CHAPTER ONE

Personal Perspectives

The worlds of Ancient Greece and Rome may be long ago, but ancient history itself is an ongoing process, discovering, interpreting and reinterpreting the past. In the study of ancient history the present is never far away. The chapters in this *Companion* show ancient historians and their colleagues at work, but by way of introduction I have asked several scholars to reflect on their experience of ancient history and what it means for them.

1 Why I Study Ancient History, and Why I Suppose it Matters

Josiah Ober, Professor of Classics and Political Science, Stanford University

I have always been fascinated by politics – not parties or elections, but the play of power, legitimacy, and justice. Politics, in this extended sense, is at once a practical issue, an interpretative problem, and a moral concern: understanding any given political system or regime requires describing how it actually works, explaining why it works that way, and offering defensible reasons for why it ought to be otherwise (if in fact it ought). When I was young, I found I had a simple intuitive sense of how power worked in small groups, and discovered that it was possible to make some sense of social behavior by a rough-and-ready calculus of costs, benefits, and ideological legitimacy. Yet I lacked anything like a satisfactory vocabulary for parsing my intuitions about interpersonal politics. I could not begin to answer the descriptive, analytical, and normative questions that I might have asked had I been able to frame them in the first place.

When I arrived at university, more or less by accident, in 1971 I sought out courses that I imagined might help to me to make sense of my intuitions: sociology, anthropology, and so on. But only history held my dilettante's attention. The ancient world – and especially the world of the classical Greek poleis – seemed to offer the raw materials for understanding politics. Not surprisingly, reading Thucydides was a

revelation. I realized, as have so many others, that Thucydides' narrative of the events of the Peloponnesian war was the product of a profoundly powerful intelligence working at the descriptive and analytical sides of the power and legitimacy equation. Thucydides showed me that it was possible to conjoin the study of internal (intra-*polis*) and external (foreign policy) power relations; to ground political choice in a plausible conception of human nature; that relations between social classes were inherently political; and that thinking about power outside history made no sense. It was only later that I realized Thucydides also had much to say about morally defensible norms of interpersonal behavior and the possibility for justice in what appears to be an anarchic world of inter-state relations.

So I was hooked. Yet when doing my graduate training in the late 1970s I knew enough to see that I would not be able to work out my own Thucydidean explanation, or for that matter to do original work on Thucydides, until I knew a lot more about the concrete realities of Greek history. So I spent a long time studying Greek warfare. By the mid-1980s I felt ready to take on bigger political questions, including (over the next two decades) political sociology, ideology and discourse, revolution, expertise and dissent, social identity, moral authority, and collective action. Each of these emerged clearly in the context of democratic Athens, and so Athens became my case study: a model political system whose changes and continuities over two centuries allowed me to explore diverse aspects of the set of political issues that remained my abiding concern.

When I moved to Princeton in 1990, I saw more clearly than ever that the academic field of classical studies was a perfect environment for the work that interested me, because it demands no sharp distinction between various aspects of history (military, economic, social, cultural, intellectual), or between history, literature, and philosophy. Those undeterred by the disapproval of the few who feel that ancient history must *only* be pursued for its own sake are free to bring in contemporary work on sociology, anthropology, psychology, political theory, and so on. Although this was not always so, the field (publishers of scholarly books and journals, readers, many reviewers) is now remarkably liberal in its acceptance of methodological experimentation. This liberalism rightly carries a requirement that innovators manifest a respect for evidence, reasonable clarity in expression, and honesty in laying out premises and framing arguments. Ancient history is currently a very good field for someone who plans to devote a life to the study of politics and political change.

Ancient history matters to me because it seems to offer insight into questions that ought to matter to anyone living in a complex society, and especially to every citizen in a democracy. These questions have inseparable descriptive, analytical, and normative aspects: historians cannot avoid bringing together the question of *what happened*, with *why it happened*, and *how what happened ought to be evaluated*. That evaluation inevitably means moral judgment of some kind. Historians are necessarily concerned with description. But there is limited value in *describing* the past accurately without being able to *explain* it. And there is little value in explaining something without the capacity to judge its value. The difference between history and moral philosophy is, perhaps, that the historian is likely to see limited value in moral judgments that require historical outcomes no human community has ever, or ever could provide.

