

THE ROLE OF THE TEXT IN TRAINING ANCIENT HISTORIANS

David Potter
The University of Michigan

The crucial word in the title of my paper is “text,” unqualified by an adjective. Perhaps the most significant distinction between the historians whom we train, and the historians who are trained in most areas of modern history, is that our students are more likely to find jobs in Classics Departments than in History Departments, and so must have a much broader familiarity with ways of reading texts of all sorts. They are as likely to spend much of their time teaching courses in Greek and Latin prose, and even, if my own career may be taken as a guide, Greek and Latin poetry, as surveys of ancient history (I have not taught a course listed as a history course in more than twenty years, while I have routinely taught the second half of our Latin literature survey for graduates). Combined with the professional aspect is an important intellectual issue: what special skill can students gain through taking classics courses that can be regarded as characteristic of our discipline? I feel very strongly that this skill is the close reading and interpretation of the evidence.

The one thing that all our entering graduate students have in common is that their primary undergraduate training, or early post-graduate training, has been in reading Greek and Latin. This will usually mean that they have read authors who are part of the basic canon of undergraduate texts used in upper-level language courses—texts for which there are Cambridge “Green and Yellow” or Bryn Mawr commentaries. The expansion of these series, while freeing instructors to range more widely across the corpus (crucial for sanity) has had the coincidental effect of ensuring that most students will not have read the same texts by the time that they show up in graduate school. It is not at all

uncommon for an entering student to have read Ovid in greater quantity and more recently than Virgil, to have read Euripides more recently than Homer, and, again, in larger quantities. The one area, however, where they will likely be almost completely unprepared is in the handling of documentary material such as inscriptions, papyri or legal texts. If they have encountered this sort of material at all, it might have been in a course that was taught in translation rather than in the original languages. They may have some familiarity with material culture, and most likely will have taken courses outside of classics that have given them familiarity with other disciplines. The expansion of study-abroad programs, and the long-standing success of the Centro in Rome mean that our students are far more likely to have spent time in Greece or Italy than was the case a decade ago.

The typical first year student then will tend to arrive with an eclectic command of Greek and Latin (usually more of one than the other), some command of the big picture from courses in translation, and some experience in the Mediterranean. The issue that we all must face at the beginning of a program is then how to build on the strengths of the preparation they have received and make up the deficiencies. The solution to this problem that we have favored at Michigan, and I quite frankly think that it is the most economical solution, is the combination of reading lists (to be examined in the course of the second year) and survey courses. In creating our Interdepartmental Program in Greek and Roman History we decided to include reading lists in Greek and Latin that were equivalent in weight to those that we use in the Philology program (while at the same time making sure that the creation of a separate program in “ancient history” did not dissuade interested students who were less certain on entry as to what course they would

follow from pursuing a degree on an historical topic). The difference between the two lists might be summed up as “more Cassius Dio less Menander,” but the point remains that the exams would be set by the same people for both programs, and evaluated in the same way. I should also note that the Michigan experience dictates that a reading list be doable by students, giving them some reading knowledge across a variety of genres so that they can pass exams based explicitly on those lists, and this is true as well, for instance in the ancient history programs at Harvard, Yale, The University of North Carolina and The University of Pennsylvania. Other programs (and this used to be true at Michigan as well) have different sorts of exams and state, for instance that “This list, on the other hand, presents the categories, authors and texts that are most central to the discipline and most important for you to know well as a professional classicist,” while another program will simply state that “All students should work on their languages so as to pass sight examinations (prose and poetry) in the program languages (Greek and Latin, or Greek, Latin and Byzantine or Modern Greek for XXX students) as early as possible.” All these are obviously plausible and successful approaches, and all aim at the same thing: to ensure that ancient historians can function easily in the necessary languages.

A further aspect of this training, right from the start, is that students must develop the habit of looking at the varieties of evidence that are available for whatever topic they chose to address. They need absolutely to be familiar with the contents of Jacoby and Peter (and Peter’s recent descendents), they need to be at ease in dealing with epigraphic and papyrological evidence (a number of programs include selections of inscriptions and selections from Jacoby etc. on their reading lists); they need first hand experience of the methods of archaeology, and they need to know how to interpret images. Since we do not

know where students will end up, we need to open as many doors as possible through which they may pass. We also need to make it clear to students that, as they become their own people, they will do so by working with different specialists, and learning the methods particular to whatever sub-disciplines are necessary to them.

