Noble Dreams: *Historia Vincit Omnia* ?

For students contemplating graduate work in ancient history who enquire: "Should I train in a History program, or in a Classics one ?," I have a one-word answer: "History." Those who disagree may wish to protest (pointing at me, and in fact at several other senior ancient historians in North America today): "But you trained in a Classics program yourself." To which my reply is: "True, but that was on a different continent, almost forty years ago, when really the only training that a British PhD in History or Classics offered was do-it-yourself dissertation-writing." Fortunately, today in North America there are History and Classics programs which offer a great deal more, and a would-be ancient historian should consider them with care.

Whether the label on the program chosen is 'Classics' or 'History' need hardly matter in the end. What do matter are the program's requirements and potential scope. An ancient history program in a History department that will train you well must be associated with a strong Classics department where you have the chance, and preferably the obligation, to improve your essential language skills, read historical authors, and more. Equally, an ancient history program in a Classics department must not burden you with excessive language and literature (metrics and palaeography, for instance, should be optional), and at the same time should positively encourage you to take courses elsewhere in history, archaeology, anthropology, and more.

Among History programs, is it a good sign if some attention is required to theories of history and to the development of academic history since its professionalization in the late nineteenth century ? Yes, in my view. Peter Novick, the author of a very instructive and influential study *That Noble Dream: the "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), happens to show minimal awareness of ancient history. But if you read his first and last chapters in particular from an ancient historian's perspective, you are left in no doubt that over time trends in other fields of history and in ours have in fact stayed in step. For would-be ancient historians to cultivate a sense of where their profession has come from, where it is now, and where it may be headed should prove invaluable. If nothing else, it should remove any dismay that history is no longer a well defined discipline with widely agreed aims, standards and methods; that it is a Cyclops which has lost its way and become a Hydra. On the contrary, one may argue, it has happily shrugged off its never very noble Cyclopean persona. As the victim of its own success almost, it has now expanded its vision to take in the entire globe, becoming much more socially inclusive and ethnically diverse, and asking fresh questions that tap neglected forms of testimony along with new theories and techniques of investigation. Most recently, this Hydra has even dared to attempt some serious cross-cultural comparisons and contrasts, a development that features later in the panel.

Should would-be ancient historians want to engage with theories of history ? Again I say yes, although I do acknowledge that this area of the discipline can prove tough to penetrate satisfyingly. This is, first, because there has been no shortage of theorizing and any instructor has to make choices; and, second, because – inevitably for students only

beginning their serious engagement with history – many choices and their potential value may not have immediate appeal. Two colleagues at different institutions were kind enough to equip me with their syllabi for theory courses that each taught in fall semester 2007. Both are stimulating syllabi, although with a striking lack of overlap. One of the colleagues, not an ancient historian, made some use of Arnaldo Momigliano's *Classical Foundations of Modern Historiography* (California, 1990); but the other colleague, who does happen to be an ancient historian, did not. Neither used Elizabeth Clark's *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Harvard, 2004), which analyses ideas and debates about history, philosophy and critical theory from Ranke onwards, and of course happens to be the work of an author whose specializes in the early centuries of Christianity. Equally, neither colleague used Anthony Grafton's new book *What Was History ? The Art of History in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 2007), with its title consciously evoking E.H. Carr's *What is History ?* (New York, 1961).

Again, neither syllabus (as it happens) includes anything by Brian Harley, whose approach to interpreting maps has proven immensely influential,[1] nor anything by Pierre Nora, whose differentiation between 'history' and 'memory' I find a rewarding means of approach to ancient historiography about Sparta, for instance,[2] or to Roman commemorative practice. My point in offering these observations is not to find fault with two colleagues for making choices different from those that I might have favored in their position, but simply to illustrate the challenge of deciding what range of theories to

[1] See M.H. Edney, *The Origins and Development of J.B. Harley's Cartographic Theories*, *Cartographica* 40,1-2 [2005] = Monograph 54 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press).
[2] See my "Plutarch's Sparta: *lieux de mémoire, trous de mémoire*," in N. Kaltsas (ed.), *Athens-Sparta* (forthcoming).

introduce, and when, in the course of a program. On timing, my inclination is to favor a later stage rather than early, although I can equally well appreciate the potential stimulus that some theory introduced early might give.

A general caution that I should like to express both to students seeking the 'best' ancient history training, and to faculty who control graduate work, is not to overload a program. In our awareness of new ideas, techniques and areas of history, we are understandably eager to cram in more. In fact our own field is demanding enough already, and we may resist dropping a current component in order to accommodate a new one. The plain fact is that most graduate students come to our field with nowhere near full background, so that most of their coursework and preparation for comprehensive exams will be usefully devoted to the multiple dimensions of Greek and Roman history. If such focus leaves only limited time for other cultures and periods at this stage, or for learning a technique like Advanced Geographic Information Systems, my reaction is not to be over-concerned. A graduate program can only do so much, and its aim should be to lay the most useful foundation for launching students into the field, as well as developing and completing a dissertation. Moreover, a graduate program should not mark the end of training. Our field should expect training to continue thereafter, and it ought to provide more opportunities for this than it does currently.

Accordingly, I think our students during their graduate training would benefit immensely from more sustained interaction with their peers and with faculty in other institutions. To be sure, many gain some such contact already by one means or other.

But I am convinced that as a field we could usefully serve our students better in this respect. Few North American universities have anything but a handful of ancient history faculty, and their clusters of graduate students are correspondingly small. Dissertation committees typically comprise faculty from the student's home institution only, and usually there is no external examiner either. This past summer (2007), I had the privilege of being asked to lead a four-day 'Masterclass' organized for doctoral students from among the half-dozen Netherlands universities which offer a classics/ancient history PhD. It was like a retreat: we all lived and worked in the beautiful surroundings of a renovated former nunnery; each of the fourteen participants delivered a paper around a broad common theme; and there was ample discussion of approach, content, style, presentation. I left full of admiration for such a thoroughly worthwhile experience, wishing that we could offer something comparable for students in North America. Here such an experience could have added value, because I imagine that few, if any, participants would know each other at all beforehand, whereas most of the Dutch participants already did to some degree.

By the same token, I think we could, and should, do more for junior faculty to continue broadening their scope and their expertise after the PhD. A National History Center in Washington, DC – created by the American Historical Association in 2002 – takes this as one of its goals.[3] I am not aware that ancient historians have played any role here yet, but perhaps they should. The summer Institutes and Seminars funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities are designed to assist likewise, and certainly the last such seminar I co-directed (in 2006) had a notable number of junior faculty in the

[3] http://www.nationalhistorycenter.org

group. We should exploit these opportunities more. NEH has also just introduced a new category of Institute for Advanced Topics in the Digital Humanities, which is an ideal means for faculty to gain or to update skills in these research techniques.

To sum up: my recommendation to prospective graduate students in ancient history is to opt for a History training well linked to Classics. Faculty I urge not to overload programs, but to strive for their students to gain wider contacts before they graduate, and to have more training opportunities after the PhD.

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