Capacities and trade-offs really matter. For a student of democracy, for example, it matters whether democracy is capable of generating its values through participatory practice: Can liberty as absence of domination be sustained by liberty as right of entry? Can equality of opportunity support fair distribution? Will dignity as recognition support the integrity of the individual or the minority community? It matters whether or not social justice is achievable at a cost low enough that democratic communities can compete with undemocratic rivals. It matters if democratic institutions and civic education can sustain democratic discourse and culture while promoting economic growth. Deciding if politics (like medicine) demands a highly specialized expertise, or if political craftsmanship can be attained by ordinary men and women, matters a lot. Those kinds of questions can only be answered by linking political description with analysis and moral reasoning, and by assessing historical processes of change and continuity over time.

It is, I think, easy to get politics badly wrong by approaching the question of politics too narrowly or ahistorically. Basic errors include severing the issue of power from that of legitimacy and legitimacy from justice; ignoring class distinction by imagining politics as an intra-elite game; focusing too narrowly on discourse, or critique, or beliefs; or institutions, or decision-process, or personalities; or chance, or environmental factors, or technological change; or social structure, or agency; or change, or stability. Ancient history offers special benefits to the student of politics seeking to avoid the errors encouraged by narrowness and ahistoricism because it is at once expansive and limited: Its sweep is huge in respect to time and space, but its scale, in terms of relevant facts that can be securely established, is small when compared with modernity. Achieving the level of expertise necessary to bring the manifold aspects of politics into play, even over a lifetime of scholarly activity, is impossible if there is too much to know – which is one reason the study of modernity is so fragmented by discipline. By contrast, antiquity allows me to dream of a sort of "unified political field theory," in which power, legitimacy, and justice could be grasped as a whole.

Achieving that dream may prove impossible. Yet even approaching it represents progress in understanding how communities impede or sustain human lives that go well. So, at the end of the day, my reason for thinking ancient history is worth doing is ethical. Any historian who denies that the fundamental ethical question of "what it is for a human life to go well" lies within the realm of *historia* must answer to the Father of History. Herodotus may have got the facts wrong in his tale of Solon's reply to Croesus's query about who had lived the happiest life. Yet Herodotus's clear conviction that ethics, politics, and history belong together is, I should say, dead right.

2 Why Ancient History?

Peter Derow, formerly Hody Fellow and Tutor in Ancient History, Wadham College, Oxford

I think there is one very particular reason, and that is its relevance, by which I mean the way in which the study of ancient history can (and should) contribute to our

understanding of the world around us and enhance our awareness of much that is going on in it. I think in the first instance, of course, of Polybius, who wrote of the expansion of Roman dominion in the Mediterranean world, of what was effectively the establishment of a single power in a world where before there had been a number of centers of power. He was aware of the importance of this process, which was the theme of his work:

> Is there any human being so low-minded or lazy as not to want to understand how, and being overcome by what sort of state in the space of not even 53 years, almost the whole world fell under a single dominion, that of the Romans – something which is not found to have happened before – and is anyone so little disposed to spectacles or to learning as to consider anything more important than this knowledge? (1.1.5–6)

He did not stop there. Concerned as he was with the elucidation of this process, he reckoned that the elucidation of its effects, on both ruled and rulers, was at least as important:

> . . . and to the aforementioned actions one must add both an account of the policy of those in control – what it was after this and how they exercised their universal control, and also an account of the number and variety of the responses and opinions of the rest to and about the rulers. And beyond this one must also tell of the inclinations and pursuits which prevailed and took hold among the individual peoples in their private lives and in their public affairs, for it is evident that it will be clear from these things to those now living whether the dominion of the Romans is turning out to be something to be shunned or, rather, to be embraced, and to those of future generations whether their rule should be judged to have been worthy of praise and emulation or deserving of censure. (3.4.6–7)

