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Listening to the First, Speaking to the Twenty-First Centuries

Before I joined the academic specialists advising the writers and producers of 'The First Century in the Roman Empire,' a documentary series produced for public television, I had previously taken part in several commercial projects that sought to represent the classical world for a broadly constituted audience. Among them were a documentary for ABC-TV Sports, a series for the Discovery Channel, and various programs produced under the auspices of the History Channel. It was rewarding to work with the creators of these commercial projects, since they had considerable enthusiasm for classical antiquity. Yet they often regarded serious research and thoughtful analysis as of lesser importance than communicating fairly simple and, where possible, sensationalist messages to suit agendas that had been made up in advance, agendas they thought would 'sell' to their sponsors and 'wow' their target audiences. Interview questions, formulated and posed by staffers, were sometimes informed by markedly presentist concerns, with mixed results. Some of these programs ultimately gave a misleading impression of ancient Greek and Roman society and conveying an insufficient sense of new developments in scholarship and approaches to evidence.

I had, however, also served as an 'expert witness' on four different classically-themed episodes of a public radio program, the Canadian Broadcasting Company's 'Court of Ideas.' Co-authored by the learned and imaginative Trevor Hodge of Carleton University (who also conducted carefully prepared interviews with witnesses such as myself before integrating them into his script), each episode spotlighted the relevant ancient texts and current research on them. Hodge's more historically responsible approach served his material and listeners well, without any loss of entertainment value. Consequently I was pleased to learn that the creative minds behind 'The First Century' shared several of Hodge's assumptions, and had indeed worked on the award-winning television documentary series 'The Great War.'

Publicly funded by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, and aired on both PBS and the BBC, 'The Great War' searched out first-person accounts, obscure or well known, of the events treated in each episode. Therefore, as Jay Winter has observed, 'storytelling created both the narrative flow and the analytic force, from the accumulation of insights through personal testimony.' The writers and producers of 'The First Century' have also chosen to adapt this method for portraying the cultural milieu of early imperial Rome and have also obtained funding support from the NEH. To judge from the success of 'The Great War,' affording twenty-first century audiences the opportunity to listen to voices from the first century of the Roman empire will enhance the impact as well as the quality of this television series.