer, Hermippus of Smyrna (third century BC), referred to Thales a saying generally attributed to Socrates, namely that he was glad to have been born a human, a man, and a Greek rather than an animal, a woman, and a barbarian (*Lives of the Philosophers* 1.33 (FGrH Cont. 1026 F13)). While the composition of and traditions about the Seven Sages varied, no one in antiquity seems to have questioned that, with the partial exception of Thales, they were a coherent synchronous group that practised a mode of wisdom distinct from what was later termed ‘philosophy’. Diogenes Laertius underscores this difference by treating them in a book of their own at the start of his work.⁶

Even as Herodotus evokes the idea of an earlier group of sages at the court of Croesus, his use of the term ‘sophist’ seems to align these sages with the fee-charging intellectuals who were drawn to wealthy Athens in Herodotus’ own day. There may be a danger that this argument is itself a back-projection from the use of ‘sophist’ by Plato, who was above all concerned to distinguish Socrates from these itinerant figures. But if the link with the sophists who flocked to Athens is justified, it is surely a deliberate allusion on Herodotus’ part: it has often been suggested that Solon’s warnings to Croesus about the dangers of trusting in his prosperity should be taken as a warning imparted by Herodotus himself to imperial Athens.⁷

Even the lessons that Solon gives Croesus show that it is far too restricted to see the ancient concern with exemplary wisdom as a matter of learning timeless truths from the past. The suggestion that it is better to be dead than alive may well be a timeless truth, but it is not one that provides much help with coping with the varied circumstances of life itself. There may be greater profit to be derived from Solon’s other timeless truth – the injunction to ‘look to the end’. But this maxim is itself grounded in an awareness of change over the course of a human lifetime. In Herodotus’ account, Croesus, after taking Solon for a fool at first, comes to realize the wisdom of his utterance when he is himself conquered by Cyrus (1.86.3–5).

Both Solon and Herodotus can be read, then, as timeless treasuries of wisdom, with Tellus and Croesus on display as prize exempla. But the whole encounter between Solon and Croesus raises multiple questions about the interactions

between different temporalities. As we shall see, these various questions all turn on a single concept: anachronism.

In current English the word 'anachronism' carries a range of meanings. We might call the meeting between Solon and Croesus an anachronism because it seems chronologically impossible. We might call Herodotus' use of the word 'sophist' an anachronism – if we assume that he is drawing on the resonances that the word was beginning to acquire in the Athens of his own day; and we might similarly suspect that the attribution of an opposition of 'Greek' and 'barbarian' to Thales is an anachronism, a retrojection of the ideological weight those terms gained in the years before and after the Greco-Persian wars of the early fifth century BC. We might see Solon's calendrical calculations as anachronistic, at least judged by the standards of Herodotus' day. We might regard Solon himself as an anachronism, a practitioner of a type of wisdom that seemed old-fashioned at the time Herodotus was writing. And we might even fancy that Solon's injunction to Croesus to 'look to the end' is an acknowledgement of the danger of anachronism inherent in historical judgements.

How does the English word 'anachronism' relate to the temporal conceptions of the Greeks themselves? The roots of 'anachronism' lie in a Greek word first attested at the turn of the second and third centuries AD. Like the various meanings the word has gained in the modern world, the Greek root turns on the notion of historical change. But rather different understandings of the mechanisms of change underlie the varied meanings the term has acquired since its adoption in vernacular languages. We shall trace in the next chapter the history of the term, exploring how it has acquired the conceptual richness it now enjoys as a marker of historical difference. This conceptual richness is explored in Chapter 2, but we will at the same time be alive to the methodological challenges of constructing and understanding a 'sense of anachronism'. The concept of anachronism can be identified before the appearance of the term, but there are many pitfalls in using this concept as the basis for a progressive narrative of increasing historical understanding.

