

# The New Greeks. Historicism of Polish Romantics in the Face of the Birth of *Altertumswissenschaft*

## Summary

In 1807, Wilhelm von Humboldt wrote that admiration for Greeks is characterised by the fact that it does not curb human strife for perfection, and it does not intimidate us with the grandeur of Hellenic history and its achievements. On the contrary, it boosts the autonomy of the modern age man as it forces him to seek his own path of growth. Modernity should not freeze in awe of the ancient philosophy, democracy and poetry. It has to attain its own goals and means to them. At the same time, we cannot resign from ancient models altogether because the gauge of modern nations' development is their comprehension of Antiquity, the degree of acquiring its heritage and methods of drawing from its achievements.

Therefore, according to Humboldt, European nations can be arranged by their attitude towards the past and the role which this past plays in the process of their formation and their reaction to the challenges of the reality. Humboldt made no secret of the fact that since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Germans had been unparalleled on this path, while his successors – the representatives of subsequent generations of philosophers, historians and writers – transferred this conviction to the reservoir of key ideas for the long period of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Consequently, the attitude towards Antiquity became the grounds for international competition, while the myths of origin of individual nations drew arguments from this rivalry necessary to legitimise the actions of the German, French, Italian or British governments. The focus on Antiquity, admiration for the ancients, or the cultivation of ancient traditions have not always been purely scientific in their search for the truth or artistic reference to the ancient heritage. With all certainty, for nations, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century rivalry in this field became the arena of struggle for prestige and power. However, not every participant of this competition had a level playing field. This was the case with the Polish Romantic literature and culture.

The purpose of this book is to analyse the role which the development of the German *Altertumswissenschaft* at the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had (in combination with the English-French intellectual base) on the birth of the Romantic reception of the ancient traditions in Poland. I would like to make the *Griechenmythos* (the myth of the Greeks) the key term, which – for the sake of accuracy in the terminology – I will refer to as the Greek myth. By this term, I mean the inherent belief, verbalised on the pages of scientific and literary work as well as philosophical treatises in the remarkable bond between the German culture, history and language, and the world of ancient Greece.

In order to avoid mechanical connotations with „the myths of Greece” or „the myth of Greece”, which are commonly encountered in research on Polish literature and culture, in the wording of *Griechenmythos*, I purposefully try to highlight its certain unnatural quality and foreignness compared to already accepted and frequently-used phrases. *Griechenmythos* is a carefully verified term of a limited meaning. Writing about it, I will try to underscore its strangeness from other terms, even if they are related. It is also a term which cannot be identified with Neo-Hellenism, Neo-Paganism or Philhellenism.

This singular belief, whose political, historical and cultural reasons are reconstructed in this book, had its own special medium, and simultaneously, a highly-specialised tool. These were the *Altertumswissenschaften*, antiquarian sciences, whose particular focus was on Classical philology, which underwent a deep transformation in Germany in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in order to engage intensely in the propagation of the Greek myth. Due to the book's nature, it will explore the areas between literary studies, intellectual history, and the history of ideas because a single discipline would not have allowed for a due treatment of the entire subject matter.

The first chapter attempts to reconstruct the *Greek myth* in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century research tradition. It is a complex research problem studied by modern literary scholars, historians, historians of ideas, Classical philologists and sociologists. In the Polish humanities, however, it remains practically unexplored. The second chapter focuses on the scientific work of G. E. Groddeck and J. Lelewel. It explores two issues: the attitude of both researchers to the Greek historiography on the example of Herodotus and Thucydides, and their interpretation of the history of Sparta and Athens, particularly the conflict of both *poleis* during the Peloponnesian War. I have selected these aspects because they played a crucial role in the formulation and clarification of the assumptions of the *Greek myth*. Hence, I was trying to investigate whether Groddeck and Lelewel follow the German or the French-British sources and publications in their work. The third and fourth chapters delve into the lecture activity of Adam Mickiewicz in Lausanne and Paris. I will not conceal the fact that for me Mickiewicz is a key figure for the settlement of the entire *Greek myth* issue in Poland, hence, I consider these last chapters as the most vital in the entire book.

I would also like to underscore that Groddeck, Lelewel and Mickiewicz's academic engagement and affiliation to the widely-understood intellectual community of the Vilnius University (and in the case of Lelewel, also the Warsaw University) in the first two decades of the 19th century are central to my considerations devoted to them. It is this tradition, deliberated and re-interpreted, that will later be used by Mickiewicz in the lecture halls of Lausanne and Paris.

*Translated by Katarzyna Szuster*