

OLGA PALAGIA

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Interviewed by

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Born in October 1949, Professor Olga Palagia has been one of the main experts in Ancient Greek Sculpture for almost half a century. Once she obtained her Degree in the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, she moved to Oxford to write her PhD in Classical Archaeology in 1977. After a brief lapse of years working as research assistant in the Acropolis Museum of Athens, she became Lecturer in the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, where she developed her whole academic career. Author of a huge amount of research on Greek sculpture, from handbooks to papers, her voice has been one of the most respected and authoritative concerning this field. Likewise, she has made excellent and invaluable contributions to our knowledge of the Argead society, art and culture.

[Interviewer]: Dear Prof. Palagia, thank you for accepting to be interviewed for Karanos journal. I am glad and proud to have this great chance to interview you.

As a starting point: Where does your interest in Antiquity come from? How did it start?

[Palagia]: I was born and raised in Athens, which is of course full of antiquities. My father was an architect and was very interested in monuments. We often visited ancient sites on weekends. Ancient Greek art was all around us and it was easy to develop an interest in it.

Did you have a mentor when you started your research? Is there any school (theoretical, methodological, or from any other kind or perspective) do you feel you came from or belong to?

My research began when I was a doctorate student at Oxford University. I was writing a dissertation on the ancient Greek sculptor and painter Euphranor who lived in Athens in the fourth century B.C. I was intrigued by the fact that he was both a sculptor and a painter, as I wanted to explore ancient painting as well as sculpture. I was influenced by three Oxford academics: Bernard Ashmole showed me that understanding sculptural techniques was fundamental to appreciating sculpture, demonstrated the use of photography for approaching details of artworks and pioneered the study of Attic fourth-century reliefs as echoes of lost free-standing statues. Martin Robertson was particularly interested in ancient Greek painting and taught me how to approach it through Roman copies. The spectacular discoveries of Macedonian wall-paintings were still in the future. Robertson was especially interested in Renaissance art, which inspired me to study it further as a gateway to antiquity. Last but not least, John Boardman, who had a background in excavations and the Bronze Age, taught me to curb my flights of fancy and apply common sense to all theory. So I would say that I come from the Oxford school of pragmatism, where, most of all, I learned to question accepted wisdom and not take anything for granted.

How were your first steps into the Academia?

My first job was in the Acropolis Museum, where I had to catalogue material for the Museum inventories. A couple of years later, I got a teaching job in the University of Athens, where I had to give courses focused on the sculptures of the Parthenon. After I became Full Professor of Classical Archaeology, I was able to introduce a course on Macedonian painting. This was considered eccentric, since the University of Athens was supposed to concentrate on studies in Athens and Southern Greece, while the University of Thessaloniki focused on ancient Macedonian studies and carried out excavations in Pella and Aigai (Vergina). By tacit agreement, scholars active in Macedonian archaeology were more acceptable if they were natives of the area. I tried to break the mould but it was an uphill struggle. In the last few years, however, outsiders are becoming more acceptable in Macedonian archaeology and the field can only profit from this.

Despite the deep impact of your research in disciplines like Archaeology, Classics, or Ancient History, your approach always comes from the field of Art. Do you think that this different perspective of approach allows you to get a personal and differentiated scope from other authors about the topics you studied?

I was trained as an archeologist and art historian, hence the art historical perspective. However, I was also interested in the historical implications of art and made use of epigraphy and numismatics in order to reach a better understanding of the artworks I examined. Ancient Macedonian painting is a new field. It reflects a Macedonian rather than athenocentric approach and is best studied in tandem with Macedonian history. As it happens, ancient Macedonian customs and institutions can be studied through the historiography of Alexander the Great and his Successors since there are no ancient

histories of Macedonia before his reign. There are episodes in Alexander's campaign which seem to shed light on aspects of Macedonian art and archaeology that would otherwise be unfamiliar to us.

What are, in your opinion, your main contributions?

As far as Macedonian studies are concerned, I am rather happy I tried to combine historical details of Alexander's campaign in Asia, as well as iconographic details of the Achaemenid art of the western satrapies in order to illuminate some of the themes of Macedonian painting (like banquets and hunts). The artists in Macedonia, however, had an eclectic taste and, to my surprise, they also chose to illustrate Athenian motifs like the rape of Persephone or an assembly of intellectuals modelled on the tomb of Isokrates.

In addition, I am glad I questioned the association of Vergina Tomb II with Philip II of Macedon. The tomb was never fully published and I think we should reserve judgement. There is still room for debate as further information keeps coming to light. I am also glad I questioned the association of the Kasta tomb at Amphipolis with the family of Alexander the Great. The association was announced even before the tomb was excavated. Again, no conclusion can be reached until the tomb is properly published. The temptation to attribute impressive tombs to historical personalities is understandable (and I too am guilty of this) but in the absence of inscriptions the exercise is never safe.

Did you have any problems in your career because you are a woman?

I never had any problems as a woman. I had difficulties on account of my unconventional attitude, because I thought outside the box and because I did not bow to political pressures.

How do you assess the situation of the study of Antiquity nowadays in Greece, and from a wider scope, in Europe and worldwide?

