



Antiquity and Antiquities in the Long 18th Century Construction and Dissemination of the Classical Past in British Dictionaries and Periodicals

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In the long eighteenth-century, British society underwent enormous changes owing, among other things, to the rise of a new middle class in need of reading and writing. This phenomenon triggered a significant increase in the production of books, including dictionaries and encyclopædias, as well as in the publication of periodicals, such as newspapers, journals, and magazines. According to Raven,

Books and other publications framed and communicated popular ideas and opinion, and they figured particular cognitive modes and the character of scientific and artistic appreciation and debate. Print established and modulated standards of language and behaviour [...] acted as a prime agent in social cohesion as well as dissent. The press ensured the effectiveness of political and religious governance, but also of the independence as much as the compliance of different communities. (2007, 1)

The scientific and technical progress of the period, the new geographic expeditions and the archaeological discoveries of classical antiquity defined as “the exemplum of good taste” (Brewer 1997, 171), all became key areas of focus for authors, compilers, and editors, significantly influencing life and society. The contemporary gaze on reality started to mould a whole new state of learning in reference works, to shape new values in news-reporting, and to foster the translation and adaptation of earlier works. In the course of the century, archeological discoveries and (re)discoveries of ancient manuscripts affected social practices. Descriptions of private collections and the acquisition of new artifacts by the British elite would often make their way into print, emphasizing the prestige associated with possessing classical works. Italy became the favourite destination of many British travellers (172), and accounts of the grand tour in Rome, Sicily, Tuscany, Umbria and Latium, among others, were often published in newspapers and magazines. In this context, dictionaries and encyclopædias as repositories of traditional and innovative knowledge (158; McIntosh 1998; Yeo 2001; Donato and Luesebrink 2021), as well as periodicals reporting on the discoveries of classical antiquities, played a crucial role in shaping new perceptions of the past and in tracing the origin of western civilization.

The record and transmission of the classical past – along with the popularisation and vernacularisation of knowledge about antiquity – represent some of the most significant accomplishments of historians, antiquaries, travellers, polymaths, men of science, writers and editors. The celebration of antiquity, whether conveyed in lexicographic works or periodicals, was

potentially addressed to an expanding cross-section of society and assimilated as contemporary cultural and language heritage. In the 18th century, the study of the ancient past was to “provide the essential empirical foundation for the science of society” (Sweet 2001, 188) with antiquaries becoming the essential partners in the development of a new style of sociological history.

In this perspective, the general aim of this monographic section of *LEA* is to investigate the notion and the representation of the distant past as it emerges from those words and contents labelled as and/or tracing back to antiquity. This approach is also crucial to highlight the relationship between past and present in 18th-century contemporary (educated) society, and the status of antiquity in a changing world. In particular, the interest focuses on which aspects of antiquity may be found, appreciated, selected, explained, discussed, represented, magnified, and eventually popularised in the text-types under scrutiny. The studies show how dictionaries and periodicals contributed to constructing and shaping people’s knowledge of the classical past through a careful selection of words, concepts and discourse practices which were informed by the moral, ideological, and socio-cultural values of the time.

The collection of articles consists of two parts. Part 1 focuses on the construction and dissemination of classical past in dictionaries and *encyclopaedias*. Part 2 investigates the construction and dissemination of classical past in periodicals.

1. Part One

Aldo Corcella investigates the nature, purpose, and cultural significance of the mythological dictionary *The Gentleman and Lady’s Key to Polite Literature [...] Intended for the Assistance of those who would understand Mythology, Poetry, Painting, Statuary, and Theatrical Entertainments; and particularly adapted to the use of Latin and French-Schools*. Largely based on 17th- and early 18th-century French sources, the 18th-century dictionary experienced considerable popularity, as evidenced by its multiple reprints and editions (from 1776 onwards). Unlike scholarly or moralistic texts that sought to interpret or rationalize ancient myths, the *Key* prioritized the values of accessibility and utility to an audience who would understand and appreciate the subjects of liberal arts. Corcella notices how the compilers addressed readers – mainly aspiring gentlemen and ladies – who needed a brief introduction to classical mythology without delving into extensive academic resources. Despite a number of mistranslations and erroneous transcriptions from the sources, or deeper misunderstanding of the text, the dictionary presented itself as an essential tool for those seeking to enrich their understanding of ancient myths and, by extension, engage more deeply with the cultural productions of the Enlightenment.

