

Ancient historians conventionally draw a line through maps of the Mediterranean basin. On one side of it are the Greek and Roman worlds; on the other, Egypt and the Near East. Aeschylus and Herodotus already made a similar distinction twenty-five hundred years ago, but since the late eighteenth century AD the delineation has provided the basic structure for studying the ancient Mediterranean world. After 250 years of scholarly consensus about the reality and importance of this Greco-Roman/Egyptian–Near Eastern boundary, a major shift of opinions began in the late 1980s. Some specialists announced that there was just one East Mediterranean culture in antiquity, stretching from Mesopotamia to the Adriatic. Others asserted that while this had been true in the Bronze and Early Iron Ages, the East Mediterranean *koine* had fragmented in the fifth century BC. Others still acknowledged the merits of the traditional view that classical Greco-Roman and Egyptian–Near Eastern cultures were fairly distinct but believed the former had strong Afroasiatic roots in the latter. Finally, some insisted there was no point trying to make distinctions within the Mediterranean at all, since the entire basin had been tied together in a kaleidoscopic pattern of constantly shifting interactions. Throughout the 1990s the old dividing line was arguably the most prominent academic battlefield in ancient Mediterranean studies.

The fiercest clashes have been among students of ancient literature, history, and myth. But challenging the traditional divided-Mediterranean model

among cultural historians. In this volume, economic historians of different regions try to lay the foundation for a systematic comparative economic history of the ancient Mediterranean. They highlight key problems in evidence, models, and intellectual traditions of the economic history of different regions of the Mediterranean in different periods of time. This is merely a first step: Our main goal is to clear away some of the conceptual fog and empirical ignorance that currently bedevil comparative economic analysis.

This introductory chapter is a position paper. We define the central problem and explain the state of the debate as we understand it. We also make some recommendations for research in the next decade. It has become fashionable in the last few years to complain that ancient economic history has run its course, and that there is no hope of real progress.¹ We do not agree completely. Serious economic analysis of the ancient Mediterranean world has barely begun. A century of important work has created a large (but problematic) database, honed powerful (but somewhat narrow) methods, and identified fundamental (but unresolved) problems. Ancient historians should be proud of these achievements. But the field remains remarkably undertheorized and methodologically impoverished. Theory, method, and data are inseparable. Archaeologists and historians have made great advances in classifying and analyzing the primary sources but have not thought enough about how to build models or how to relate models to empirical facts.

We see four particular limitations in the way research is currently organized:

1. In the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries, ancient historians debated the purpose of their field—its function in the modern world and how it should be organized so as to perform that function. The divided-Mediterranean model is a legacy of these debates. Whether this division helps or hinders our understanding depends on the particular historian's notion of the purpose of ancient economic history.

economic history contributes to any larger questions. The fields reveal technical expertise in reading texts or recovering artifacts but little emphasis on model building, methodology, or comparison. The result is economic history without economics.

3. Beneath the level of this shared tradition, there are deep divisions between Classics, Egyptology, and Near Eastern studies. Scholars in each field tend to be located in separate university or museum departments, and the emphasis that all these fields put on very specific linguistic skills discourages shared graduate programs. The separate scholarly communities use terms in different ways, and while work across these boundaries is more common than it was a generation ago, it remains the exception. The separation of disciplines by language reinforces perceived differences in socioeconomic structure, greatly inhibiting systematic comparison of economic systems.
4. Different kinds of evidence survive from different parts of the Mediterranean. For example, Egypt is rich in documentary papyri recording family and individual economic transactions. Greece has little of this evidence but has a sophisticated literary tradition that addresses the morality of economic behavior. Given the positivist traditions of these fields, “economic history” has come to have very different meanings to scholars specializing in different parts of the Mediterranean. Egyptologists and papyrologists lean toward detailed accounts of specific events; Hellenists, toward sweeping overviews of ideologies. There are few generalizations that can be made across disciplinary boundaries because of the contrasts in the kinds of evidence available. Progress depends on careful consideration of how we build models, how our conceptual frameworks relate to the data, and how we develop methods that will allow us to test models across regions.