The relevance of what was going on in Polybius's world to what is going on in that of today is inescapable, and there is, I think, no doubt that other analogous processes have unfolded in the course of human history. The important thing is always to ask about them, "How and why?" Explanation requires understanding, and it is explanation that Polybius defined as the primary task of the historian. Explanation, and the pursuit of the understanding on which it must be based, should be the aim of all of us. This dual undertaking is certainly what doing ancient history is all about. And doing ancient history is all about evidence. The range of evidence – literary, documentary, archaeological, and more – is wide. The quantity is substantial, but it is not, of course, limitless. For some areas of inquiry it is relatively, sometimes decidedly, limited, and this can have the advantage of making ancient history particularly accessible. And the nature of the evidence is another advantage. Whether one is dealing with an historian, a document or a material artifact, one is always dealing with a form of human utterance, a representation, and these utterances, these representations are always in need of interpretation and of all kinds of contextualization before they can be knitted into the story the ancient historian wants to tell. The ancient historian must accordingly develop self-awareness and the capacity for self-contextualization. If Plato was right to say that it is improper for a human being to live a life which is

unexamined, and if one may extend the purview of his remark from the confines of the individual life to include concern for the world in which that life is lived, then the study of ancient history is available as a most appropriate form of human endeavor.

Polybius and his world are profoundly relevant to the world of today, but it will have become clear that the real relevance of ancient history is to be found in the fact that it is about people and the breadth of human experience. It is an aspect of this, to my mind an absolutely crucial one, to which Thucydides attributed the importance of his work:

> But as many as wish to see with clarity the things which have happened, and the similar and analogous things which are going, according to the human condition, to happen sometime again – it will be enough for them to judge this work to be useful. (1.22.4)

History does not repeat itself, but people are people, and ancient history involves the study, within a chronological microcosm, of people's responses to circumstances, both political (at local and global levels) and other. It is a deeply humane kind of study, and, given the nature and range both of the evidence it uses and of the intellectual engagement and activity it requires, it is also fun.

3 A Roman Historian Reflects

Andrea Giardina, Professor, Istituto Italiano di Scienze Umane

Fortunately, no cultured person today deigns to find in ancient Rome a simple mirror of reality. We can recognize, of course, that this mistaken perception of resemblance did not always have negative consequences: it has sustained intellectual curiosity, stimulated research, and favored the preservation of documents and monuments. Even in the political realm, it has at times provided authority and even some good ideas to both medieval and modern proponents of reform and change. All of this is indisputable. We must recognize, however, that much more often, the Roman mirror, in addition to dissolving into a sea of rhetoric and worthless bibliography, has fuelled passions of conquest, imperialistic tendencies and tyrannies.

In truth, the mirror fantasy today has an unconscious echo in the rhetoric of roots. In Europe this has recently provoked lively debates with reference to the text of the European Constitution. There has been much discussion about adjectives (Christian roots or Judeo-Christian roots, etc.) without consideration of the fact that the noun is much more venomous than all of its possible modifiers. The idea of the root is, in fact, a racist metaphor, and it will remain such, notwithstanding the good intentions and candor of those who use it: "Race is likened to a tree; it does not change. The roots of the race are always the same. There are the branches of the tree, there is the foliage. And this is all." (George Mosse). Even if we succeeded in confining its resonance to a purely humanistic domain, we would end by establishing its danger: constructing a hierarchy of historic objects, separating the green limbs from the dry,

removing creative value from failed or spent experiences: this in fact suggests a sort of historiographic eugenics. But everyone should recognize that the past does not acquire greater value only if it is capable of demonstrating traces of our lifeblood.