The next two chapters will prepare the ground for the aim of the book as a whole – to explore the concept of anachronism in its full range of meanings across the whole of Greco-Roman antiquity. The book will look beyond the limited ancient uses of the root 'anachronism' and argue that, contrary to frequent assertions of the ancients' lack of complex historical consciousness, there are many indications that they did have a sense of anachronism that is not wholly different from modern notions. It will investigate anachronisms and the responses they generate in a broad range of textual and material evidence,

tracking the history of the word ‘anachronism’ as it covers in successive chapters literary anachronisms and ancient scholarly discussions of them (Chapter 3); chronological writers (Chapter 4); ideas of historical survival in ethnographic settings (Chapter 5); and the ancient discourse of exemplarity (Chapter 6). It will then turn to the role of anachronism in the conceptualization of multitemporal texts and objects (Chapter 7) and of dialogues among communities of writers and readers, both living and dead (Chapter 8). Three Interludes (two of them devoted to Virgil) explore stories and images that have resonated with ancient and modern writers. The book as a whole will provide an overarching explanatory framework for understanding what earlier scholarship has at best treated as isolated instances of anachronism. Anachronism, it will emerge, is a powerful concept not just for capturing the varying modes of historical consciousness within antiquity but also for understanding the way we ourselves define antiquity – for to engage with the classical past at all is inescapably to become part of an anachronistic community.

Inventing Anachronism

Modern anachronisms

The title of this section might strike the reader as paradoxical. The grouping of anachronism with modernity jars with the type of perception encapsulated in the pronouncement of one of Oscar Wilde's characters in his dialogue 'The Critic as Artist': 'Whatever, in fact, is modern in our life we owe to the Greeks. Whatever is an anachronism is due to medievalism.' This claim owes much to a striving for epigrammatic wit: it follows the brazenly anachronistic claim that 'the Greeks chattered about painters just as much as people do nowadays ... even the theatrical managers of travelling companies brought their dramatic critics with them ... and paid them very handsome salaries for writing laudatory notices.'¹ Wilde's character, then, is enacting his professed Hellenic modernity even as he offers a fictionalized past as the basis of this enactment. But, for all that, his soundbite does capture a common perception that anachronism is opposed to modernity.

The sense in which Wilde was using 'anachronism' was quite recent at the time he wrote his essay. The word was applied in English first as a description of textual phenomena, typically allusions to institutions or places that were not yet in existence at the time of the events being described. It was subsequently used of errors in the fixing of dates. It was only in the early nineteenth century that the word started to be used of people or practices thought obsolete or out of date. Like all words, anachronism has a history, and this history has continued since Wilde's time. The word has continued to acquire new resonances – and in the process the division Wilde created between the medieval and the modern has been profoundly reconfigured.

'What does it feel like to be an anachronism?' is the question posed at the start of a discussion of medieval temporalities by Carolyn Dinshaw, a leading exponent of Queer Theory. One of the goals of Queer Theory is to disrupt the normative assumptions of 'straight' time, that is, a view of time as linear and

oriented around transgenerational reproduction. To answer her question, Dinshaw turns to the mystic Margery Kempe (c. 1373–c. 1440). In her autobiographical writings, Kempe describes herself overcome with weeping before an image of Christ on the cross. At odds with her powerful sense of the immediacy of Christ's death is the detached figure of her priest, who tries to console her by saying that Jesus died long ago. On Dinshaw's reading, the priest, proud in the institutional power of the church, dismisses the emotional Kempe as a 'pathetic anachronism – a creature stuck in the past'. That is, he rejects Kempe's emotionalism with the same disdain with which Wilde rejects the medieval.²

As her essay progresses, Dinshaw starts to use 'anachronism' in a different sense. Rather than being applied to a sense of belonging to an earlier period, it becomes a sympathetic vehicle for expressing Kempe's spiritual and bodily absorption in the dying Christ. This broader use allows Dinshaw to connect her own subjective experience of time with the experiences of Kempe and of Kempe's twentieth-century editor, Hope Emily Allen. In effect, it is used as a synonym of 'asynchrony', to express the multitemporality of experienced life (and Dinshaw did indeed start a later version of her essay with the less snappy 'What does it feel like to be asynchronous?').³

