

Giovanna CESERANI

Modern nationalisms and ancient ethnicities in Magna Graecia: issues in the interpretation of the past

This paper will address the relationship between modern and ancient concepts of ethnicity and how it affects the interpretation of the past. These issues will be explored with specific reference to the history of the archaeology of Magna Graecia.

The name Magna Graecia - this rather peculiar term meaning 'Great Greece' - indicates the area of South Italy colonised by the Greeks from the eighth century BC. Since the second half of the eighteenth century the position of Magna Graecia in modern scholarship has undergone a major shift. In the late eighteenth century Magna Graecia held a central place in the rediscovery of the Greeks and the birth of philhellenism. As part of the Grand Tour, South Italy provided the first encounter with Greek culture for antiquarians and travellers alike. But in the course of the nineteenth century, as histories of ancient Greece were written and grand-scale excavations were organised in mainland Greece, Magna Graecia was increasingly marginalised and re-conceptualised as colonial Greece.

I interpret this trajectory by using theories of nationalism. In the nineteenth century the national paradigm became the dominant template for ancient historians, affecting their approaches to the ancient world and the way they divided its topography into centre and colonial periphery. Both in the modern world and in modern theories of nationalism, ethnicity is intimately linked to nationhood. Ethnic identity is now recognised as a major force for defining nationalist agendas. The modern study of the ancient world is fully implicated in this relationship between nationalism and ethnicity, as the ancients themselves were the first to conceptualise ethnic identity in western culture.

The case of the temples of Paestum highlights the various modern constructions of ancient ethnicity. The local antiquarians - the first to write about the 'rediscovery' of the temples - considered them to be Phoenician (see A. S. Mazzocchi, *Commentarii in tabulas Heracleenses*, 1754). This opinion was rejected by others who reclaimed the temples for the Greeks (see P. Magnoni, *De originibus paestanis*, date unknown). Winckelmann established the temples as paradigm of Greek sublime art, judging them to embody the true qualities of Greek masterpieces: natural simplicity and calm greatness. By the end of the nineteenth century, the temples were considered deviations from the canon which was now defined by the Parthenon in Athens, and explained as the result of the mixing of the Greeks with the native cultures (see W. Dinsmoor, *The Architecture of Ancient Greece*, 1927). These contrasting interpretations expose the process of the modern construction of ancient ethnicities. What were the reasons for such different interpretations? Do the ancient sources provide any evidence for legitimating a colonial ethnic character for the temples?

This case study of Magna Graecia suggests how intertwined the issues of modern and ancient ethnicity are, not least in the instrumentalisation of classical concepts in modern ideological agendas. It is the work of scholarly research to investigate the difference between modern and ancient conceptions of ethnicity. It is only by making this process itself the object of analysis through a historiographical approach that one can fully appreciate the complexity of the relationship between ancient and modern conceptual categories and the evasive nature of the concept of ethnic identity itself