

C.G. Heyne, F.A. Wolf, and the Birth of the Professional Classicist in 18th Century Germany

An examination of turning points in the institutional and educational history of classical studies may be instructive for diagnosing its problems. A conservative, positivist philological tradition sees its acme in late 19th and early 20th century Germany, but its legacy persists in the modern academy (Hamilton, 2022)—one name for this approach to the study of ancient Greece and Rome is *Altertumswissenschaft*, or “science of antiquity.” I wish to explore the origins of this discipline in the social conditions and ideology of late 18th century Germany by analyzing the rivalry of two influential classical philologists of this era, Friedrich August Wolf (1759-1824) and Christian Gottlob Heyne (1729-1812), building on the work of classicist Constanze Güthenke, who has analyzed the same period (Güthenke 2020).

Wolf coined the term *Altertumswissenschaft* to “unify” disparate kinds of antiquarian scholarship into an “organic whole,” and thereby “elevate all that belongs to the study of the learned ancient world to the level of a philosophical-historical science” (Wolf 1807, 5). That is, he set out to give classical studies the disciplinary coherence that they had not previously had—this “coherence,” of course, remains a contested one, as does the objectivity of this “scientific” perspective. Wolf is influential in insisting that this science be restricted to the study Greek and Roman civilizations, with Near Eastern cultures such as the ancient Israelites, Egyptians, and Persians excluded.

To illustrate the cultural background of this professionalization, I turn to the relationship of Wolf to his predecessor, Christian Gottlob Heyne, Professor of Eloquence at Göttingen. Heyne discouraged a young Wolf from his intention to declare himself a *studiosus philologiae* (student of philology) rather than a student of law, theology, or medicine. Contemporary society

could not accommodate someone who, like Wolf, wanted to devote himself entirely to researching antiquity. Classical education was rather a means to the end of service in the bureaucracies of the church and state. Heyne's own life as a child of poverty who obtained a high position in the Hanoverian civil service provides further examples of the dynamics of class in the study of the classics in the 18th century (LaVopa, 1988).

Further exemplary is the controversy that would later erupt between a mature Wolf, Heyne, and the philosopher Herder in 1795 after Wolf's publication of his most famous work, the *Prolegomena ad Homerum*. All three figures agreed that there was no singular author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. What they did not agree upon is how this hypothesis should be properly argued. Wolf took a stance of scientific rigor, while Herder argued from general philosophical principles. Heyne sided with Herder, thereby unleashing what Anthony Grafton has called "the first great priority fight" in modern classical philology (Grafton 1983, 171), a battle that also illustrates the emergence of the "academic expert" in public discourse around classical literature.

Finally, I examine Wolf's later life in terms of the consequences of his "professionalization" of classical studies. Through his teaching at the University of Halle and the University of Berlin, Wolf created the prototype of the modern, research-focused Classics department. Yet he was himself dissatisfied with and even ostracized in the new world that he created, as his feud with his students Friedrich Schleiermacher and August Boeckh demonstrates. Heyne's warning about the pitfalls of professional philology feels prescient, but not in the way that either scholar expected. Wolf helped to create a new niche for the research scholar, but also helped to serve the Prussian state in engineering a social system in which classical studies were hallmarks of membership in a conservative nationalistic establishment. This model of classicism would reign supreme in the culture of the later German Empire and leave its mark on American

academia. I believe that knowledge of this history may raise classical scholars' awareness of the hidden social uses to which their apparently disinterested professional activities may contribute, thereby allowing us another angle of attack on the "straitjacket of nationalism" (and classism) that Dan-el Padilla Peralta has argued surrounds our discipline (Padilla Peralta 2017, para. 40).

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