Recuperation of anachronism as a sort of disturbed temporality that runs counter to the hegemony of straight time has also been a feature of postcolonial criticism (notably Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*). Anachronism or 'the recurrence of *being out of time*' is defined by one postcolonial critic as 'a condition produced by the British Empire's definition of time as a linear progression'. But this critic also attributes to 'anachronistic methods' the capacity to 'disrupt the way in which colonial history is written'.⁴ Notions of anachronism are central, too, to some ecocritical attempts to think about human damage to the environment in what has been termed the Anthropocene period. An understanding of humanity's influence on the climate has led to an awareness that 'previous norms become uncertainly anachronistic'. Long-standing human practices such as wood-burning are now subject to a 'retrospective derangement of meaning',⁵ and literature composed prior to knowledge of climate change has taken on hitherto unavailable meanings (as in J. Hillis Miller's 'anachronistic reading' of Wallace Stevens' 1942 poem 'The Man on the Dump'⁶).

The language of anachronism pervades many other modern discourses, notably memory studies, cognitive science and the history of art. In this last discipline, the historicizing iconological method of Erwin Panofsky has been challenged by Georges Didi-Huberman as well as by Alexander Nagel and

Christopher Wood in their 2010 book *Anachronic Renaissance*. While these scholars applaud Panofsky's erudition, they suggest that he uses his learning to shut down the meaning of images. In Didi-Huberman's reading, Panofsky (a German Jew forced into exile in the United States in the 1930s) reacted against the unreason of Nazism, but in the process 'exorcised the anachronisms and liabilities specific to the world of images' by rejecting the approaches found in German Jewish writers such as Aby Warburg and Walter Benjamin.⁷ While Didi-Huberman celebrates anachronism as 'the temporal way of expressing the exuberance, complexity, and overdetermination of images', Nagel and Wood prefer to speak of the 'anachronic' on the grounds that anachronism is 'a judgmental term that carries with it the historicist assumption that every event and every object has its proper location within objective and linear time'.⁸ But the anachronic does similar work for them in resisting the notion that the circumstances of any artwork's production provide a sufficient explanation of its creation.⁹

The recuperation of the anachronic has been accompanied by a transformation in attitudes towards artistic and literary anachronisms. Features formerly ignored or regarded as flaws are now valued for challenging the constructedness of linear narrative. 'Creative'¹⁰ or 'productive'¹¹ anachronisms are widely celebrated – while paradoxically the attempt to avoid anachronism in historical reconstruction is condemned as itself a pernicious anachronism.¹²

The origins of anachronism

The way 'anachronism' is generally used in the modern world would have meant nothing to the first exponents of the word in English. To understand its history, we need to probe into its roots in Ancient Greek and the transmission of those Greek roots (via Renaissance Latin) to vernacular languages.

Scholars outside the discipline of Classics have tended to approach the etymology of 'anachronism' rather adventurously. A monograph on *Modern Antiques* proposes the meaning 'against time'.¹³ Joseph Luzzi, a scholar of comparative literature, suggests that the word derives from 'a fusion of the Greek compound meaning "late in time"', while Nagel and Wood split the Greek *anachronizein* into 'ana-', "again", and the verb *chronizein*, "to be late or belated" (they speak of artworks 'anachronizing' in the sense of being 'belated again').¹⁴ These two explanations root the modern English word in an intransitive use of the Greek verb *anachronizein* that is attested, as we shall see, only once, in a short

papyrus letter that was dug up in Egypt at the end of the nineteenth century – and even here the sense must be ‘delay’ rather than ‘be late again’ (the prefix *ana-*, like English *re-*, is used in this sense only with telic verbs, that is, with verbs expressing an accomplishment). But to criticize the etymology offered by Nagel and Wood may be to miss their point. They offer a creative redefinition to suit their view of the temporal dynamism of art: they explain that the anachronic artwork ‘is late, first because it succeeds some reality that it re-presents, and then late again when that re-presentation is repeated for successive recipients.’¹⁵