We see six ways to resolve these problems:

1. *Conduct more discussion of the metanarratives that structure arguments.* “metanarratives” we mean the grand stories within which some questions assume importance, while others are rendered irrelevant.

place.

2. *A deliberate turn toward social science history:* We define what we mean by this in more detail below, but for the moment we sum it up as a commitment to assuming the basic rationality of economic systems and systems, formulating explicit explanatory models, and exposing these models to the risk of falsification. Social science historians have developed powerful tools for the analysis of economic systems and rigorous comparisons across space and time. It is both arrogant and ignorant for ancient historians to assume that they can do ancient economic history without these tools.
3. *A broader approach to economic history:* Historians must focus on the *performance* and *structure* of ancient economies. This will require new models, new methods, and new kinds of evidence.
4. *More thoughtful integration of archaeology into ancient economic history:* In many contexts archaeology provides the only data that can be quantified on a large scale, and there can be no real economic history without quantification. The archaeological record is subject to information processes every bit as complex as those behind the textual record, so this is not simply a matter of using an objective material record to correct a subjective textual one. But on the other hand, some classes of archaeological data can potentially be recovered from all regions of the ancient Mediterranean, vastly improving our ability to write comparative history.
5. *More emphasis on ancient demography and technology:* Economic history depends on understanding demographic trends and the possibilities set by technology.
6. *More detailed comparisons of economic institutions through time and space:* There has been little work on whether superficially different institutions in different parts of the Mediterranean were functional equivalents, or whether similar-looking institutions in fact functioned differently. It is telling that the only extended comparative study of premodern financial systems—including ancient Mesopotamia

four pairs of specialists on the regions of the Near East, Greece, Egypt, and the Roman Empire; responses came from social science historians based at Stanford's Economics, Sociology, and Political Science Departments. Participants hoped to cross two sets of barriers: those dividing ancient history from the social sciences, and those dividing specialists within Mediterranean studies.

There was a flurry of conferences on the ancient economy in the late 1990s, but the Stanford gathering was rather unusual. John Davies, who took part in several of these meetings, concluded that "in general, the main messages stemmed from the Stanford conference. The first was a continuous undercurrent of determined deconstruction of the Finley divide. The Mediterranean model as static, simplistic, useless, and retrograde. The second comprised a set of signals that the pre-Alexander economies of the Ancient Near East were vastly more complex and diverse than conventional wisdom dreamed of" (Davies 2001: 13).

Rather than rushing the papers into print, we have taken several years to discuss them and reflect upon their potential impact. Important new studies have appeared since 1998, allowing us to refine our goals more clearly. This is not a systematic review of ancient Mediterranean economic history or a fully developed model (desirable as both of these would be). It is simply an attempt to open up discussion. There have been plenty of conferences of classical historians featuring a token Near Eastern specialist (for example Parkins and Smith 1998), or of Near Easterners with a token classicalist (Bongenaar 2000), but few attempts to bring the fields together as equal participants. We want to move toward agreement on questions, methods, terminology, and problems. No two contributors have exactly the same ideas about how the field should move, nor do they each address the whole range of issues listed above. Some chapters concentrate on describing the dominant models in a particular field; others, on new kinds of evidence or forms of argument. But all are united by a commitment to building a generalizing and comparative ancient economic history, connecting debates in the social sciences as well as—but not instead of—those in the humanities.

Latin; and in the twentieth century Greek and Latin both lost ground to modern languages. But even in the early twenty-first century, Classics and biblical studies remain huge scholarly enterprises, with meetings attracting thousands of professionals. At the editors' own university, the introductory undergraduate courses in Egyptian and Greek draw more students than those in any other field except U.S. history.