Jack Lynch’s contribution investigates Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) in relation to the early modern lexicons of the classical languages, especially those of the Continental humanists in the 16th and 17th centuries. These lexicons, which were landmarks of Renaissance lexicography, inspired Johnson’s perspective (e.g. title-page motto) and lexicographic practice (e.g. hanging indents, all-capital running heads, Latinate and Greek wordlist from his readings, etymologies, quotations, etc.), and placed him in a European context. Critics argue that Johnson’s classical interests and aspirations, as they clearly emerge from his own library catalogue, sometimes led him away from addressing the unique characteristics of English. Lynch, on the other hand, shows that Johnson recognized the distinct nature of the English language and aimed to preserve its purity and meaning (*Plan* 1747). While Johnson did not introduce radically new techniques, Lynch concludes that, in adopting several classical precedents, his dictionary laid a solid foundation for future developments in English lexicography.

In her paper, Ruxandra Visan examines Ephraim Chambers’ *Cyclopaedia or An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences* (1728) and Nathan Bailey’s *Dictionarium Britannicum* (1736). The two early 18th-century lexicographic works, relying on ethnic stereotypes (e.g. French sources: Bouhours 1671, *Les Entretiens d’Ariste et d’Eugène*; Trévoux 1704/1721; Furetière/Basnage de Beauval 1701), played a crucial role in establishing the connection between the notions of ‘language’ and ‘nation’, which were central to the ideology of linguistic standardization. English is systematically associated with Greek and Latin and, as a result, given direct connection with a prestigious classical heritage. Visan focuses on the recontextualization of ancient commonplaces, or *topoi*, which informed lexicographic portrayals of languages and nations and shows the way in which they significantly contributed to the shaping of English linguistic identity in the 18th century. By examining linguistic and ethnic stereotypes in the lexicographic representations of “languages” and “nations”, Visan’s essay emphasizes how the myth of the nation-state gradually intertwines with that of a uniform and coherent standard English.

2. Part Two

Matylda Włodarczyk explores the relationship between editorial stance and references to antiquity, by focusing on the representation of Napoleon Bonaparte as the “French Hannibal” in British and Polish periodicals during the early phases of the French Revolutionary Wars. The research highlights the previously underexplored connections between evaluative language and intertextuality in historical news discourse. Adopting a diachronic and comparative approach, the analysis reveals that British news from this period clearly articulated editorial stances, using established conventions to convey opinion. Conversely, Polish news outlets lacked these conventions, indicating a less developed framework for expressing editorial viewpoints at the time. The disparity between the British and Polish press underscores the complexity of media representation and the influence of cultural and historical contexts on the construction of political narratives.

Isabella Martini’s contribution on early 19th-century British news articles regarding Etruscan antiquities provides insights into how these discoveries were communicated and perceived by the public. By applying a corpus-assisted discourse approach, Martini examines recurrent language patterns thus allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how Etruscan antiquities were framed in news discourse. Results show that the British fascination with the Etruscan civilization extended beyond academic circles and permeated cultural spheres, most notably fashion. Etruscan artefacts became symbols of status and sophistication among the aristocracy, influencing luxury fashion designs. Martini concludes that the news reporting of Etruscan finds not only shaped perceptions of beauty within the realm of antique collectibles but also contributed to contemporary luxury trends, thereby intertwining archaeology and fashion into a broader societal narrative.

Elisabetta Cecconi examines the way in which news about archaeological discoveries in Herculaneum and Pompeii was reported in 18th-century London newspapers. By combining van Dijk’s persuasive features of journalism (1988) with the popularisation indicators identified by Umbricht and Esser (2016), the study shows how 18th-century London weeklies employed a set of discursive strategies to make specialized knowledge more accessible to a wider audience. The analysis reveals a gradual transformation in the narrative of Italian discoveries over the decades: from the early framing of antiquities as mere collectibles to a more critical examination of the excavation practices. This gradual shift in focus highlights the important role that 18th-century London newspapers played in disseminating knowledge of antiquity and in developing public awareness of the cultural heritage of the past.

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