

The teaching of history in the United States has been revolutionized in the past few decades by the emergence of World History as a major teaching field. Starting in public school curricula, world history spread to universities, where the year-long world history course increasingly is replacing western civilization as the standard introduction to non-US history for most students. This change poses serious challenges, practical and conceptual, for ancient history and ancient historians.

On the practical level it means that the amount of ancient history defined as Greek and Roman history taught in school and university surveys has decreased at the same time that its focus has changed dramatically. No longer central to the narrative as had been the case in the familiar Western Civilization course, Greek and Roman history must now share the syllabus not only with Egypt and Mesopotamia but also with China, India, and even the Americas in a World Civilization course whose primary focus is contact and interaction between civilizations instead of the linear development of European culture and institutions. An effective response to this challenge requires more than adding the history of the rest of the civilizations of the ancient world to the training of ancient historians. It also requires fundamental changes in the conceptualization of Greek and Roman history and their place in world history; and the positivist character of contemporary Greek and Roman historiography has hampered the development of an effective response to this challenge.

Although in the early twentieth century ancient historians of the stature of Eduard Meyer and M.I. Rostovtzeff tried to place Greek and Roman history in broader regional and world historical contexts, not only was their lead not followed, but ancient historians increasingly treated the histories of Greece and Rome in isolation from those of the other peoples of the ancient Mediterranean basin, a tendency that was intensified by training Greek and Roman historians largely in isolation from disciplines such as Egyptology, Assyriology, and European prehistory, fields that treated peoples with whom the Greeks and Romans came in contact. World History similarly has developed in isolation from ancient history, its practitioners being overwhelmingly non-Europeanists who treat the early modern and modern periods.

The result of this situation, as this presentation will show, is a tendency to “shoehorn” Greek and Roman history into frameworks that were developed to fit historical conditions characteristic of periods that differ widely in social, political, and economic organization. Examples are the idea of an interconnected Mediterranean currently being explored by ancient historians and the World System and Post-Colonial approaches favored by some classical archaeologists, all of which are intended to explain phenomena typical of European expansion and the reaction of non-Europeans to that expansion from the sixteenth century AD to the present. Progress beyond this situation will not occur until ancient historians develop explanatory frameworks appropriate to ancient conditions instead of mechanically adopting ones designed for other periods and places.