

White Supremacists Respect Classical Scholarship...If It Was Written Before the 1970s

Over the course of the last year, the evidence that white supremacists are alive and well in the United States and still as invested as they ever were in the Classical world has increased. While some have suggested that their visibility has increased as a result of the election of President Trump, in fact, these groups have been visible on the internet as long as the internet has existed. That said, their willingness to engage scholars in comments threads on web publications and on Twitter has seemingly become increasingly aggressive in recent months. The cases of Donna Zuckerberg, Sarah Bond, and Mary Beard's repeated engagement with racist commenters who resist the notion that the ancient Mediterranean was a multiethnic society highlight the willingness of white supremacists to be aggressive when engaging scholars. In some cases, groups like Campus Reform--not necessarily explicitly white supremacist, though sharing characteristics with white supremacist groups--has staff seek out scholarship or popular writing by university professors in order to target this work and scholars for their "progressive" work. Additionally, posters are appearing on campuses across the US from groups like Identity Europa and Vanguard America that use classical imagery to promote their platforms.

Interestingly, however, for all the investment and engagement these groups have put into seeking out classical scholars and using classical imagery, they are surprisingly ignorant of the classical object of their affections. In fact, an examination of the commenting patterns of individuals espousing white supremacist views suggests that they depend for their knowledge of the ancient world on out-dated--by as much as two centuries--scholarship as the basis for their opinions and claims about the ancient world. From the use of disreputable or disputed race science and physical anthropology to arguments based on a German or northern European source for a Dorian invasion to convictions that race mixing led to the fall of Rome, these commenters

demonstrate a pre-World War II mentality that belies the last 50 years of scholarship within the fields of Classics, Ancient History, and Archaeology. Given the breadth and depth of work and gains in knowledge, especially in archaeology in these decades, such (willful) ignorance is dangerous.

In this paper, I will consider, first, the impact of this (intentional) reliance on pre-WWII scholarship on white supremacist understandings of the ancient world. Next, I will consider possible reasons for the failure (or refusal) to engage with more current scholarship, including ideological selectivity and the structures of academic publishing. And finally, I will consider some ways we professionals may be able to make some headway changing this dynamic.