The formalization of scientific universities in the nineteenth century preserved the emphasis on ancient Mediterranean studies in two main directions. The first was analysis of Greco-Roman society, called Classics in the English-speaking world, and *Altertumswissenschaft*—the science of antiquities—in German-speaking areas. This was normally defined chronologically as beginning with Homer's poetry around 700 BC and continuing at least until the emperor Constantine's conversion to Christianity, roughly a thousand years later. The discovery of the Aegean Bronze Age in the 1870s raised questions; some archaeologists felt that it was part of Classics, while others thought that it was not properly Greek. The chronological boundaries shifted with geography, as Greek and Roman political power waxed and waned. Down to about 335 BC the classical lands were restricted to the shores of the Aegean Sea, central Italy, and the Greek colonies scattered around the Mediterranean. After 335, Alexander's conquests carried Hellenism to Afghanistan and India, but this larger Hellenistic world (another term coined after the German *Hellenismus*, itself a creation of the nineteenth century) was widely seen as not being fully classical. In the second century BC Rome began taking over the western Mediterranean. Some scholars included England and Romania in the classical realm, since those regions were under Roman legions; while others limited the "real" classical world to the shores of the Mediterranean.

The second scholarly cluster was the study of societies linked to the Near East. Some academics extended this region as far east as Iran, while others limited it to Mesopotamia. Egypt was generally seen as part of this world, although it was often studied in a separate department. The biblical stories of the Hebrews' wanderings meant that—unlike the situation in Classics—there was complete agreement that the Bronze Age was part of Near Eastern

Most often, specialists on the literature, material culture, thought, and history of the ancient Mediterranean were concentrated in free-standing departments of Classics or Near Eastern studies rather than being distributed across Departments of History, Literature, Philosophy, Art, or Linguistics. This was the case with specialists in most other world civilizations. Classics of the Near East, were, in a sense, the original Area Studies programs.²

In common with many humanists and social scientists of the nineteenth and earlier twentieth century, scholars of the ancient Mediterranean sought to explain the European invention of modernity; that is, how Europe had diverged from, and become superior to, the rest of the world. Most of the grand theorists of modernity had classical education, and Karl Marx and Max Weber made particularly extensive use of the ancient Mediterranean in their general frameworks. On the whole, however, experts—in Near Eastern studies as well as in Classics—concluded that race, climate, or sociology meant that Egyptians and Asians, in the great river valleys, got a precocious start in civilization but ran up against limits they could not exceed. The Greeks then took over the torch, passing it on to the Romans and ultimately to Western Europe. In one of the most influential books ever written, Johann Joachim Winckelmann proposed that Egyptian art

is to be compared to a tree which, though well cultivated, has been checked and arrested in its growth by a worm, or other casualties; for it remained unchanged, precisely the same, yet without attaining its perfection, until the period when Greek kings held sway over them; the same thing may have happened to [art] as to the mythology; for the fables of the Egyptians were seemingly born anew beneath the skies of Greece, and took an entirely different form, and other names. (Winckelmann 1880 [1764]: 132–33, 135)

Similar sentiments were repeated thousands of times between the 1760s and 1960s.

The institutional forms created in the nineteenth century provided effective structures for pursuing this argument. But as the twentieth cen-

cial scientists still interested in historical explanations of European North American power developed new models in the past fifty years: dependency theory to evolutionism, but few of these left much room for eighteenth-century theories of a racial/cultural inheritance going back to the Greeks.³

Despite their declining relevance to the rest of the humanities and social sciences, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century structures of thought and institutional arrangements have survived largely intact in ancient Mediterranean studies. This has had two main effects. First, scholars of the ancient Mediterranean have been partially shielded from potentially corrosive new ideas. Debates among classicists and biblical scholars have certainly continued noticeably since the 1980s, but taken as a whole, these fields remain more conservative than, say, comparative literature or cultural anthropology. Second, while many scholars of the ancient Mediterranean have managed to maintain research agendas not so different from those that were common in the 1950s, they have done so at the cost of increasing marginality to broader debates in the humanities and social sciences. In this volume, the contributors concentrate on one particular aspect: Whether the 250-year-old division of Mediterranean studies into two branches, ultimately driven by the divide between Latin philology and biblical exegesis, is a barrier to understanding the ancient Mediterranean in economic and social terms.

