

Women in Ancient History Graduate Programs in the U.S.A.

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When Celia asked me to discuss this topic, I envisioned a comprehensive survey of graduate programs in Classics, Ancient History and History in the USA. After a few stabs at designing a survey using Survey Monkey, however, I realized that to do this properly and to produce meaningful results would be very difficult – in part because ancient historians are spread among Classics, History and Interdepartmental Programs – and it would take far more time than I had available to devote to the task. Luckily, some Internet surfing turned up some good data on women in PhD History programs generally, as well as in the Humanities and academic disciplines overall. By comparing this data with some data I've gathered from my own university, I have been able to come up with some sense of trends in ancient history in relation to other fields. Overall, in spite of some areas where ancient history seems to fall short (particularly in the numbers of female applicants to our PhD program in ancient history), I found the data encouraging and I am optimistic about the future of women in ancient history. In this paper, I will present my data and my argument that considerable progress has been made by women. Despite this conclusion, in the final part of the paper I will present some areas in which improvements can still be made in order to attract and retain women in ancient history PhD programs.

First some background on my home institution, and the particular configuration of the graduate program in ancient history at the University of Michigan.

The Interdepartmental Program in Greek and Roman History (IPGRH) was founded in 2001 with the goal of educating students both in the traditional methods of ancient history and the broader debates of historical studies at large. Ancient historians have, of course, long been trained at the University of Michigan, but in the late 1990s – partly in response to the emergence of successful interdepartmental programs at other universities such as Princeton and Berkeley - it was felt that a joint PhD program between the Department of Classical Studies and the Department of History was needed. The hope was that the expansion of our program to include courses offered by the History Department would enable the next generation of students bring new questions and approaches to their study of ancient history. Furthermore, we hoped that this broader training would help some graduates of our program find employment in History departments, where further such cross-fertilization between fields might take place.

We admitted our first student in 2002, and each year since we have admitted two students per year. The total number of students who have been admitted to our program therefore to date is 17 – by no means an adequate sample size for statistically significant analysis. Nevertheless, our experience at the University of Michigan, I believe, does reflect some trends. Specifically, I suggest that the numbers of women in our ancient history program is in line with the numbers in the discipline of history broadly speaking and that, although History and ancient history still falls somewhat behind the Humanities as a group in numbers of women, the progress made by women is grounds for optimism about the future of the field.

Our experience at the University of Michigan can be compared to data compiled by the American Historical Association on women's participation in the broader History profession, as well as Humanities in general and in all fields (see Figure 2). This data shows that the proportion of women among female faculty has increased dramatically since 1980. Women represent over 50% of the faculty in the Humanities, slightly less - around 42% - in all disciplines together, and less still yet in History - around 35 %. Although history still lags behind other fields, the jump from 14% in 1980 to 35 % in 2007 represents a dramatic gain. When we look at the numbers of new PhDs (see Figure 1), we see that women now account for over 50 % in the Humanities, around 45 % in all fields and slightly less - 42 percent - in History.

We can compare the data on new PhDs to the numbers of women in the PhD program in History at Michigan (#2 on Handout). Women account for 46 % of the PhD students in the History program generally, and 45 % of the applicant pool on average over the past three years. This is also exactly the percentage (46%) of women enrolled in our Interdepartmental Program in Greek and Roman History. This percentage shows that Michigan is slightly ahead of the trend in History programs generally (42%), and in line with all other fields (45%), though lagging behind the Humanities in general (52%). That is, all except for an interdepartmental program in History and Women's Studies which is composed of a whopping 96 % women at the University of Michigan.

When we compare our ancient history program to related disciplines within Classical Studies - both Classical Philology and Classical Archaeology - we find that ancient history falls somewhat short. Of current PhD students in Classical Philology at the University of Michigan, 67 % are female. In Classical Philology, over the past three years on average 41 % of the applicant pool has been female. Of current PhD students in Classical Archaeology at the University of Michigan, 64 % are female. In Classical Archaeology, over the past three years on average, 63 % of the applicant pool has been female. Compared to these numbers the percentage of female ancient history students in our program (46 %) is low. Even more dramatically low, however, is the number of female applicants to the ancient history program. Over the past three years on average, the number of female applicants to our ancient history program has been 29%. This year's pool looks even lower: 24 % of the pool are female. Seen in light of the applicant pool, the 46% of women in the current group of PhD students in ancient history seems quite remarkable. By contrast, in History generally the 46 % of females in the PhD program is roughly in line with the 45 % of women in the applicant pool.

Seen in this light, the problem seems to be attracting women into the field of ancient history in the first place, rather than their success once they are interested in becoming professional ancient historians. Indeed, once women actually apply to our program in ancient history, they are much more likely than the average male applicant to be admitted. So the question becomes how do we get women to apply to our PhD program? How do we get women interested in becoming ancient historians? I'll address this question momentarily. First a final question about numbers.