The prominent French philosopher Jacques Rancière (to whose thought we will return) comes closer to the etymological truth in his important discussion of anachronism when he recognizes that the *ana-* prefix means ‘up’. But, like Nagel and Wood, the way he develops his reflections on the word owes more to the work he wants it to do than to its linguistic history. He first claims that the prefix *ana-* refers to ‘a movement from the rear toward the front’. While this is a possible sense of ‘up’ in Ancient Greek, he fails to explain why this should be seen as a movement ‘from one time toward an earlier’ (perhaps he associates the front line with an earlier time because it is first to advance). He complicates the picture further with a complex play on the literal meaning ‘up’: anachronism, he suggests, involves ‘a vertical problem of the order of time in the hierarchy of beings’; that is, the concept serves to connect human time with ‘what is above it’ – namely eternity. As we shall see, Rancière thinks that anachronism has typically been cast out by historians as a sin because it is the dark side of correct historical time, a time that is itself a modern surrogate for divine immanence.¹⁶

From a philological perspective, a better interpretation of the prefix *ana-* is that ‘up’ implies ‘back’. Among the Ancient Greeks, as in many cultures, the past could be conceived as lying *above*. The Greeks also at times used the image of time as a river flowing downwards.¹⁷ The basic sense of *anachronizein*, then, is to date something back in time. Exactly the same idea of a backwards projection was sometimes expressed by the same prefix in the words *anagein* ‘bring back’ and *anapempein*, ‘send back’.

The Greek verb *anachronizein* was typically used in scholarly exegesis of earlier literature. The word is found above all in the marginal comments known as scholia (sg. scholion) that are found in many manuscripts and that preserve material from older commentaries, perhaps in some cases dating back to Hellenistic Alexandria; another source is the voluminous commentary on Homer composed by Eustathius, Archbishop of Thessalonica in the twelfth century AD. Also used in similar contexts was the cognate noun *anachronismos*.¹⁸ These various words are uncommon in extant Greek (there are no more than

thirty occurrences of the root to the end of the Byzantine period). As we shall explore in Chapter 3, in keeping with their etymology, they were generally used of later practices imported into an earlier context: to give one example, a scholion on the first line of Sophocles' *Trachinian Women* identifies the maxim with which Heracles' wife Deianira starts the play (that a mortal's life cannot be judged until death) as an 'old saying' and 'anachronism' on the grounds that it is derived from Solon, who is earlier than Sophocles but later than the time of the play (the scholion goes on to provide a summary of Herodotus' account of his meeting with Croesus).¹⁹

The ancient history of the word is complicated by its appearance in documentary sources. Unlike the uses in ancient commentaries, this usage can be securely dated to the Roman imperial period. A new piece of evidence emerged late in the twentieth century with the discovery at Narmouthis in Egypt of a broken piece of pottery containing a petition to a local governor, Anubion. The governor's name dates the petition to AD 199. Part of the petition runs as follows: 'Soconopis son of Hormeinus, my brother by the same father, and Petermouthis and Horus pleaded with the *hēgēmōn* [prefect] together with Marcus' memorandum (which warned) that the petition has been anachronized (*anakechronisthai*) in the name of the *stratēgos* [governor] Marcus ...'²⁰ The meaning of the word here is unfortunately unclear owing to the lack of context. Given that the perfect passive of the basic verb *chronizein* is frequently found on papyri in the sense 'dated', the plea may relate to a petition that has been wrongly dated. As petitions were dated by regnal years, there may have been an incorrect alignment of Marcus' year of office with a particular regnal year, resulting in a back-dating of the petition.

Harder to explain is the appearance of the verb *anachronizein* in a letter preserved on papyrus from Tebtunis, a city in the Fayoum in Egypt and dated to the second or third century AD (Fig. 2). The papyrus, which was found in mummy cartonnage during excavations at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was described by its first editors as 'badly written' and 'containing several curious words.' The letter was written by a woman (perhaps a slave) called Aphrodite and probably addressed to her mistress. Her letter includes an apology which starts 'we are anachronizing (*anachronizomen*) in sending you letters because we have no' – before her excuse is lost in a gap in the papyrus.²¹ She is here, exceptionally, using the verb intransitively, with the meaning 'we are late', even though the plain verb *chronizein* was in use with the same sense. The new evidence provided by the ostrakon perhaps suggests a misappropriation of bureaucratic terminology.

