

## **How to make Ancient History programs less ancient** **Walter Scheidel (Stanford University)**

Ancient historians-in-training, conventionally if narrowly defined as historians who specialize in the Greco-Roman Mediterranean and the cultures in its orbit, face a time-honored laundry list of rigorous demands: a certain measure of proficiency in the principal languages of the primary evidence; reading knowledge of the main hegemonic languages of modern scholarship; acquaintance with a body of putatively significant facts and modern interpretations; and a degree of familiarity with the sheer physical variety of the source material. In as much as change is being advocated it is usually supposed to take the form of accretion rather than substitution. Ever more varied skills and perspectives are considered necessary for exploring the distant past. The promotion of cross-cultural approaches features prominently in this accretionary process: Elizabeth Pollard's compelling call for an engagement with an Afroeurasian ecumene is a case in point. If anything, this framework is still too constricting: I myself would put less emphasis on interconnectedness within a geographical sphere and more on a comparative analytical approach to comparable entities, which would then include the Pre-Columbian Americas as well, with societies that were no less 'ancient' merely because they happened to be located on a separate continent. In fact, it is their relative isolation that makes them even more valuable for the purpose of comparative analysis.

I would also be wary of privileging simultaneity: civilizations did not have to co-exist – let alone interact – in order to invite fruitful comparison. A generation ago, Moses Finley mused that we should perhaps create a new discipline, “the comparative study of literate, pre-industrial, historical societies”, and suggested “pre-Maoist China, pre-colonial India, medieval Europe, pre-revolutionary Russia, medieval Islam” as appropriate comparanda for students of the Greco-Roman world (*The Use and Abuse of History* [2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London 1986], 119). Ancient History surely stands to benefit as much from vertical extensions into later periods of pre-modern history as from horizontal expansion into other parts of the ancient world.

And the need for accretions does not stop there. Ancient historians, or any historians, study human behavior in the past by identifying and formulating questions and agenda, by establishing or adopting methodologies for addressing these questions, and by seeking ways to assess the relative merits of competing arguments and versions of the past. These core objectives of historical scholarship necessarily require explicit engagement with different ways of structuring formal inquiry, ways that have been developed for several generations by a whole number of related disciplines, most notably the 'Big Four' of Anthropology, Economics, Political Science, and Sociology. If students of antiquity are unfamiliar with what we might call the complementary world-views of these fields, how can they hope to make sense of the precious information they have worked so hard to acquire?

How can graduate students be introduced to these vital skills? The best course of action might well be to require graduate students to take a certain number of 'skills' courses offered by other programs. Ideally this should not just be an option among many but a

mandatory requirement: inputs from other, related disciplines are ‘eye-opening’ in the fundamental sense that their benefits cannot be properly anticipated a priori but only experienced. While students would be free not to make use of this knowledge in their own research or teaching, it is important to ensure that they do so not out of ignorance but only on the basis of prior exposure. This kind of “outsourcing” to neighboring programs would seem to be a somewhat less inefficient way of fostering transdisciplinarity than the common practice of self-teaching which, as far as I can tell, is how most senior ancient historians who work in this vein have come to broaden their horizons. It is true that at the end of the day, nothing can ever supersede independent study. Even so, by mandating ‘gateway courses,’ Ancient History programs could certainly make it much easier for their students to think and teach and write across conventional disciplinary boundaries.

What is the likely benefit of this approach? Exposure to the conceptualizations of other disciplines ought to enrich and ultimately improve the practice of scholarly problem-posing and problem-solving and will encourage dialogue with other, related fields. This should make Ancient History less parochial, render graduates more employable, and help attune their work to broader concerns in the Social Sciences and Humanities.

Yet *ars longa vita brevis*. If we want graduates with a solid grounding in Classics (Greek, Latin, and all that) who have been introduced to the basics of epigraphy and papyrology and numismatics, and who have some sense of the potential and the methodology of archaeology, and have ideally gained first-hand experience on a dig or survey, and who also know enough of the history of the ancient Near East and of early China and early India and Teotihuacan and medieval Europe to put their Greco-Roman Mediterranean data into context, and who, on top of all that, have some sense of how to interpret these data from the vantage point of economics, sociology, anthropology, and political science, ... then we either have to limit recruitment to insomniac geniuses or extend graduate school to last a full decade. Neither one of these options seems particularly appealing or realistic.

The ineluctable consequence is that something has to give. Something has to give in the sense that Ancient History graduate programs cannot be all things to all people. In other words, even if we wish to hold on to some kind of minimal core of basic language and other skills, we must face up to the fact that no single program will be capable of preparing graduates equally well – or even *similarly* well – in all these manifold and intrinsically desirable ways. Inevitably, a significant degree of specialization *must* occur, with some programs emphasizing certain aspects and others privileging others. Some programs, generally housed in Classics departments, will focus heavily on ancient languages and related skills. Others may pay greater attention to the contribution of material culture and the continuum between documents and artifacts. Others, perhaps most often in History departments, will emphasize a world-historical approach, or more narrowly highlight connectivity between select macro-regions, such as the Near East and the Mediterranean. Others still may take a lead in promoting transdisciplinarity, with particular emphasis on the Social Sciences. Applicants must then select programs accordingly, in keeping with their own preferences.

It seems to me that rather than lamenting this diversity, or at least regarding it as an imperfection, we ought to embrace and encourage it without reservation. Given the daunting range of useful skills and bodies of knowledge that would ideally have to be mastered, there simply cannot be a single one-size-fits-all master-plan for Ancient History at the graduate level. Instead, it is the role of the academic marketplace of ideas and jobs to identify the most competitive configurations of knowledge and perspective. In the long term, the preferences of different graduate programs will come to be reflected in the employment success of their graduates. That way, it will be the market that decides which areas to emphasize at the expense of others. This process will not merely obviate the need for panels discussing how to train Ancient History graduate students in any given century, it is also the only appropriately 'modern' way of doing Ancient History: by privileging demand over supply, and by putting our faith in the competitive diversity of American higher education.