Introduction: Reassessing Greece & Rome

> The past remains integral to us all, individually and collectively. We must concede the ancients their place. . . . But their place is not simply back there, in a separate and foreign country; it is assimilated in ourselves, and resurrected into an ever-changing present.
>
> – David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*[1]

It is difficult to square the rhetoric about the current "crisis" in the humanities with the abundant, if anecdotal, evidence that Greco-Roman antiquity continues to thrive in the popular imagination. As I am writing this, Mary Beard's new history of Rome is flying off the shelves; general interest magazines publish articles on Greek papyri; the first translation of Homer's *Iliad* by a woman has appeared to wide acclaim; the challenge of teaching ancient Greek made it to the op-ed pages of *The New York Times*; a remake of the film *Ben-Hur* is scheduled for release this summer; a traveling exhibition of large-

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ate history, only provide further proof that the past is still very much alive in the present.[3]

That said, there are different ways to assess the health of a field than by measuring popular interest in the objects of its study.[4] These signs of robust interest– of a fascination fueled perhaps by the way in which I pres

much more self-reflective. Scholars have gained an awareness of the historical contingencies at work in the very formation of the field. This has led them to approach the ancient material and older (and sometimes triumphalist) interpretations with a critical eye and a healthy dose of skepticism. It has also led them to question the cultural assumptions that not only past scholars but also they themselves bring to the evidence they study and the questions they ask. Finally, there is increasing appreciation of the constructed nature of antiquity– even in antiquity.

The third development in Greco-Roman studies is the most recent and perhaps the most exciting: the new science of antiquity. A true instance of interdisciplinary collaboration, this offers the potential for exponential growth in our knowledge of the past. Certain scientific techniques, such as radiocarbon dating, dendrochronology, and glaciology have been around for a long time. But these techniques have now been joined by other powerful tools. Multispectral imaging, for example, is making legible papyri from Herculaneum that had been carbonized in the eruption of Vesuvius; 3D laser scanning, or lidar, is enabling us to reconstruct ancient landscapes and structures; and the techniques of bioarchaeology, such as dna sequencing and isotope analysis, allow us to study human, animal, and plant specimens, and thereby reconstruct ancient ecosystems, diet, climate, disease, migration patterns, and cultural interaction. (See Malcolm Wiener's summary of some of these techniques and their application in the box on page 112.) Scientific techniques are now deployed not just to date objects or events but to tell a larger story. The data recovered in this way constitute an ever-growing physical archive that makes it possible, even necessary, to reopen old subjects, to question settled opinion, and to rewrite historical accounts.[17]

Not unrelated to these scientific developments is the important role played by digital technology. Perhaps because Greco-Roman studies has always been preoccupied with technologies of communication,[18] beginning with the shift from orality to literacy, and then from the scroll to the codex, the field was an early (perhaps the earliest) adopter of what has come to be known as digital humanities, and it has been a major contributor to that field ever since. At one level, technology has increased access to evidence, as the digitization of texts and images has made possible research on a scale previously unimagined and has thereby opened up whole new areas of inquiry. But at another level, technology offers not only access to evidence but also powerful heuristic tools for analyzing it, ranging from geospatial mapping of archaeological sites to the treebanking of Greek and Latin texts (the systematic linguistic analysis of every word in a text).[19]

The fourth and final development worth noting is the expansiveness of the field. The canon, for example, has been dramatically enlarged, not just by new finds, but also as a result of the new approaches noted above. Thus, Greek and Roman medical writings, once at the periphery of scholarship, are now taking center stage because of their potential to illuminate aspects of ancient thinking and understanding of the self.estion -oh

the field. Older notions of periodization, for example, are under review, as traditional divisions and categories (such as archaic, classical, and post-classical) are seen to be artificial, privileging rupture over continuity, and implying models of rise and decline that do not comport with the evidence. Similarly, the older focus on Greece and Rome has given way to broader studies of the Mediterranean basin and the ancient Near East that recognize the interconnectedness of their cultures at different periods. And even where there is little evidence of direct connection, comparative history allows for those who work in the Greco-Roman field to explore larger problems that transcend one particular culture or period. The current interest in "big history" or "world history" is an expression of this impulse,[21] as is the emergence of a new field, ancient studies, which takes as its project precisely this sort of crossing of boundaries of time, space, and discipline.[22]