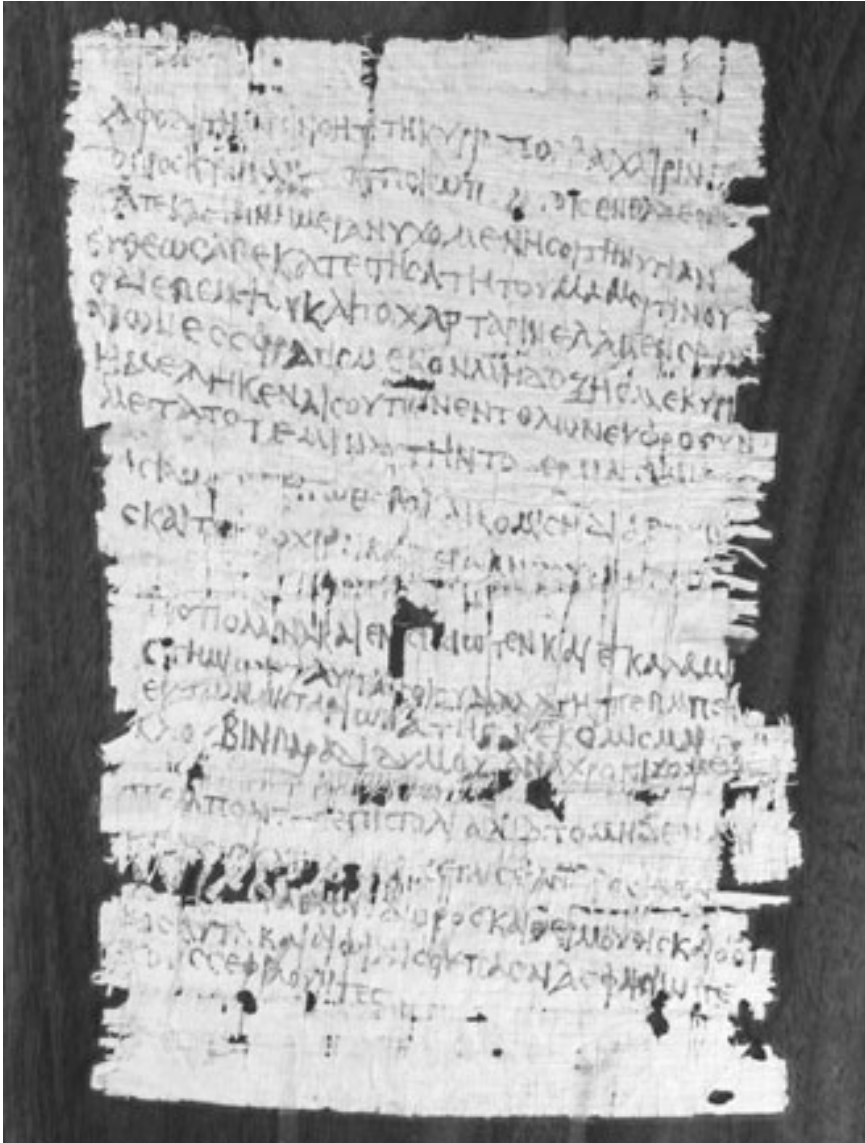


Fig. 2 A letter on papyrus from a slave, Aphrodite, to her mistress, with an early example (five lines up) of the Greek verb *anachronizein*. P. Tebt. 2.413, AD c. 175-299, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

A few passages in the scholia do not fit the interpretation 'date back'. In Euripides' *Phoenician Women* (written c. 409 BC), the seer Tiresias reports that he has travelled to Thebes from Athens, where he has made the Athenians victorious in their battle against Eumolpus, leader of neighbouring Eleusis (852-7). The scholia on line 854 use the verb *anachronizein* to draw attention to

a chronological inconsistency: the war between Eumolpus and Erechtheus took place four generations prior to the conflict at Thebes between Eteocles and Polyneices which the *Phoenician Women* recounts. But they describe the earlier war as pushed *forward* to the time of the main action of the play rather than the play's action as pushed back, as the etymology appears to demand.