If we can use reading lists and survey courses to homogenize training in the languages, it remains the case that students intending to do research in ancient history must develop facility with documentary texts, expand their knowledge of material culture, and build upon whatever background they may have in other disciplines. They will learn how to study the rhetorical aspects of ancient texts in courses that they take in Classics; this is something they must supplement by learning the nature of historiographic discourse in a history department, and, if their interests should take them into the direction of topics that are central to other disciplines—e.g. colonialism/post-colonialism, women’s studies, ethnography, religion—they need to take courses in those areas as well. Most programs have proseminars that introduce students to basic principles of study in their area; these are courses that our students need to be encouraged to take, and they need to be encouraged to build up relationships with faculty members in areas that are relevant to their work. At Michigan, History 600, the proseminar that introduces students to modern historiography, is usually taken in the same term that students take History 630, which is a topics course taught by a faculty member associated with The Interdepartmental Program (with interventions from all other members of the group) that is also open to students from any other program who wants to show up. The mix in both courses is immensely important, and broadening (the fact that ancient history students tend also to get the highest grades in History 600 has useful implications for later

funding, never a consideration to be taken lightly). Most history students will take whatever Greek or Latin survey course is offered in the department at the time they arrive (the Greek and Latin surveys are full year courses that are offered in alternate years). In all of this, the central point is to enable students to develop their own strategies of reading and interpreting the texts that have survived from antiquity, to learn how to work from a genuinely comparative perspective, and, quite frankly, to get to know as many other students as possible. Another aspect of this program that is very important is that it enables students to work, from the very beginning, with a wide variety of faculty members. One of our most pressing concerns is to create an environment where intellectual cloning is impossible. When students are exposed early on to a wide variety of approaches, they are far more likely to make independent choices of research paths for themselves. The last thing that any of us wishes to see is a person in his/her late twenties channeling the attitudes of any specific faculty member into a dissertation; as many of us have rather strong personalities, the best way to avoid this is to make sure that students do not find themselves dependent on any one person for the direction of their work.

As their work takes shape, one of the particular challenges for ancient historians is that, while they are thoroughly competent philologists, they need to be capable of dealing with subjects that are not necessarily grounded in specific ancient texts. From the point of view of an ancient historian, historiography is not the study of ancient rhetoric so much as it is the study of the scholarly traditions that inform the issues that they chose to study; they need to look to the way that those traditions are formed. A course like History 600 certainly helps with this, but so too do preliminary exams that are topic rather than text driven. Another aspect that I think is crucial is that students must start

teaching early in their careers, and for ancient history students this means teaching a variety of classes ranging from introductory Latin and Classical Civilization courses to the survey courses in the History Department. Through teaching, students become familiar with the ways that they can use texts in their own work, and certainly become aware very, very fast, of where their own deficiencies might lie (this last statement is frankly autobiographical, but I am not going to bore you with an account of the hours spent when I started teaching Greats at Oxford trying to swat up the subject for tutorials, and then, when I moved to Bryn Mawr, of some of the astonishing discoveries that I made when switching from a tutorial to a lecture format—e.g. Sulla). It is often the case that when students start teaching, they see the point of what they have been learning, and begin to take ideas in new directions.

The agenda that I have been describing is largely derived from my experience at Michigan, which might be regarded as being both “requirement heavy” and “language intensive.” It is very different in this way from a program that states:

Work in the ancient languages is an early and high priority, however, and students should plan to continue course work in languages already begun. Those who begin an ancient language after admission should plan to study that language continuously for at least the first two years. In addition, students are expected to enroll in courses and seminars relevant to their major and minor fields (see below, under PhD). Before being advanced to candidacy for the PhD, students must take a minimum of three seminars: one XXX

interdisciplinary seminar, and two additional seminars
distributed between two different departments.

That is as it should be since students come to graduate school with very different backgrounds and will develop in very different ways. In any and every case, regulations need to be (and, by and large, I think are) seen to be general guidelines that can be varied as necessary so long as the basic aim of fluency is maintained. In the final analysis, we can go only as far as the evidence will allow, and that means that the text will remain central to the training of our students as linguists, and, more importantly, as students of the discourse of other cultures. As reading lists that were meant to be prescriptive have given way to reading lists that are meant to be what might, for lack of a better word, be termed “facilitative” this has effectively sent a message that students are more free to find topics that work for them. To be text-driven does not mean that we will be text-dependent, rather it means that we are seeking to broaden the boundaries of the subject by seeking evidence that has been under utilized or misunderstood; it is not to exclude the use of the tools of modern sociology, it is to provide material upon which those tools can be used.

Where is our discipline going? I think we are looking at exciting times for the study of ancient history. From both the prospective of classics departments and of history departments there is greater demand than ever for new members of the profession to be highly skilled in the technical aspects of their disciplines. In a world ever more interested in accountability in higher education, we need to be clear about the value added by our courses; there is ever greater stress on skills-based learning. Our research and teaching may well take us in somewhat different directions, but it is crucially

important that we are able to equip our students with the tools they need to answer questions to which Deans and Provosts want answers about the value added by the study of our discipline. I feel that the answers to these questions will, in many cases, stem from classicists' ability to read and analyze complex texts.