Finally, Greco-Roman studies is being increasingly subsumed under the larger rubric of reception. Just as the "meaning" of a text or material artifact is now understood to be a function not only of the historical and social contexts in which it was produced and used, but also of how other and later communities have interpreted it, so too the study of the Greco-Roman world in all its aspects is no longer just the study of the past. As Mary Beard and John Henderson have put it: "*Classics* is a subject that exists in that gap between us and the world of the Greeks and Romans. The questions raised by *Classics* are the questions raised by our distance from 'their' world, and at the same time by our closeness to it, and by its familiarity to us. . . . The aim of *Classics* is not only to *discover* or *uncover* the ancient world. . . . Its aim is also to define and debate *our* relationship to that world."[23] And to do that entails one additional expansive gesture, moving Greco-Roman studies into the public square and using technology to democratize the production of knowledge, to disseminate discovery, and to demonstrate how the past is relevant to our own contemporary experience.[24]

The persistence of philology, the openness to new methods and theoretical perspectives, the new science of antiquity, and the expanding horizons of research–these four developments in Greco-Roman studies over the past several decades are on full display in the essays that follow. At this point, a few editorial observations are in order. Having just argued for the expansiveness of the field, I must now note that many important subjects are missing from this volume. But, given constraints of space and time, topical coverage was never the goal, nor could it be, and the contributors were given the freedom, within broad parameters, to address their subjects as they saw fit. For the same reason, these essays are not general surveys or overviews of the state of research. While most contributors situated their work in the context of recent scholarship, they intended their essays to be exhibits, original case studies that display new approaches in action and, in some cases, point in new directions. Finally, the organizing principle here is straightforward: this volume moves from literature to philosophy, visual and material culture, ancient history, and, finally, the institutional contexts in which Greco-Roman studies are conducted. Of course, this arrangement necessarily oversimplifies the interrelationship among these categories and also among the essays themselves, which display a significant degree of methodological and theoretical overlap. This is all the more remarkable, since the contributors did not share drafts with one another or collaborate in other ways. But this feature only serves to demonstrate the main theses of this volume, as noted above– the interconnectedness of the field, the cross-

ing of boundaries of various sorts (chronological, geographical, disciplinary), and the breadth of intellectual horizon. The short summaries that follow are intended to do something that the abstracts attached to the individual articles could not do, namely to point out some of these connections and also to demonstrate a larger thematic consilience, since these essays, when read consecutively, come close to providing a coherent narrative about "what is new about the old."

Given that the emphasis on texts is constitutive of the field, the first four essays in this volume address literature. Over the past several decades, various approaches have left their mark on literary interpretation, including (but not limited to) the "New Criticism," reader response, structuralism, deconstruction, and the "new historicism" or cultural poetics. In addition to offering sophisticated readings of individual texts, current scholarship also explores a wide variety of larger topics, including the materiality of the text (as noted above) and, simultaneously, its performative aspects (such as the largely oral/aural dimension of ancient literature); the social and political contexts in which texts were produced and functioned (such as literacy, ideology, and patronage); and more overtly "literary" questions of canonicity, intertextuality, and reception–to name just a few.

Focusing on Greek literature, Brooke Holmes demonstrates how both that category and its scholarly study have been "blown open," as the traditional canon has itself expanded under the impact of some of these different approaches. To take one example: cultural poetics attempts to locate texts within their immediate social and cultural contexts; on the other hand, reception studies looks to the afterlives of texts and raises questions about their transhistorical value. Taking as her case

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larger discipline of art history, which focuses increasingly on the modern and

key, which persisted for a long time and has yielded unusually rich archaeological finds. He explores how different sorts of identity (civic, social, political, and religious) overlapped and competed with one another throughout the centuries; how they were constantly being shaped and reshaped by language, custom, practices, and myths; and how they were expressed in various media, especially inscriptions, which were key to the construction and transmission of collective and cultural memory. Not only the original use of this material, but even its reuse tells a story, as when an honorific inscription is repurposed centuries later as a building block, its original role in preserving memory having by then become obsolete. It is interesting that debates about identity did not undermine the city's cohesion–until late antiquity, when Christians, Jews, and polytheists competed and religious identity trumped all other forms of self-representation. Since names constitute the most basic expression of identity, the ultimate outcome of this competition is reflected in a name, the rechristening of the "City of Aphrodite" as Stauropolis, the "City of the Cross."