The apparent etymological sense of the Greek root also fails to catch some uses of the noun *anachronismos* in the scholia to the *Prometheus Bound* (a play attributed in antiquity to Aeschylus but now dated by most scholars after his lifetime). These scholia label as 'anachronisms' a number of prophecies made by the eponymous hero – for instance, his statements that the monster Typhon will be imprisoned under Etna and cause volcanic eruptions (362) and that the Amazons 'will one day settle at Themiscyra' (723). This usage might seem to be making the slightly pedantic point that accurate prophecies necessarily involve a sort of chronological casting back of later events; on this reading, the prophesied events, like almost all the other 'anachronisms' picked up in the scholia, are in some sense placed too early. But in the case of the Amazon prophecy the scholia offer an overt justification of the label 'anachronism' that points to a more complex configuration of time: 'He refers to something that occurred a long time ago as if it were about to happen.' That is, the prophecy is deemed anachronistic on the basis that events that were in the past for the audience are referred to as being in the future for the characters. It is out of time because the temporal orientations of the characters within the play clash with those of the audience.

These ancient uses already show, then, some of the variety that 'anachronism' was to achieve in later settings. But they give little hint of the appeal the word would gain beyond antiquity. To understand that, we have to follow the word's spread to Renaissance scholarship and its emergence in the vernacular.

From Byzantium to Italy and beyond

The accounts modern scholars have given about *when* the word 'anachronism' was formed are as fragile as their explanations of its etymology. There are evident clashes in the claims made in the most recent accounts. Joseph Luzzi dates the word's appearance in English to 1669 and in Italian a century earlier.²² The intellectual historian Peter Burke, author of several treatments of the Renaissance sense of anachronism, suggests that it was 'around 1650' that the term 'began to come into use in Latin, Italian, French and English.'²³ The Shakespearean scholar Margreta de Grazia similarly claims, in a much-cited 2010 treatment of

anachronism, that the word emerged in English in the mid-seventeenth century, while adding that it surfaced at the beginning of the seventeenth century, but 'only in its Greek form and in an esoteric treatise'. And she complicates the picture further by stating that the word, though without ancient lineage, was 'coined from the Middle Greek' (the beginnings of which are variously dated to between AD 300 and 700).²⁴

These various treatments of the origins of anachronism are concerned to place the concept within a broader history of temporal consciousness. De Grazia acknowledges that 'a grasp of the concept has been identified much earlier', but proceeds to cast doubt on the familiar story of the Renaissance discovery of anachronism – suggesting that a true understanding of cognitive distance in fact comes later.²⁵ Burke and Luzzi are similarly interested in the paradoxes apparently thrown up by the linguistic development of the word: Burke concludes that 'to speak of the sense of anachronism of Mantegna or Erasmus is ... literally speaking, anachronistic', while Luzzi, noting the word's origins in 'the oldest of Western high-cultural idioms', claims that it appeared in English 'millennia after that culture had disappeared' – and hence that 'the term's etymology stands both as an ironic gloss on its semantic connotations and an allegory for its thematic claims'.²⁶

Implicit in these claims about the history of anachronism is an ideological construction of space and time. The irony Luzzi sees in the surprisingly late appearance of a classically derived word for belatedness is gained only at the expense of a misunderstanding of the Greek word, which most commonly describes something that appears too early rather than too late. And the seventeenth century is scarcely 'millennia' after the disappearance of Ancient Greek culture. His allegorical reading of the etymology can be seen as a way of separating off antiquity from its aftermath. A compelling counter-claim would be that the Greek culture whose disappearance Luzzi misdates has never disappeared at all.

