CONTENTS

Introduction

THAT'S ANCIENT HISTORY!

This is the root of the ancient traditions. . . .

—*POPOL WUJ*[1]

WHAT *IS* ancient history? Wikipedia, the world's go-to source for free information, confidently tells us that "Ancient history is a time period from the beginning of writing and recorded human history through late antiquity. . . . Ancient history covers all continents inhabited by humans in the period 3000 BC–AD 500."[2]

If only that were so. Academics employed to study and teach "ancient history" tend to be far less inclusive. Belying its grand title, the venerable multiauthored fourteen-volume *Cambridge Ancient History* restricts itself to the Mediterranean including Egypt and West Asia. So does the more recent *Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, which promises to cover "all Mediterranean civilizations, including the Near East and Egypt," from the Bronze Age to the first half of Byzantine history.[3]

Professional journals and associations have long adopted the same approach. In the United States, the *Journal of Ancient History* deals with "the history and historiography (ancient and modern) of the ancient Mediterranean world and of neighboring

civilizations in their relations with it." The *Ancient History Bulletin* serves "Ancient Mediterranean studies . . . from the Bronze Age to Late Antiquity." Meanwhile, North America's Association of Ancient Historians seeks to foster "interaction among historians of the Ancient Mediterranean"—the qualifier "especially among those who study the Greeks and Romans" having been quietly dropped just a few years ago.[4]

This is not an idiosyncrasy of the Anglosphere. In Germany, the periodical *Klio: Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte* ("Contributions to Ancient History") covers the "history of ancient Greece and Rome, including their relations to the ancient Near East," an ambit similar to that of the Russian *Vestnik Drevnei Istorii* ("Ancient History Messenger"). Others are even more restrictive: Germany's *Historia: Zeitschrift für Alte Geschichte* ("Journal of Ancient History") specializes in the "study of the entire era of Greek and Roman antiquity." So do Italy's *Rivista di Storia Antica* (ditto) and the French *Revue des Études Anciennes* ("Journal of Ancient Studies") and *Dialogues d'Histoire Ancienne* ("Ancient History Dialogues") as well as Spain's *Gérion: Revista de Historia Antigua* (yet another "Journal of Ancient History"). The Belgian journal *Ancient Society* devotes itself to "the study of the society of the Greek, Hellenistic and Roman world in all its aspects, including the relations with peripheral peoples and cultures." University departments and degree programs uphold versions of these demarcations around the globe.[5]

The message is clear: as far as the professionals are concerned, "ancient history" is not at all what Wikipedia would like it to be. Credentialed gatekeepers prefer to run it as a much more exclusive club. More often than not, ancient history is simply equated with that of ancient Greece and Rome.[6] Only sometimes are they joined by "peripheral peoples and cultures" located in or near the Mediterranean, though not normally beyond Egypt and Southwest Asia.

To be sure, such niceties hardly register outside the ivory tower. For many, "ancient history" carries an entirely different

connotation. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as a "chiefly colloquial" term meant to refer to "the past or a past event considered as no longer relevant, important, or interesting." Across the Atlantic, *Merriam-Webster* concurs: ancient history is "something from the past dismissed as no longer important or relevant to the present."[7]

The formal and colloquial meanings could not clash any more violently. Europeans called Greek and Roman history "ancient" not because they considered it irrelevant but out of admiration: back in the day, "ancient"—German "antik," French "ancien," Italian "antico"—served as a marker of high status and value. German intellectuals, second to none in their appreciation of Greeks and Romans, used to venerate them as "die Alten," literally "the old ones."

It was hardly by chance that the opposite, colloquial meaning of "ancient history" appeared in the 1830s, gaining ground just as modernizing change was accelerating and the premodern past seemed to fade in the rearview mirror. By now, intimations of obsolescence have carried the day. From personal experience, I can attest that an ancient historian identifying as such is more likely to prompt the dad-joke-level response "you don't look that ancient" than some variant of "I have always loved the Greeks/Romans."[8]

Yet even among the more cerebral, "ancient history" has not been doing well. Several problems conspire to drag it down. For one, the label "ancient" is a blatant misnomer, coined at a time when scholars had little hope to know anything at all about the unwritten: the study of history had to start with the earliest textual records. Yet we have long since come to realize that there was nothing particularly "ancient" about people who lived a few thousand years ago, a tiny fraction of the 300,000 years or so that *Homo sapiens* has roamed the earth. If anything, the long Stone Age is the true "ancient history" of our species.

To make matters worse, the very concept rests on a quaintly Eurocentric perspective. The common conflation of "ancient history" with Greece and Rome (with or without "peripherals")

shuts out most of the world's early cultures, insinuating that only the former enjoyed a true ancient history—*the* ancient history, as it were—whereas matters elsewhere were at best of local concern. Not least because of this self-imposed restriction, engagement with that stunted version of "ancient history" tends to be fairly marginalized even in academic circles and viewed as remote from the present and its most pressing issues.

As a result, university departments of History often try to make do with a single representative of that subfield, if that. Many "Classics" programs—dedicated to covering all aspects of the Greco-Roman world such as language, literature, history, material culture, and philosophy—are hanging on for dear life, subsisting on what remains of legacy privileges dating from the nineteenth century. The ancient origins of Christianity, still the world's largest religion yet shunned by most practitioners of Greco-Roman "ancient history," have long been covered by separate programs, journals, and associations. Specialized programs tasked with dealing with all the many other ancient histories beyond Greece and Rome are conspicuous by their rarity and usually confined to the largest and best endowed academic institutions. All in all, the future of ancient studies is far from rosy.

