

I begin on an autobiographical note in the hope that this will provide some context for my talk. On a hot sticky evening in late August twelve and a half years ago, I pulled up in a small U-Haul and unloaded my books into my office in Old Main at the liberal arts college that had hired me in their classics department. One way or another, I had amassed quite a lot of books during graduate school. But when I looked at my bookshelves, I noticed that there weren't many that would help me prepare for the history course that I had been assigned to teach. This was entirely my fault. Although I had studied some ancient history as an undergrad and grad student, my attention had been dominated by philology, and my bookshelves were full of texts and translations of ancient literary works. Needless to say, I found myself outside my comfort zone in teaching a history course, especially one that began in ancient Mesopotamia and ended with the Renaissance. Where did I put that ziggurat poster I drew in grade school and my jester's hat?

Fortunately I was teaching two sections of this course alongside a classics colleague who had taught the course for decades, and I inherited her syllabus. As the semester progressed and I tried to keep one lesson ahead of my students, I noticed a couple of things about the course.

First, although it purported to be a chronological survey of western history, it seemed to linger for as long as humanly possible in the Greco-Roman world. One of our students, in a good-natured parody, represented the course in visual form as a cartogram in which Greece and Italy appeared to be on steroids. And when the Goths, Ostrogoths and Vandals finally forced us to move on to non-classical periods, we still found ourselves connecting back to the classical world wherever possible. We studied Charlemagne, for example, by reading Einhard's biography of him, modeled on Suetonius' *Life of Augustus*. And then we hopped, skipped and jumped to the Renaissance, where of course we could rediscover the classical world all over again.

Secondly, as I taught the course, it quickly became apparent that it had been designed by philologists like me. Literary texts loomed large. We read *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Petrarch's love sonnets, and Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Intellectual history was disproportionately represented: the ideas of Pre-Socratic philosophers, Plato's *Symposium*, Renaissance thinkers. This was a course about big ideas, about values, about the relation of the individual and society. And the students (mostly) loved it. The next year, I taught the course again. I made minor changes, but kept many of the same texts, assembled as a giant coursepack. The point I am making is that inertia, and a level of comfort with the familiar, meant that I continued the kind of course that I had inherited.

Courses such as this can come under scrutiny from various quarters. History departments may question their content and methodologies and be reluctant to count them

towards the history major. This happened at my college. At the same time, many history departments are no longer interested in teaching ancient history and readily cede this ground to classics departments. This is the situation for other areas of the ancient world as well: Greco-Roman art is taught by fewer art history programs than in the past.

Here I am moving away from the microscopic to the macroscopic. If you look at where ancient history is taught in colleges and universities in the U.S., and by whom, a couple of general trends emerge. At large universities, both public and private, ancient history courses are usually taught by historians. These specialists are more likely to be based in history departments than in classics departments. The situation is quite different in liberal arts colleges, where courses in ancient history are typically housed in classics departments, and where the instructor is less likely to be a historian, though certainly some are.

For those students planning to go on to a graduate program in history, we must ask whether the field of classics prepares them for the kinds of historical inquiry in which they are likely to engage? For example, is the heavy emphasis that many classics curricula place on Greek and Latin language skills warranted, or does it displace other skills more important to the study of history in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? And what would these be?

If we look at modern history departments, several trends are discernible. First, history faculty are increasingly shying away from offering survey courses, especially broad surveys from ancient Mesopotamia to the Renaissance such as the one we had been teaching. These have been replaced mainly by topics courses.<sup>1</sup> One factor that is often cited is that in the internet age, when anyone can look up information on Wikipedia using their omnipresent smartphones, having facts and dates at your fingertips is no longer as valued as having other skills. These skills include analyzing historical evidence, understanding cultural context, and exploring a variety of perspectives and their relation to gender, class, religious, and other identities. Second, modern historians are increasingly teaching within their specialties. Our recent hires in the history department, for example, refuse to teach the *Historical Perspectives II* course, the pendant to the one we teach, as a European course—not so much because they are wary of a Eurocentric view of history (though there is that), but because they are by training Africanists, or Latin Americanists, or specialists in South East Asia and do not feel qualified to teach outside their geographical area. At the same time, these geographical areas are not necessarily contiguous. Migration and diaspora studies are exploding right now; thus transnational history has replaced history organized around the nation state. Finally, cross-disciplinary studies are also yielding interesting results. Ancient history taught mainly through primary sources in translation (or, for the lucky few, taught in the original) is an approach that examines an increasingly small portion of the available evidence. Archaeology in all its subfields (from nautical archaeology to paleobotany), environmental anthropology, network studies as a way to study cross-cultural exchange, all have greatly expanded our historical understanding of the ancient world in recent years.