The most suggestive remedy was the attribution to our ancestors of a certain exotic or foreign character. When the Jacobins put on the clothes of Brutus and posed as imitators of the ancient defenders of the republics and of liberty, the "ideologue" Volney responded with a brilliant taunt: "I am always struck by the analogy that I detect daily between the savages of North America and the ancient peoples, so highly lauded, of Greece and Italy." Today, after psychoanalysis and anthropology have taught us the advantages of detached vision, we are particularly aware of the cultural influences in the exotic perspective (obviously with the condition that we do not fall into exoticism). Still, this does not succeed in satisfying us completely. Nothing can explain this dissatisfaction better than the Latin language. When we read *religio, respublica, familia, imperium, libertas*, and so many other fundamental terms of the society, institutions and politics of Rome, we read words that reoccur almost identically in the principal languages of Europe and the Western world. That vocabulary, so similar to ours, truly seems to encapsulate our "roots," and it transmits to us at first glance a reassuring sense of identity. But if, just as archaeologists working in the soil, we proceed to the substrata of these words, we immediately become aware of the successive and numerous changes that have occurred over the centuries and we perceive that at the base of this excavation we are in a world that has strong elements of foreignness. The *religio* of the Romans is not exactly the *religion* of the English, the *religion* of the French, the *Religion* of the Germans, the *religione* of the Italians, and the *religión* of the Spanish, and the same can be said for many other essential terms. The appeal of the relationship with the Romans is in this diversity both oscillating and dramatic: discovering the alien in the similar is a beautiful adventure of both intelligence and sensibility.

Moderns have often looked for, and sometimes found, in the ancient world a lost harmony: harmony of form, of comportment, of poetry, of stories and of scenery. This research has looked more at the Greek world, the cradle of classicism, than the Roman world. In the case of Rome, it has concentrated on civic virtues: for centuries the readers of Livy and Plutarch have learned to recognize in the Romans (up to the crisis of the republic) the most authentic cultivators of discipline, capable of examples of extreme self-denial for the benefit of their country and the collective interest. Today all this provokes little enthusiasm, even if the old theme, already ancient, of "the virtue of the Romans" would merit serious sociological attention and would be useful as a way of explaining, at least in part, the success of Rome. The more fascinating element in Roman history is, however, a harmony of another kind, one which appears to us retrospectively, if we isolate a series of contradictions arranged in equilibrium, of contrasting yet at the same time complementary colors which embody the principal aspects of Rome from the highest levels of the empire to the microcosm of the family.

Rome was in fact a "foreign" city, a city that took its origins from a lost and prestigious world, the city of Troy destroyed by the Greeks, and did not have at its core the idea of consanguinity: in the rich ideological repertoire of domination and

Roman 'diplomacy' the concept of lineage was in fact the most ephemeral and marginal. But this sense of being foreign associated itself, quite naturally, with an extraordinarily broad extension of the right of citizenship that could not be found in equal measure in any other ancient (and perhaps even modern) empire. Rome had a very deep sense of its own honor and an ostentatious perception of its own superiority, but declared with pride that it had as ancestors men who were bastards, ethnically promiscuous, socially dangerous (the myth of Romulus's asylum) or even downright servile in origin. Rome ably exploited slaves and punished them with chilling penalties, but simple will on the part of their owner could transform them almost into citizens (and their children would eventually be citizens). Not being a democracy, and not cultivating the principle of direct participation, Rome could entrust to single citizens, by means of manumission, the reproduction – partial yet significant – of the civic body. The *potestas* of the *paterfamilias* was immense and potentially terrifying, but the Roman family was an open organism, and adoption was perceived as an imitation of nature.

At various levels, then, a characteristic polarity repeated itself between dominance and flexibility, between a rigid and invariable sense of command and elasticity, between rigor and openness. For the scholar, the exploration of this universe, composite and coherent at the same time, is a true challenge, because at the point of contact of each of these contradictions he or she sees the great history of Rome taking shape and its evolutionary processes developing in often surprising ways.

4 A View from Japan

Neil McLynn, University Lecturer and Fellow in Later Roman History, Corpus Christi College, Oxford, formerly of the Faculty of Law, Keio University, Japan

Sixteen years of doing my ancient history in Japan have given a distinctive accent to those persistently nagging questions, what I think I might be doing, and why. For even if the answers remain much the same (do we not all continue our wrestling because we have somehow been allowed to?), the questions sound quite different in an environment without even the vestigial framework of a Greco-Latin educational tradition. In Japan, to ask students and colleagues why *they* do what they do (and what they think it is) is not quite to throw questions into the mirror.