A similar spatial ideology is conveyed by de Grazia's statement that anachronism surfaced in its Greek form early in the seventeenth century and by Burke's *bon mot* about the anachronism of speaking of anachronism. These should be understood as claims about *where* the word was used as much as about *when* or *how*. And they do not make much sense even if their scope is restricted to Western Europe.

The Greek word *anachronismos* had been known in Italy at least since the arrival of Byzantine manuscripts in the fifteenth century. It is found, for instance, in the margins of the famous manuscript of Aeschylus now known as the

Mediceus, which was one of more than 200 manuscripts brought to Italy in 1423 by Giovanni Aurispa, a Sicilian sent as translator on a papal mission to the Byzantine court.²⁷ The diffusion of the word can be traced further through the publication of the manuscripts that contained the word. ‘Anachronism’ appears in the scholia on Sophocles published by Janus Lascaris in 1518 (scholion on *Trachinian Women* 1) and in those on Aeschylus published by Francisco Robortello in 1552 (scholion on *Eumenides* 723), and again in an edition of Eustathius’ commentary on the *Iliad* published in Rome between 1542 and 1550. The word ‘anachronism’ had been in existence, then, for more than a millennium when Mantegna and Erasmus were alive, and was available in Italy in manuscripts during Mantegna’s lifetime (c. 1431–1506) and in print during Erasmus’ (1466–1536).

The invention of ‘anachronism’ in Western Europe was one consequence of the dispersal of Greek learning with the weakening and eventual collapse of Byzantium. From Greek *anachronismos* appeared the Latin *anachronismus*. This transliteration into the common language of European scholarship is attested in a collection of notes on classical authors and topics published in 1542 by Lodovico Ricchieri (also known as Caelius Rhodiginus). Ricchieri uses the term in relation to one of the passages designated an anachronism in the scholia, the start of Sophocles’ *Trachinian Women*: ‘this figure of speech is called *anachronismus*’; the gloss suggests a consciousness of neologism.²⁸ Indicative of the conceptual reach of the term is the fact that Ricchieri includes in his discussion some passages where the term anachronism was not expressly used in the scholia: a speech in Virgil’s *Aeneid* in which a character refers to the ‘Veline harbour’ even though the eponymous town Velia (Greek Elea) had not been founded, and a messenger speech in Sophocles’ *Electra* which recounts Orestes’ supposed death in the chariot race in the Pythian games, though these games were founded ‘about 600 years after Orestes.’²⁹

‘Anachronism’ was soon used in the sophisticated literary criticism written in Italian in the second half of the sixteenth century. Lodovico Castelvetro uses it in his voluminous commentary on the *Poetics* of Aristotle, precisely with reference to the passage from Sophocles’ *Electra* mentioned by Ricchieri (‘I also believe that the offence is not to be excused by an appeal to the figure known as *anachronismos*’ – as in Ricchieri, the formulation betrays a sense of novelty); not content with rejecting *anachronismos* as an excuse, he coined the Greek words *anatopismos*, *anaprosōpismos* and *anatotropismos* for the (equally unacceptable) practices of changing the place, character or events of a story.³⁰ *Anachronismo* was subsequently the subject of a chapter in Jacopo Mazzoni’s *On the Defence of*

Dante's Comedy, an important work of literary criticism published in 1587. Starting with an allusion to Castelvetro's commentary, Mazzoni includes an extensive collection of ancient passages that pertain to anachronism, largely inspired by ancient critics but including many not covered by the Greek term and some apparently independent examples (such as the naming of Cape Pelorias in Polybius).³¹

A formidable array of arguments about anachronism as a literary phenomenon emerged in Latin and Italian well before the term's appearance in English. Inspired by his knowledge of ancient criticism, Mazzoni was thoroughly alive to justifications for literary anachronism, notably the distinctions between history and poetry and between the voices of the character and narrator – much the same arguments that would continue to be used over the following centuries. In due course, moreover, 'anachronism' seeped into the language of creative artists: Giulio Strozzi gave his 1620 play *The Birth of Love* the sub-title *Anachronism* because it brought together characters from different mythical eras, and justified the practice by allusion to Plato's dialogues and Virgil.³² He would be followed in this overt apology for anachronism in recreations of the classical world by writers such as Henry Fielding in Britain (in a dialogue between the cynic Diogenes and Alexander of Macedon) and Barthélemy in France (in his widely read *Travels of the Younger Anacharsis*).³³ The birth of anachronism, then, was an event in literary studies rather than chronology. And this literary usage was still prominent when the word appeared first in English.