The next essay, by Kyle Harper, uses a very different category of evidence, not just textual and archaeological but also scientific data. Revisiting a "classic" problem of ancient history, the (so-called) fall of Rome, he explores environmental factors that had not figured prominently in past accounts. Harper notes that Rome was an agrarian tributary empire, and its economy was remarkably resilient because of a variety of risk-management strategies, from technological improvements in agriculture to the network of roads and sea lanes that facilitated the movement of foodstuffs and other goods. But if "trade and technology let the Romans outrun the Malthusian reaper for no short season," we now know, on the basis of scientific evidence, that climate also contributed, specifically that the Mediterranean "patchwork of microclimates" had been hospitable for much of the imperial period. In the ad 160s, however, the Antonine Plague, which science has identified as smallpox, was introduced through the Red Sea trade "along the very networks that held the empire together." At same time, volcanic eruptions in ad 169 ended the period of stable climate, anticipating the later onset of what science has identified as a "late antique little ice age." Next, in ad 244 and again in ad 246, the Nile failed to rise, causing a food crisis in Egypt that had repercussions across the empire. And then, a second pandemic, the Plague of Cyprian, started in Alexandria in ad 249 and spread across the Roman world over the next twenty years. The crisis of the third century was underway, not as the result of any one event, but instead due to a cascade of environmental disasters that was related to climate change and disease and that was, in a sense, "the revenge of the giant imperial ecology." These disasters, finally, "pushed the imperial system beyond the threshold of resilience."

After two essays that explore specific problems in ancient history, Ian Morris and Walter Scheidel reflect on the nature of the enterprise itself. They review two different versions of ancient history–the classical model that regards Greece and Rome as the beginning that matters, since they were turning points in world history, and the evolutionary model, which is global in its outlook and goes back to the origins of humanity. The approaches have competed and coexisted for two hundred and fifty years, with the evolutionary model taking hold in the social sciences and the classical dominating the humanities. But as evidence and methods are changing faster than ever before, the evolutionary is in the ascendant: "Now, the origin story that seems to matter most

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began not in first-millennium-bce Greece and Rome, but with the invention of agriculture in the Middle East more than ten thousand years ago, or the evolution in Africa of modern humans more than one hundred thousand years ago, or of the genus *Homo* nearly three million years ago." But if the classical model ignores most of the world's history, the evolutionary model has its own "flyover zone," neglecting much of what transpired between the agricultural revolution and the industrial revolution, that is, much of recorded history. The authors propose an alternative way of doing ancient history, which is comparative and can combine classical and evolutionary thinking. Their first case study is the Axial Age, the middle of the first millennium bce, when "an explosion of moral thinking" occurred at roughly the same time in different cultures– Chinese, Indian, Iranian, Israelite, and Greek– without much evidence of diffusion. The second topic is the study of political organization. Both Rome and China, for example, built empires; but they had very different trajectories, and their divergence can be explained only by systematic comparative analysis. The Axial Age and the fate of empires are, then, two areas for research in which both evolutionary and classical historians can work together. But to do this, classical historians "will need to . . . master new evidence, methods, and
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Endowment for the Humanities' support of research show). Crane suggests ways to counter this "intellectual scholasticism." One is to expand open access, which is "a necessary, though by no means sufficient, condition for reaching beyond this closed academic network." Even more important is to come up with "a new theoretical foundation for Greco-Roman studies in a digital age," one which does not prioritize the "idealized expert" with full control of the scholarship, but extends to non-specialists, including specialists in other disciplines. Technology makes it possible for such "citizen scholars" to develop requisite skills and make real contributions to knowledge. His final point is that Greco-Roman studies in a digital age needs to open up not only to different audiences and practitioners but also to "a global network of historical languages and cultures." One traditional name for the field, "classics," ignores the fact that there are many other "classical" languages and cultures than those of Greece and Rome. He suggests institutional reorganization, forming partnerships with scholars of non-European cultures and making use of communications technology to work with colleagues around the globe. His vision of "students in Tehran and Texas reading classical Greek and classical Persian together" is akin to the sort of comparative ancient history that Morris and Scheidel envision and is consistent with the larger opening out of the field noted earlier. While not all readers may agree about the advisability or feasibility of some of these recommendations, Crane's final exhortation can serve not only as a conclusion to this introduction[27] but also as a prelude to the essays that follow:

> 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 want to build. . . . 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. . . . 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.

endnotes

1 [illegible], *The Past is a Foreign Country* ([illegible]: [illegible], 1985), 412.

2 [illegible], *SPQR: A History of Ancient Rome* ([illegible], 2015); [illegible]? *The New Yorker,* [illegible] 16, 2015; [illegible], *The Iliad: A New Translation by Caroline Alexander* ([illegible], 2015); [illegible], *The New York Times,* [illegible] 3, 2016, [illegible] 10; [illegible], *The New York Times,* [illegible] 10, 2016; [illegible], *Power and Pathos: Bronze Sculpture of the Hellenistic World* ([illegible], 2015).

3 [illegible]

4 [illegible]

5 [illegible]

6 [illegible], *Classics: A Discipline and Profession in Crisis*

13 [illegible]

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25 *Dædalus* … *The Siren's Song* (1977), … *Rape of the Sabine Women* (1963), … *Guernica,*

26 … *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* lxix (2) (2016): 31 41.

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