Why, then, do they do it? The relatively few captivated in early youth attest the various channels through which the ancient Mediterranean laps the shores of modern Japan. Childhood reading accounts for some. Plutarch's *Lives* are much translated, with an improving adaptation designed specifically for the young, while the stirring vision of Rome presented in Nanami Shiono's phenomenally successful popularizing treatments has left its imprint on all age groups. A thesis will one day be written, meanwhile, on the *manga* sub-genre that broods on the decline and fall of archaized, and safely occidentalized, empires; the theme seems peculiarly resonant here, and those who succumb duly proceed to their Gibbon (another much-translated text).

But those who study the subject at university in Japan have survived high school World History, the formidable barrier of names and dates from which university entrance examinations are constructed. Candidates even for a Law faculty, for example, might have to identify Pompey and Hadrian, as conquerors of Jerusalem, from a list also including Caesar, Nero, Trajan, and Caracalla, in a test that demands similar precision concerning Portuguese Malacca and Spanish Manila, or Lumumba and Nkrumah. No wonder, then, that many undergraduates cherish an instinctive, and understandable, aversion to all things historical, while others insist stubbornly, but forgivably, that history *is* their cherished Gradgrindian list and nothing more. But then one meets the happy few capable of putting their feats of memorization to creative use, who have made their accumulated store of facts a playground for their historical imagination; and such meetings, for me at least, raise vexing questions about the propaedeutics appropriate for a discipline such as ours.

Only at university level does the subject emerge in its own right, perched at the end of the sprawling archipelago of "Western History." Its workings seem haphazard and, to the foreigner, strikingly personalized. Few institutions can afford the luxury of specialized sub-departments, and even there most students are entangled gradually, through their optional courses and special subjects, in a process which can last into postgraduate studies. A thesis originally aimed at the French Revolution, for example, might end up in Late Antique Gaul. Such conversions are generally attributed to professorial apothegms rather than to the student's own sense of direction, for this is a culture which takes discipleship seriously. And the physiognomy of Japanese ancient history today bears the imprint of its genealogy. Such themes as Athenian Democracy and Roman Slavery found powerful resonance in the immediate post-war period, helping to generate a critical mass of researchers. Still today, dry specialists will come alive when they discuss their academic pedigrees – the real debt felt to one's teachers' teachers clearly serves to inspire.

For the Western ancient historian washed up on these shores, perhaps the most delightful stimulus is the license to teach so much that is *not* ancient history. It is strangely liberating to spend the bulk of the teaching week leaping from Safavid Iran to Shakespearian Comedy, from the Cold War to Angevin Hungary. And in making these leaps one constantly feels the benefit of a training in Herodotus and Thucydides, and of a continuing engagement with the politics of Cappadocian Christianity; which is (perhaps) merely to sum up one principal message from this assemblage of contributions, that ours is a discipline which to an unusual degree serves as a springboard rather than a straitjacket.

sidere mens eadem mutato?

5 The Relevance of Ancient History: an Australian Perspective

Kathryn Welch, Senior Lecturer, Department of Classics and Ancient History, University of Sydney

According to the Board of Studies statistics in my home state of New South Wales, almost one in three students does history in the final year of school. Of that cohort,

however, more students select ancient history than modern – and in ever increasing numbers. They go on to study it at university too. Whether the trend away from studying the more recent past is a good thing might be questioned, but it is worth considering why ancient history is so popular in modern Australia.

It cannot be explained only by the cultural ties Australia shares with Europe, which, while strong, have mutated under the influence of a multicultural social experience, especially in urban centers. Instead, as with Neil McLynn's Japanese students, many from diverse ethnic backgrounds have embraced ancient history with no less passion than their Anglo-Irish classmates. I like to think that they are drawn instinctively to the humanity articulated by Peter Derow. But why specifically *ancient* history? Partly, perhaps, because it offers a medium, at once alien and familiar, through which to explore all kinds of historical questions. The broadly based New South Wales school syllabus covers Egypt, Greece, Rome and the "Near East." The narrative histories and material remains of all these areas have a wide appeal. But there is more. Ancient history puts us in touch with the serious debates of the past and the different ways in which antiquity (and not just classical antiquity) has been reinvented by later generations. In our study of ancient history we meet many other histories, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the American and French Revolutions, Napoleon and his use of Roman and Egyptian models of imperialism, institutions such as the Fabian Society and the Spartacists, and the whole development of Western (and some non-Western) democracies. And this is just a sample! The ancient past has provided diverse cultures with a conceptual framework for articulating their present, and each layer has added an ingredient to our study. We are the cultural heirs of Machiavelli as much as we are of his hero Livy.

