

Ian MORRIS

The Position of Ancient History in Universities

The ancient Mediterranean flourishes on the History Channel and airport bookstands, yet funding and enrollments are shrinking at many universities. I suggest here that there are just two important issues-the theoretical one of what ancient history is for, and the practical one of fitting this to specific institutions' needs.

The field's point seemed clear in the 19th century-Greece and Rome were the origins of western civilization, and every educated person should know about them. Confidence in this faded in the 20th century, and doubts spread about supporting ancient history. Most History departments became modernist; many Classics departments shrank; and undergraduate enrollments often fell.

This trend affected institutions of all types. I moved to Stanford University in 1995, at which Classics had recently lost 25% of its faculty lines and graduate aid. Undergraduate ancient history enrollments were low. The History department had no ancient faculty or graduate program, and there was no classical archaeology. This has now changed: there are more ancient history faculty and graduate students than ever before, and our introductory ancient history sequence enrolled 225 students in 2004 (only US history draws more).

This turnaround came from fitting a theory of the point of ancient history to the university's specific needs. The theory has two elements:

(1) We do not claim that Greece and Rome founded a unique western tradition; but we do insist that they are the most important parallel in world history to modernity's citizenship, individual freedom, democracy, and secular rationalism.

(2) ancient historians and archaeologists can study some of history's most important phenomena-imperialism, cultural evolution, cross-cultural contacts-on longer time-scales than anyone else. Ancient history provides tools for explaining why the world is the way it is.

These arguments call for three kinds of research and teaching:

(1) Our traditional subject matter, the details of ancient culture: its poetry, art, philosophy, languages, etc. There is no substitute for this.

(2) Our arguments are thoroughly comparative. Debunking "origins of the west" theories means examining medieval discontinuities and parallels with Asian and New World civilizations. Treating antiquity as a parallel to modernity means studying both periods together. Long-term histories of imperialism, cultural evolution, etc., mean arguing with social scientists, not just borrowing generalizations from other fields to illuminate antiquity.

(3) Ancient history's own history is part of the subject: to understand antiquity we must also understand Europeans' choices since the 18th century to seek their origins in Greece and Rome.

This position developed in the process of learning how ancient history could contribute to our specific institution. The comparative approach dovetailed with undergraduate General Education Requirements mandating non-western cultures. Our introductory courses fit into the university's freshman program, its major fund-raising target. We link ancient history to archaeology, another major fund-raising area; most Archaeology majors focus on the Mediterranean and excavate in Italy, and the interdepartmental Archaeology Center funds half the classical archaeology PhD program. Our social-scientific questions link ancient history to well-funded and very generous institutes. And so on.

Reorienting ancient history creates challenges as well as opportunities. It threatens not only the traditional Greco-Roman focus, but also the newer Mediterranean one (China and the New World are as useful to us as the Near East). Expanding comparisons and intellectual history means weakening older emphases on languages and political history. Students sometimes resist learning new skills. And what works at Stanford University may, of course, fail elsewhere. But if ancient history works for novelists and TV producers, it should do so in higher education too.