

Greco-Roman Studies in a Digital Age

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Abstract: What is the audience for the work that we professional researchers conduct on Greco-Roman culture? If the public outside academia does not have access to up-to-date data about the Greco-Roman world, whose problem is it? Frequently heard remarks, observed practices, and published survey results indicate most of us still assume that only specialists and revenue-generating students really matter. If we specialists do not believe that we have a primary responsibility to open up the field as is now possible in this digital age, then I am not sure why we should expect support from anyone other than specialists or the students who enroll in our classes. If we do believe that we have an obligation to open up the field, then that has fundamental implications for our daily activities, for our operational theory justifying the existence of our positions, and for the hermeneutics (following a term that is still popular in Germany) that we construct about who can know what.

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The Blinded Eye:

Many traditional humanists have objected— quite correctly— that digital humanists focus too much of their attention on questions of *how* we should exploit new forms of technology in our teaching and research and not enough on questions of *why*. Of course, in many cases, such criticisms underestimate the immense challenges that humanists face as they attempt to implement universally desired capacities in a digital space that require far more expertise than amateur digital humanists can usually acquire. (The production of annotations that we can manage across different editions of a text and over many years is one such deceptively simple but essential task.) Of course, even if there is much that requires the attention of us digital humanists (in which we can justifiably focus upon the question of *how*), the most important questions always return to our motivations for using technology in the first place.

The digital question now before all academics is the extent to which the shift from print to a digital space changes how our particular fields can contribute to society as a whole. From a Darwinian per-

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doi:10.1162/DAED_a_00383

spective, we need to reflect upon the degree to which new forms of technology may alter the social contract upon which our departments, our positions, our place in the curriculum, and our research funding (such as it is) depend. When we ask why we might use new methods (digital or otherwise), the first question is not how these methods can improve specialist-on-specialist discourse or even the experiences of our tuition paying students, but why our particular discipline should exist at all. We cannot insist upon theorizing the humanities in a digital age or demand a new hermeneutics for them unless we explicitly consider as well how our new theorizing and hermeneutics affect the reasons why professional academics should exist.

Figures published in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences' Humanities Indicators demonstrate the degree to which professional academics explicitly exclude from serious consideration the hard question of how our fields contribute to the intellectual life of society as a whole. That exclusion stands out when we observe the factors that faculty consider important for tenure: the most important single judgment to which faculty are subject. Even the initial hire to a tenure-track line is subordinate to the subsequent tenure decision, and most departments are careful only to hire those candidates who have shown that they will (or at least can) meet the requirements for tenure.¹

The Academy's data show predictable and remarkably complementary perspectives about the importance of teaching and

remains relatively modest and accounts for less than one-quarter (23.5 percent) of the 2015 neh budget. And even that modest support attracts sometimes virulent criticism from members of Congress and from political candidates. Unfortunately, insofar as professional humanists care only about other specialists and revenue-generating students, they undermine their claim to support from public funding. If we are subject to attack, we have, for the most part, brought it on ourselves. On the other hand, if we can manage to shift our focus and assert, seriously and tangibly, a commitment to advancing the contributions of the humanities and of humanities research to society as a whole, we have a chance of reestablishing, over time, the social contract by which various aspects of the humanities justify their existence.

So, what does this mean in practical terms for Greco-Roman studies? We can take several steps now, and for some of these, digital technology has a crucial role to play. First, if we are to advance the intellectual life of society as a whole as effectively as possible, we need to shift not only to *open access* (resources available to the public free of restriction or charge) but to *open data* (source data available to the public for their own use and manipulation). An analysis of 780 websites for German and U.S. faculty in Greco-Roman studies revealed that perhaps fifteen of these researchers were actively contributing to the fundamental task of creating open resources and building the sort of open infrastructure needed for study of Greco-Roman culture in a digital age. A handful of faculty, for example, have made an effort to make their work available under an open-access license, and a handful of publications (such as the now venerable *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*) do make their content freely available. But making the thousands of publications cited on these websites available

under an open-access license would be a necessary, though by no means sufficient, condition for reaching beyond this closed academic network.

Second, we need a new theoretical foundation for Greco-Roman studies in a digital age, one that takes into consideration our new ability to advance the intellectual life of society as a whole. When we speak of advancing human understanding, we may imagine an idealized expert who has internalized all the primary and secondary literature and who has gained a new perspective (notice that I carefully avoid positivistic references to knowledge). Such an idealized expert provides, however, only one perspective. If there is no plausible pathway from the impact of that professional to anyone beyond other specialists, then I am not sure how strongly we can argue for the value of that new perspective. We need a theoretical foundation that accounts for what happens in the brains of

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audience). The equation of classics with Greek and Latin comes from a very problematic tradition of European hegemonic thought, and emerges from shared assumptions of European privilege that are neither acceptable nor realistic in a world where nations such as China and India are global powers.

And so, the final step we can take is to evolve from a regional discipline, conducted almost entirely in a handful of European languages and focused on Greco-Roman culture, to one that participates in a global network of historical languages and cultures, many of which are now considered classical (as of 2014, India had six official classical languages: Tamil, Sanskrit, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam, and Odia,⁸ with some arguing that Pali should be included as a distinct language in this group).⁹ To do this, we need to redesign our departments, forming strategic partnerships with colleagues in our universities (such as with professors of Sanskrit or classical Arabic, if we are lucky enough to have them), and making creative use of new communications technologies to work with colleagues not only in other universities but in universities beyond Europe and North America. We need students in Tehran and Texas reading classical Greek and classical Persian together, establishing in the process dialogues across boundaries of space, languages, and culture. Bilingual editions that face Greek and Latin texts with translations into English (Loebs), French (Budés), German (the *Tusculum* editions), or Latin (older series like the *Patrologia Graeca* in France or the *Bipontine Editions* in what is now Germany) are not enough. We need editions that can support readers of non-Western languages like Mandarin and Arabic, while also offering much better support for Spanish and Portuguese readers. We need serious research into the limits of what ideas we can represent in formats that can be quickly translated across lan-

guages and customized for different cultural perspectives. Here, the growing coverage of non-English versions of Wikipedia provides a better model than any of the rigid workflows from conventional Western academia.¹⁰

Those of us who have the privilege to earn a living as students of the Greco-Roman world have a decision before us about the field we wish to build. We can continue producing publications to which only other specialists have intellectual or (because we hide them behind paywalls) practical access, doing what we need to attract and hold revenue-generating students, and ignoring (if not disdaining) members of society as a whole. We can continue writing and teaching in much the same way we always have, exploiting new digital methods as ancillary tools by which we compose more traditional articles and books, rather than asking ourselves what the purpose of our research and teaching should be and then exploring new forms of intellectual activity and production. We can even continue to conflate the idea of classical with Greco-Roman and, in so doing, define ourselves as, at best, a parochial community. Deviating from any of these paths will be difficult: it entails redefining our field and thus inevitably challenges established structures of authority and institutional power. But the potential benefits are immense, and there will be opportunities for anyone in the field, at whatever level of seniority, to contribute to and flourish within the world we collectively fashion.

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