This dialogue with the past is infinitely portable. It arrived in Australia very soon after European settlement began in 1788. According to Edwin Judge, who wrote the supplementary entry on classical studies in Australia and New Zealand for *Der Neue Pauly*, at least two types of people taught classics in early Australia. One group represented members of the establishment who felt extreme separation anxiety from the elite British education system, hence the motto, accompanied by a crest which combines that of Oxford and Cambridge, of Sydney University quoted above: "The constellations have changed but the mind (mentality?) remains the same." The second was made up of revolutionary Romantics who wanted to (or were forced to) escape to the freer intellectual environment of "The Colonies." Both types can still be found teaching ancient history in Australian schools and universities. The tension between conservatism and revolution is not always comfortable, but it is part of who we are and has the beneficial effect of making us think about why we do what we do instead of taking our relevance for granted.

Ancient history is a sociable subject. As well as constantly debating with the past, with other published scholars and sometimes even with the authorities, its adherents love to debate historical questions with each other in both formal and informal settings, one of which is often the local hostelry. Sometimes the partisan nature of such conversations can be disturbing when one thinks about the distance between us and, say, the rights and wrongs of the assassination of Julius Caesar or whether the establishment of the principate was a "good thing" or not. The passion of the debate reflects our ability to empathize. Because of the huge distance between us and our

fragmentary evidence, our conclusions are contestable, and so the debate can keep going.

We cannot change the past: we can only challenge and interpret its narratives. And we have to accept what we find rather than what we think we want to find. We can observe that thousands of years ago people could be as silly and as passionate as ourselves – and often smarter (something I realized the first time I read Thucydides!). The study of ancient history insists upon a long-term view of human endeavor and human problems. This is a humbling thing and we should approach it with an open mind and in the knowledge that it will end up being a lot more complex than we thought. What we can and should do is to analyze and explain the past from new perspectives and with our own questions. This is what will always separate history from mere antiquarianism.

Although ancient history has sometimes been appropriated by both respectable and less-respectable interest groups, no one really owns it, or, at least, not all of it. It belongs to everyone who has access to the evidence upon which it is based. This raises the question of the relationship between ancient history and the classics. Jerry Toner recently expressed the view that Roman historians should cut their losses and escape from moribund classics to the nearest convenient history department. In some ways it is easy to see what he means. Yet the ancient historian should be at home in either setting and welcomed in both. In its Greek and Roman guises, it shares a common area of study with classics, but its discipline and methodologies lie with history. Let's be realistic. The relationship between all history and language should be symbiotic. University professionals cannot operate without the languages in which their texts were written. But neither should they restrict their horizons to the relatively narrow temporal and cultural worlds of the "Classical." Moreover, ancient history, along with lively expositions of ancient literature, has the ability to make people from amazingly different backgrounds fall in love with a translated foreign world and even to encourage a few to discover language skills they never knew they wanted. Because of this drawing power, new classicists as well as new ancient historians can emerge from among the ranks of previously monoglottal enthusiasts. When all who approach the ancient world from different disciplinary perspectives treat each other as equal allies in the same enterprise, ancient historians should have no need to escape.

I leave the final words to my undergraduate students whom I questioned about the relevance of ancient history to them. Overwhelmingly they stated that ancient history helped them to understand their own world. One spoke of "the most complex and enthralling narratives of all time," another of its interconnection with directly neighboring fields. Perhaps the most honest stated that it helped him win at Trivia. But that just suggests that ancient history is as firmly entrenched in popular culture as it is in the New South Wales school curriculum. It is part of the fabric of who we are and where we are.