Anachronism from literature to chronology

The common statement that 'anachronism' entered English in the middle of the seventeenth century is based on the earliest instance cited in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) under 'anachronism'. This entry is from a chronological work by John Gregory (1609–46), a chaplain of Christ Church in Oxford. Dating the birth of Christ 'Anno Mundi 3949, Anno Period. Jul. 4713, Olympiad 197, and 748 of Nabonassar', Gregory explained that 'this Connexion of things is called Synchronism', while 'an error committed herein is called Anachronism'. This passage is cited from Gregory's 1649 *Posthuma*, and so dated 'a[nte] 1646', the year of his death.³⁴

The problem with the common view of the origin of 'anachronism' in English is that the *OED* itself commits an anachronism. Its entry for 'hysterosis' contains an earlier appearance of the word, from William Lisle's 1623 edition with

translation of *A Saxon Treatise concerning the Old and New Testament*, written by a monk called Aelfricus. Lisle took a phrase used by Aelfricus, 'Lingua Britannica', to be a reference to Old English, 'by Hysterosis or Anachronisme (a figure much used in Historie, yea even in the Bible):³⁵ As the *OED* advances alphabetically, the entry for 'metachronism' ('the placing of an event later than its real date') reveals a still earlier usage of 'anachronism' in a sermon delivered at St Mary's Church in Oxford in Easter week, 1617, by John Hales, Regius Professor of Greek. Addressing the biblical text 'Which the vnlearned and vnstable wrest, as they doe the other Scriptures, vnto their owne destruction' (2 Peter 3.16), Hales warned against unwarranted projections of Calvinist doctrines such as predestination on to obscure biblical passages: 'there are in Scripture of things that are *hustera protera* [later earlier], *seemingly confus'd, enantiophanē* [opposite-seeming], *carrying semblance of contrarietie, anachronismes, metachronismes*, and the like, which bring infinite obscuritie to the text: there are I say in Scripture more of them, then in any writing that I knowe secular or divine.'³⁶ Here 'anachronism' is one in a powerful list of forces that disrupt Calvinist attempts to find meaning in texts that, for Hales, could only be clarified through divine revelation.

Why the mistake in the *OED* entry for 'anachronism'? The misleading date it gives for the first appearance of the word could, at a pinch, be taken as a subtle in-joke, the entry for 'metachronism' metachronically revealing an anachronism in the entry for 'anachronism'. But it is easy enough to understand why the editors of the original *OED* (or rather: *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*) failed to pick up these earlier usages: the dictionary itself appeared in fascicles over the course of forty-four years, with the entries for 'anachronism', 'hysterosis' and 'metachronism' first appearing in 1884, 1899 and 1906. Those editors are rather to be admired for their coverage: digital resources such as *Early English Books Online* reveal no earlier instance of the word in English.

The lexical history summarized above is made more complicated by the existence of an almost identical form, 'anachronicism'. The only occurrence of this word cited in the *OED* is taken from Thomas Blount's 1656 *Glossographia*, where 'an error in Chronology, or an undue connexion of time, a false Chronicling, a repeating of time' is offered as a joint definition for both 'Anachronicism' and 'Anachronism.'³⁷ The source for Blount himself was probably Sir Walter Raleigh's *History of the World*, which was written in the Tower of London and published in November 1614 (two and a half years before the earliest attested occurrence of 'anachronism'). The word appears in an address to the reader placed at the end of the narrative part of the history immediately before an extensive 'chronologicall table': Raleigh explains that this table 'may serue to free the Booke, and likewise