

My premise is simple. Programs that combine the study of the Graeco-Roman world with that of the ancient Near East and/or combine approaches of history, religion, and material culture have existed for a long time and demonstrated their usefulness. More recently, guidelines for the teaching of history on the Secondary School and College levels increasingly broaden their perspective to “Global History,” thus requiring a redefinition of the role assigned to and contribution expected from Mediterranean or Graeco-Roman history. At the same time, initiatives to study the ancient world from a broad or even global comparative perspective, comprising both the Far East and the Far West, are becoming more frequent. The Program in Ancient Studies at Brown University, which I have been directing for the last eight years, is an example of the wealth of possibilities offered by this approach. All the while, the potential for direct comparison between specific phenomena in various ancient civilizations, or for the investigation of how cultural influences and transfers might have stimulated cultural development elsewhere, is far from exhausted. Comparative research in all its dimensions has yielded exciting results but also poses serious problems, not least because it is often done superficially and based on insufficient methodological foundations. All this suggests that it might be both useful and necessary at this time to discuss the potential offered by such comparative and crossdisciplinary approaches and the pitfalls that might undermine them.

With these considerations in mind, I have invited five speakers who will be able to illuminate various perspectives of our broad topic. We will move from more limited and focused to broader, more “global” approaches.