The study of antiquity in source countries like Greece and Italy continues unabated. Some periods or some fields may be more fashionable than others but fads come and go. The study of antiquity has suffered, however, in countries like the UK, where slavery and the inferior position of women, especially in classical Athens, have cast a shadow on the great achievements of the classical world, and as a result, classical studies are losing ground (while slavery and women studies predominate). In the US the study of classical antiquity has to compete with other civilizations which are considered equally valuable and attractive. Contemporary art is also a great draw. In Europe the impact of the classical world is still visible in art and architecture and there is always an amount of interest in ancient Greece and Rome.

What is your perception on the current research on Ancient Macedonia?

The study of ancient Macedonia is a field of great potential. Alexander the Great has always been the focus of international attention by ancient historians and there is a veritable industry around his life and that of his contemporaries. But as Alexander departed from Macedonia early, he left no archaeological footprint. The excavations in Macedonia have revealed monuments earlier and later than his reign. The bulk of archaeological material dates from the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Macedonia is being excavated by the Greek antiquities service as well as the University of Thessaloniki, so many publications are in Greek and therefore less accessible to an international audience. This situation is being remedied recently as foreign archaeologists are gradually gaining access to the material. Greek scholars have been tempted to date some archaeological remains early and to see Philip II's and Alexander the Great's agencies here and there but in some cases this reflects wishful thinking rather than hard facts. In addition, the Roman conquest of Macedonia has altered the overall picture of some sites, Amphipolis, for example, and this is still sinking in.

What can be the most promising topics of study for early-career researchers on Ancient Macedonia and the Hellenistic world?

Speaking as an art historian, there are still many problems to explore, like the question of itinerant artists, Macedonian cultural influence in other areas such as Thrace or southern Greece, or the dissemination of cults. A nagging question is the impact of the cult of Demeter and Kore in Macedonia even though we do not hear of any prominent Macedonian initiates to the Eleusinian mysteries before Demetrios Poliorketes. Was Alexander the Great initiated during his single visit to Athens (which was close to the date of the celebration of the mysteries)? Another question is why the Macedonians chose to represent only a handful of Greek gods in their art (even though they imported Attic vases with scenes of Greek mythology). Another avenue to explore is the scientific approach to the artifacts (like special photography, 3D scanning, photogrammetry and the determination of clay or marble provenance), as well as forensic study of the human remains.

Although much of your research was published in Greek, you also published a lot in English. Why? How did it start? Do you think this fact gave your studies a wider impact?

Most of my research is in fact published in English. I wrote my doctoral dissertation in English at Oxford and continued to publish in English in order to reach a wider audience. It is also easier to publish scholarly articles and books in English as very few archaeological journals are published in Greece.

How do you describe your relationship with other main international scholars? You had a great friendship with Eugene Borza, for example, among others. From your point of view, how does this kind of close friendship between scholars balance personal life and academia?

Collaboration between scholars of different fields can be very fruitful. I have collaborated with scientists, for example, in order to determine the provenance of

marble or clay used in sculpture, as well as the alloys of bronze statues. I have also collaborated with epigraphists and religious experts in order to explore the meaning of sculptures beyond style. I could not decipher the significance of ancient Macedonian art without the historical background provided by ancient historians. My collaboration with Eugene Borza was a happy experience of two scholars from different backgrounds coming together to raise questions about a tremendous discovery which we thought had not been sufficiently explored. We actually raised more questions than we could answer, and the debate is still ongoing but I am glad we stirred the waters. I must mention here another friend that guided me through the maze of ancient Macedonian history. Brian Bosworth taught me to rely on the historical sources as much as on the physical evidence and to try and combine the two (even though this is not always possible, as every archaeologist knows). I will always remember how he was able to cite relevant passages from the historians of Alexander that would shed light on intriguing details of archaeological problems.

A bigger, almost last, question: Why does studying the Ancient World still matter? Is it still worthy of attention, in the light of the struggles, wars, and mass killings around the world nowadays? If so, what for?

The ancient world is of course a record of war and mass killings, especially as regards Alexander's campaigns. We look to the ancient world for a justification of such struggles and usually a new world emerges as a result. I think we are witnessing the birth of something new even though it may not be to our liking. We can hold the ancient world as a mirror to ourselves and learn from our mistakes. It is always worthy of attention!

There is a whole world beyond Academia. What are your hobbies? What makes you still be connected with the people around you during your academic career? What was outside the books waiting for you?

Apart from family and friends, I would say that I spend a lot of time in museums, not necessarily archaeological museums, as I enjoy art of other periods and cultures. My two great loves are the art of the Renaissance and that of Japan. Naturally, I travel a lot as I am curious about a lot of things. I also enjoy going to the opera and the theatre and love reading literature. Not always being serious. I read a lot of murder mysteries and go to the movies on weekends.

You have been retired for some years. Does it make you change your mind about the relationship between research, Antiquity, and the world around you in our present days? How do you manage to still keep involved in research and the study of Antiquity?

Retirement was good for me because it gave me freedom to travel and concentrate more on research. The study of antiquity is so much part of what I do that of course I do not give it up. It is fascinating to see new developments in our field and I never take anything for granted. I always try to approach antiquity from the side of the ancients

rather than the moderns and try to avoid introducing modern perspectives to our interpretation of the ancient world.