What's the Question? Metanarratives

In the last quarter-century, scholarship on the ancient Mediterranean has gone through its most profound transformation in more than two centuries. The outcome remains unclear, but the metanarratives of European imperialism that have guided the field since the eighteenth century are shifting under our feet. Even defenders of the idea of a distinct Western civilization are mounting their defenses in forms very different from those common fifty years ago (Gress 1998; Lind 2000).

Jean-François Lyotard famously spoke of a growing “incredulity toward metanarratives” in the 1980s. He insisted that “to the obsolescence

that historians can escape metanarratives altogether is simplistic (Berke 1995). As is often pointed out, critiques of metanarrative usually turn merely to be arguments in favor of other metanarratives; the postmodern rejection of metanarrative is itself “a (quite totalizing) piece of historical narrative” (Reddy 1992: 137).

In the late eighteenth century and again in the late nineteenth, and again in the twentieth century, historians went through anguished debates about the overarching question that shaped their inquiries, but contemporary scholars of the ancient Mediterranean too often act as if there is nothing to discuss. In the early twentieth century, a once-radical idea—Europe’s superiority to the rest of the world—became a truism, so securely established that it no longer needed to be explained. With the overarching metanarrative secure, the experts concentrated their focus on what Thomas Kuhn (1970 [1962]) called normal science, generating a mass of detailed scholarly analysis. Most experts on the ancient Mediterranean defined their topics in narrow geographical and chronological terms. If a body of primary and secondary literature expands without a corresponding relaxation of the assumption that a serious scholar must read everything written on the subject, increasingly narrow research topics become the only ones to follow. Large-scale comparative work might have blurred the simple contrast between Greco-Roman and Near Eastern–Egyptian–biblical research topics, but professional ancient historians undertook few studies of this kind, while those evolutionary theorists who addressed larger questions generally operated at such a high level of abstraction that most ancient historians felt that they could safely ignore them.

In the next section we summarize the most influential version of the divided-Mediterranean model. We then address some of the more recent alternatives, looking at Fernand Braudel’s vision of a single Mediterranean, the East Mediterranean models advocated by Martin Bernal and others, and Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell’s recent revival of pan-Mediterraneanism. We close by considering a different metanarrative, which seems to us to open up more fruitful questions. This calls for a new form of global history, committed neither to justifying European domination nor to explaining it away. This approach starts from the fact

these constraints. From this perspective, the Greco-Roman/Egyptian Eastern divide is just not very important. Some ancient Mediterranean societies achieved limited economic growth, which are very significant in global perspective (Goldstone 2002; Saller, Chapter 11 of this volume). But drawing lines across the map will not help us do good economic history.

TWO MEDITERRANEANS: MARX, WEBER, POLANYI, AND FINLEY

Malleability has been of the greatest strength of the divided-Mediterranean model developed in eighteenth-century Europe. Despite their political preferences, Marxists, Weberians, and theorists of a long-lasting “Western civilization” have all found the East-West division perfectly compatible with their reconstructions. The *Communist Manifesto* opens by drawing a line between the struggles of the Roman patricians and plebeians and those of contemporary bourgeois and proletarians (Marx and Engels 1848), and Engels distinguished between Asiatic and Classical Modes of Production, seeing the Middle East, India, and China as characterized by primitive communism in history, in contrast with the European evolutionary mainstream. Uniquely in Europe, contradictions within primitive communism generated a Roman Classical (or Slave) Mode of Production. Weakened by the struggle between citizens and slaves, this fused with a Germanic Mode to create the Feudal Mode. A series of bourgeois revolutions, beginning in seventeenth-century England, transformed this into the capitalist order and would eventually lead to communism (Marx 1964 [1857/58]: 69–74).

Engels (1972 [1884]) presented this interpretation of ancient history to a wide audience. In communist countries this became the orthodox view, though elsewhere its impact was more limited. Some Near Eastern scholars, especially in interwar Germany, found Marxist frameworks useful (Saller, Chapter 2), and there have been notable Marxist accounts of ancient history in Italy (Giardina and Schiavone 1981; Carandini 1985; Goldstone 1986). But in the English-speaking world, even Geoffrey de Ste. Croix's monumental *The Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (1981), t