General Introduction: Valuing Antiquity in Antiquity

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1 The Penn-Leiden Project

Readers of earlier volumes of the Penn-Leiden Colloquia on Ancient Values will know that the project has addressed its central questions—principally, ‘the use, organization, function and effects of value discourse in different cultural and historical contexts in classical antiquity’—from ever-new angles, assembling a three-dimensional portrait of ancient valuation practices. The first six Colloquia and their corresponding volumes focused initially on the use and meaning of the concepts andreia (manliness) and parrhēsia (freedom of speech), then on the organization of values in spatial categories (city and countryside), the notion of anti-value (badness), the valuing of others and, most recently, aesthetic value. As incoming editors for the seventh volume, we saw an opportunity to add, as it were, a fourth dimension, by directing attention to the organization of value in time, focusing on marked ancient uses of the ‘past’. The title we chose for our Colloquium was ‘Valuing antiquity in antiquity’; we invited speakers to address ‘ancient valuations of antiquity as expressions of lived value systems’, asking, inter alia, ‘How did specific Greek and Roman communities use notions of antiquity to define themselves and others?’ In certain obvious ways our topic was the temporal correlate of ‘City and countryside’, which had focused on ‘city’ and ‘countryside’ as a pair of ‘conceptual “containers” of value judgments’ rather than on a single value or a specific object or mode of evaluation. But ‘antiquity’ is a more capacious container than, say, the

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1 The title of this introduction corresponds to the title of our conference. Only afterwards, we came across the volume by Gardner and Osterloh 2008 which has almost the same title (but deals mainly with Jewish and Christian culture in Late Antiquity). In the following, the translations of all Greek and Latin authors are taken from the relevant Loeb edition, unless otherwise indicated.

2 Sluiter and Rosen 2008, 2. For a fuller account of the progress of the project, see Sluiter and Rosen 2012, 6–7.

3 Sluiter and Rosen 2008, 3.
space of the countryside. Indeed, any of the value-systems previously consid-
ered in this series might be, and often were, mapped onto a temporal axis.

In the Colloquium itself we were delighted to discover that there was more
to say about antiquity as a locus or criterion of value than we had initially
envisaged—see our sketch of the chapters below. At this point let us simply
point out three further distinctive aspects of the topic. First, the practice of
referring to an antique past through language is not limited to the use of a
finite set of evaluative terms: beyond the numerous adjectives and nouns that
explicitly denote a stage in the past perceived as distant, separate, singular, or
special, gestures toward such a past are as ubiquitous as language itself, where
contrastive past-tense reference is constitutive, habitual and often consequen-
tial. Second, the valuation of antiquity is a phenomenon observed by scholars
working in virtually every field of ancient studies—witness the fact that we
received some 113 paper-proposals (and we take this opportunity again to thank
all who responded so enthusiastically, with our apologies for having had to
exclude many excellent papers). In the end we opted not to choose one paper
from every sub-field (something that we feared would have spread the conver-
sation too thin), and instead composed the Colloquium around half a dozen
especially prominent discursive practices—see the Table of Contents. Third,
the valuation of antiquity within antiquity has an over-determined significance
given the fact that modern scholars who study the ancient world are by defi-
nition engaged in a similar practice themselves; not only this, but they (we)
are dependent on prior value-judgments made by the ancients. This aspect was
alluded to in the recursive phrasing of our Colloquium’s title, and although only
a few of the chapters in the volume explicitly address this by offering compar-
isons between ancient and modern evaluative practices, we believe that the
volume as a whole, in drawing attention to the arbitrary or contingent fac-
tors in ancient valuations of the past, prompts careful reflection on what it is
we do when we ascribe value to the ancient Greco-Roman world in part or in
whole.

One other thing about the editors: unlike the founding editors of the series,
we are primarily Romanists—a fact that has influenced our choice of examples
in the Introduction, but not, we hope, the overall scope of the volume.

2 The Past as the Antique

That the past mattered and was constantly evaluated in antiquity is hardly
surprising. In many ways, the Greco-Roman world could be (and has been)
characterized as a society that constantly lived with and sometimes even in