There are obvious disadvantages and limitations to the ways in which ancient history is taught by a non-specialist. But today I am going to focus on the advantages and opportunities. A non-specialist instructor can bring to the study of history the impulse to ask the unexpected questions that students also often bring, and the same curiosity that drove Herodotus to engage in inquiry (*'historiē'*). Like Herodotus, the non-specialist can model to students the heuristic methods of learning from credible historical sources, and can be more responsive to the interests of students. In my case, this is especially evident when students start researching their final term paper on a topic from the Middle Ages. My latest batch of papers included a study of the role of milk-parents in social networks in 13<sup>th</sup> century Italy, another on the development of the university as an institution as seen in the *Chartularium* of the University of Paris, a third on the works of Christine de Pizan as a feminist challenge to male-centered historical narratives. One examined the persecution of Jews during the Black Death using both Christian and Jewish sources; another looked at figural representations of death in art before and after the Black Death. As they try and identify useful primary and secondary sources, I often find myself taking them to the library in our one-on-one meetings and browsing the shelves with them, showing them how to follow leads in reference encyclopedias, all from a position of ignorance. Students find this openness empowering, as they come in assuming that their professors know—or should know—everything!

Two years ago, our department did a major revision of the *Historical Perspectives I* course to include more global history.<sup>2</sup> This was largely in response to students' interests in a more globalized curriculum. We have moved away from the survey course to a topics-focused course. We still follow a broadly chronological sequence, but we no longer try to cover the sweep of history and instead focus on introducing students to a wide range of historical sources and methods of inquiry, including archaeology, epigraphy, numismatics, monumental art, and film. Here are a few examples to give you a sense of what is, I think, a distinctly liberal arts approach to teaching ancient history.

In the unit on Mesopotamia, students read the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. We then introduce them to archaeological methods, and they read a field report on the excavation of the sanctuary of Inanna in Uruk. They read catalogue entries from *Art of the First Cities*, a special exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and consider what artifacts can tell us about a culture. We discuss what myth, archaeological evidence and funerary and prestige artifacts variously can tell us about the political organization and values of a society. We then look at the history of the transmission of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and consider factors that explain its assimilation and diffusion beyond Sumeria; why, for example, it was discovered in the library of King Assurbanipal in Nineveh. Finally, we read an article about the looting of the National Museum in Baghdad during the Iraq war and discuss contemporary ethical issues relating to the antiquities trade. Our next topic is the Uluburun shipwreck, which we include as an

example of trade within the Late Bronze Age and to encourage students to start thinking beyond the nation state and consider cross-cultural exchange.

A unit on 5<sup>th</sup> century Greece, in which selections from Herodotus and Thucydides are read in quick succession, allows students to focus on historiography and to consider how these two historians' interests shapes their narratives, and how their perspectives are influenced by the ideologies of the cultures in which they write. Students wrestle with questions fundamental to the study of historical sources such as the reliability of evidence, the value of autopsy, and the question of bias. We read Herodotus' account of the constitutional debate between Darius and his fellow conspirators about which is the best form of government. We study this alongside Darius' Behistun inscription, carved into the Zagros mountains along the old caravan road from Babylon to Ecbatana. Students write a paper in which they are asked to analyze what each source contributes to our understanding of Darius' rise to power. At first they struggle to see the value of the Behistun inscription beyond what it tells us about Darius being a very arrogant king. But we prompt them to consider the text within the expectations of its particular genre. We look at modern inscriptions—gravestones and inscriptions on public monuments—and consider what typically is and is not recorded in these texts. In preparing to write this paper, we also send students on a scavenger hunt around our college library during which they have to find specific items discussing the controversial construction of the presidential sculptures on Mount Rushmore.<sup>3</sup> This scavenger hunt gets them using newspaper databases, microfilm, online journals etc. as they move from one clue to the next. However, they also get introduced to a variety of perspectives on this modern monumental stone carving; Lakota viewpoints, for example, make students more aware of the underlying narrative of ethnic conflict between Persians and Medes in the Herodotus and Behistun accounts.

This understanding of the importance of context and perspectives helps students contextualize the Persian wars as described by Herodotus. Herodotus' ethnographical accounts introduce interesting discussions of ethno-centricism in everything from cartographical conventions to how American and European history dominate the high school curriculum. We then compare Herodotus' account of the battle of Thermopylae to the movie *300*, directed by Zach Snyder. We show selected scenes from the latter to critique the film's hyper-masculine representation of the Spartans against its 'othering' of Xerxes as an effeminate deviant, and of Ephialtes as a disfigured hunchback. This is the first of a number of case studies that showcase how modern concerns influence our understanding of the past, and how the past is used as a source of authority. For example, we also study the influence of Pericles' funeral speech on Lincoln's Gettysburg address, and we consider the ongoing debate about whether Alexander was seen as Greek in the context of the naming dispute about the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

This course is part of a core curriculum general education program that integrates the exploration of values into its course content. In *Historical Perspectives* we consider the relationship of the individual to society in a variety of historical contexts. In choosing the topics for their research papers, students gravitate to areas of investigation that fall under the umbrella of the human experience: the experience of an infant growing up under the care of milk-parents and the conception of family in 13<sup>th</sup> century Italy, or the precarious life of a prostitute in medieval London as glimpsed through legislative records and coroners' reports on causes of death. We encourage students to enter empathetically into the lived experiences of people living in very different social and cultural contexts than they, to go beyond preconceived stereotypical views of history as a grand narrative of progress towards the civilized and enlightened present, to break free from the tyranny of teleological presentism. All this is very hard to do. Students can easily become frustrated with the paucity of direct evidence. What they want is a first-hand account of what it was like to grow up under the care of a wet nurse when the only evidence that they can find are oblique references in the *libro di ricordanze* of a Florentine merchant, where payments to the *balia* are recorded alongside other ledger entries. It is very easy for them to throw up their hands and make sweeping generalizations. The line between historical investigation and fantasy is indeed thin. But lack of direct evidence is in itself illuminating, I find myself reassuring them. As I meet with students for individual tutorials to discuss their research project, some of our most interesting conversations center on the relation of literacy, writing and voice to power and agency.