Should we be greatly concerned that ancient history lags behind sister disciplines like Classical Philology and Classical Archaeology, or the Humanities in general? I don't think so, and here is why. The statistics for female faculty in History, Humanities and all fields together show some pretty consistent patterns in terms of gender (see figures 1,2, 3). Ancient history falls very nicely within these patterns – less female participation than humanities overall, but more than history in general and about the same as all fields considered together. Even allowing for the fact that I am an irrepressibly optimistic person, I don't think that we can deny that great progress has been made and that ancient history – at least at Michigan - is holding its own when compared to the historical profession broadly speaking.

So how can we make ancient history PhD programs and the idea of a career in ancient history more attractive to women? The final part of my paper aims to provoke discussion about the pedagogical and institutional factors that may affect levels of female participation and success in the field of ancient history at the graduate level. Such factors might include: 1. The nature of course offerings, reading lists and exams in ancient history at the undergraduate and graduate level. 2. Ratios of males to females among the faculty of PhD programs in ancient history. 3. The existence of a critical mass of female students in ancient history PhD programs. The factors listed above are only a sample of those that might be considered relevant to the question of female participation and success in graduate programs in ancient history. I hope that the audience will contribute their own observations and suggestions about the ways that graduate programs can foster success among female students.

I offer only a few observations based on my experience at Michigan.

Courses & Exams

The course offerings in ancient history have broadened during my time from primarily author-based courses to more thematic and topic courses. For example, in addition to courses with titles like Herodotus, Demosthenes, Sallust and Tacitus, we have recently offered courses with titles such as: The Ancient Economy, Sex and Gender in the Ancient World, Rhetoric and History, Religion and Ritual in Ancient Greece and Rome; Social Memory and Oral Tradition; Environment and Empire; Constantine; and Ancient Slavery. If it is true that in general women are more attracted to social and cultural history than military and political history, then we must ensure a balance in our course offerings so that - for example - courses on religion and the family occur with equal regularity as courses on Thucydides and Tacitus in so far as these authors are focused on war and politics. Yet it is equally true that a course on say –Xenophon – could be as much about Greek religion as about Greek warfare. A recent experience of mine is instructive in this regard.

In most of my graduate courses, there is a reasonable balance between women and men. Yet there is one glaring recent exception. When I last taught Thucydides, there were

seven men and **no women**. These seven students came from four different graduate programs (Classical Philology, Classical Archaeology, Ancient History, and a MA in Teaching), **yet none were women**. This gender lopsidedness occurred despite the fact that when I teach Thucydides I focus as much if not more on issues of narrative style and literary artistry as on the military and political aspects of the Peloponnesian war. Yet something about the title “Thucydides” was apparently enough to turn women away from the course without even inquiring as to the approach that the course would take to the author. The existence of a female instructor, moreover, was apparently not enough to provoke interest among female graduate students. Perhaps we need to re-title our seminars from bare author names to more representative titles - my seminar on Thucydides could as well be titled “History, Narrative and Politics in Thucydides’ History of the Peloponnesian War.” Or more provocatively: “Thucydides as Literary Artist and Political Ideologue.”

Another observation on the content of our courses and reading lists. The most recent incarnation of our required graduate seminar “Introduction to Greek and Roman Studies” which introduces the field of ancient history by reading a series of influential books, has only 2 books out of 20 by women. Furthermore, when I was recently revising the reading list for our graduate exam in ancient history, I noted that only 2 out of 23 books were written by women and that the two books by women were on the subject of the family, private life, and gender. Again, I do not think this is cause for despair. As more women move into the field, they will produce more books from which landmarks of scholarship will certainly emerge. In the meantime, however, it is incumbent on instructors to recognize the landmark works by women that do exist – the works of the Virginia Hunters, the Mabel Langs, and the Lily Ross Taylors.

Faculty

At Michigan there are six faculty whose primary specialty is ancient history. Until this year, I was the only female ancient historian, but to my great pleasure I have now been joined by our panel organizer Celia Schultz. That makes 33% - not so far at all from the average in History generally (35%), though short of the average in Humanities (50 %) and in all fields (42 %). For comparison, I counted the number of female historians in the faculties of a few other prominent universities. At Berkeley, 29% of ancient history faculty are women. At Princeton, 17 % of the ancient history faculty are women. It seems that Michigan, with its two female ancient historians, is doing pretty well. In my department, Classical Studies, moreover, the percentage of female faculty is approximately 45 % a number above the average of all fields. Would more students be attracted to the field of ancient history if there were more female role models? My experience teaching Thucydides suggests not. But if more female faculty means more books and courses on topics that appeal on average to more women – cultural and social history for example – then surely that would be helpful.

Critical Mass of Female PhD Students

I hope it is clear by now that I believe that with 46 % of our PhD students in ancient history comprised of women, I think we at Michigan have achieved the critical mass of women needed to provide mutual support and a sense of belonging. My conversations with current and past students in our program suggests that this is correct.

In conclusion, I think I know what happened to Lily Ross Taylor. She led the way for the historians of today such as my colleague Celia Schultz and many members of this audience. Given the fact that women now outnumber men at the undergraduate level, maybe one day there will be a panel at the APA with the title “What became of Sir Moses Finley!”