We also study religions in their historical contexts. We study the growth of Christianity within the Greco-Roman world. We study the spread of Islam and the interactions of Muslims with followers of other religions in the Arabian peninsula. We study Confucianism and Buddhism in their early historical and cultural contexts. The connections between societies and worldviews are explored, as are constructions of identity.

One of our units is focused on China under Qin Shi Huang-di, the First Emperor, using Sima Qian as our primary source. After reading the *Analects* or sayings of Confucius, students are more readily able to understand why historians such as Sima Qian opposed the legalist framework that Qin Shi sought to introduce. Their study of the Augustan age and the role that literature, art, and prestige building projects played in communicating a political ideology makes for a nuanced reading of similar dynamics at play in the reign of Qin Shi Huang-di, who is also attempting to present a new form of government as a return to the old. Sima Qian's account, written during the Han dynasty and antipathetic to the Qin emperors, offers a valuable comparandum to the differing accounts of Augustus' reign given by Suetonius and Augustus himself in his *Res Gestae*. This topic thus engages with the burgeoning field of the comparative study of imperialism. It encourages students to engage in cross-cultural studies while paying attention to the particulars of context.

One of our units in the medieval period is on the emergence of the liberal arts curriculum during the middle ages and the rise of universities. As students read the letters of Abelard and Heloise and study extracts from the *Chartularium* of the University of Paris that allow them to imagine the experiences of their medieval counterparts, they get to discussing big questions related to their own educational experiences. Why do we study what we study? Should our studies be relevant to the society in which we live? If so, in what ways? My goals for this first year history course are pretty broad, and this is typical of the approach of many of my colleagues at liberal arts colleges. I believe that the study of ancient history plays a critical role in helping students develop new perspectives, skills, and capacities. The ancient world can offer a safe space in which to start thinking and talking about topics such as religion, ethnicity, gender, and class. As students start to understand their lives within a broader historical context, and see the relation of narrative to power and of perspective to societal position, they prepare to function as citizens able to think critically, to detect bias, to engage with fellow humans beyond their native affiliations and to work towards the greater good. This expansive view of the purpose of studying history is one that is affirmed by the American Historical Association in its statement of core competencies that has emerged from its so-called History Tuning Project.<sup>4</sup> I fully expect them to forget most of the information that they learn in a matter of weeks after the final exam; but I hope that some of the habits of mind that they develop will stay with them for life.

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<sup>1</sup> Here are examples of such courses from three different institutions:

**Black Death to Obesity Epidemic:** History of Public Health in the West (3) Surveys attempts to protect the health of human populations from the Black Death in Europe to rising concern about obesity in the United States. Explores shifting patterns of disease and illness, and emergence and growth of public health as a domain of expert knowledge and policy in the United States and Europe. *Rutgers University*

**Greek and Roman Slavery:** Social, economic, legal, and political aspects of slavery in Ancient Greece and Rome. The sources and numbers of slaves, forms of servitude, manumission, and slave labor. *Rutgers University*

**World Migration:** Overview of human migration from pre-history to the present. Sessions on classical Rome; Jewish diaspora; Viking, Mongol, and Arab conquests; peopling of New World, European colonization, and African slavery; 19th-century European mass migration; Chinese and Indian diasporas; resurgence of global migration in last three decades, and current debates. *Columbia College*

**First-Year Seminar: The Barbarian North:** The seminar will explore how Germanic and Celtic societies emerged and solidified their identities as they came into contact with Roman institutions and Latin Christendom from ca. 100 to 1050 A.D. Students will choose to specialize in a current methodology, ranging from archaeology to gender. Writings of the period concerning saints, scholars, kings, and warlords will be stressed. *Swarthmore College*

<sup>2</sup> My departmental colleagues who helped revise this course are Seán Easton, Yurie Hong, Mary McHugh, and Matt Panciera.

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<sup>3</sup> This assignment was developed by Barbara Fister, coordinator of Gustavus' library instruction program.

<sup>4</sup> AHA History Tuning Project: History Discipline Core (accessed January 8, 2014: <http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2012/history-discipline-core>)

History students can (core competencies):

1. Engage in historical inquiry, research, and analysis.
2. Practice historical empathy.
3. Understand the complex nature of the historical record.
4. Generate significant, open-ended questions about the past and devise research strategies to answer them.
5. Craft historical narrative and argument.
6. Practice historical thinking as central to engaged citizenship.