In the United States, attitudes toward the standard rump version of "ancient history" are shaped by political preference. At least notionally valued by those with a commitment to privileged cultural lineages such as "Western Civilization" leading "from Plato to NATO," it is increasingly viewed not only as irrelevant but as positively out of place in a cosmopolitan society.

In the popular imagination, the narrowed-down ancient world of Greece and Rome is kept alive by familiar tropes from bulked-up Spartans to bulked-up gladiators. By contrast, much of the actual wider and often earlier ancient world comes across as so remote and mysterious that there is good money to be made from books and TV programs that credit Atlantis or extraterrestrials with creating its major monuments. While this pseudohistory reliably makes professionals froth at the mouth, it should best be seen

for what it is, as a sign of thorough detachment. The subject matter's slide into irrelevance and obsolescence may seem unstoppable as the colloquial meaning of "ancient history" merges with the formal one.

And yet—the scorn of colloquial usage has always been tempered by a tinge of defensiveness. From the very beginning, the dismissive phrase "that's ancient history!" has been employed not so much to state the obvious but as a plea, an attempt to make it so. In one of the earliest reported references, in Isabella Romer's novel *Sturmer* of 1841, a character accused of adultery "shrugged his shoulders, and laughingly replied, 'All that you are talking about is *ancient history*; those follies are over, and have not left a trace behind them here.'"[9]

This introduced what quickly became the default mode: "The claim 'oh, that's ancient history' is almost always a wish, an anxious attempt to put a boundary of time around some event that really is not over at all; it is a bid to silence the past." That underlying anxiety jumps out at us in another early example, the British MP Grant Duff's claim that after less than two decades, the Indian uprising of 1857 "is now becoming an event of ancient history."[10]

Even if the English phrase is of fairly recent origin, this rhetoric of distancing has a long, indeed ancient pedigree. In 355/54 BCE, the Athenian orator Demosthenes alluded to this gambit in defending the Persian Wars that took place more than a century earlier against the charge of having become *archaia kai palaia*, "ancient and old matters"—a reference a modern translator aptly renders as "Well, you say, but that is ancient history."[11]

What lurks in the background is the nagging feeling that whatever it is we seek to dismiss may not in fact be a thing of the past, irrelevant in the here and now. When it comes to the story of humanity, this suspicion turns out to be true. Ancient history, once we see it for what it really was, is not at all irrelevant or obsolete. It is the exact opposite. Impossible to confine to any privileged bits, ancient history is nothing less than the history of our world's

shared foundations. It takes us back to a time when the building blocks that support the present were fashioned and arranged in ways that proved both enduring and irresistible.

It is impossible to define, study, and teach this foundational history unless we scrape off the thickly layered encrustations of academic convention that block our view, and develop new strategies of engagement and understanding. This is my goal.

The opening chapter restores ancient history to its rightful place as a foundational phase of human development in which the earliest versions of our current lifeways were created, consolidated, and locked in. These changes separated an earlier world of ancestral foragers from agrarian societies and their modernized offshoots. This was when most of the practices and the hardware that surround and sustain us appeared for the first time—farming and animal husbandry, sedentism, mining and metalworking, all manner of infrastructure from houses to roads alongside myriad contraptions from wheeled transport to water mills. All of this is still with us, and most of us cannot do without it.

As the earth filled up with people and their novel designs, social arrangements were transformed beyond recognition. Humans domesticated themselves alongside plants and animals. Cities, states, and governments reordered lives. So did division of labor and patriarchy, money and taxes. Warfare escalated and inequalities soared. Goods were traded across continents, autocracies competed with democracies, and empires sprawled.

Religious beliefs both mirrored and challenged new hierarchies. All the major world religions we know today appeared on the scene. Writing made it possible for knowledge to accumulate on an unprecedented scale. Genres configured literature and visual art, and schools formed minds. Some texts were deemed "classics" and have maintained their privileged position to the present day.

These developments were not synchronized: they commenced at different times and unfolded at different speeds in different parts of the world. Contrary to what Wikipedia tells us, "ancient history" did not happen in a specific period. Rather, it represents a distinctive phase of development. The changes it wrought were massive, irresistible, and irreversible. They occurred on a planetary scale: arising independently in Afroeurasia and the Americas, they gradually reconnected a species that had spread far and wide upon its expansion out of Africa, and transformed its lifeways in the process.

And with that, the scene was set. In some sense, everything that has happened since has been an elaboration. For better or worse, the defining features of our own world are either updated versions of these innovations or directly derive from them, no matter how novel, spectacular, and revolutionary they may seem. Those foundations had not existed until they were brought into being. "Something has been born which had not been born before": though merely intended as a reference to her own writings, this claim made by or ascribed to the Akkadian priestess Enheduana around 2300 BCE exquisitely captured the whole new world that was emerging all around her.[12]

Once it had taken hold in various places and begun its unrelenting advance, this new world slowly but surely crowded out alternative arrangements. Ever since then, humankind has faithfully followed the tracks that were laid at the time. It is hard to imagine a more important, or exciting, or scary metamorphosis. Unless we appreciate it in its immensity and persistence, we cannot hope to understand the present.

And once we recognize this phase for what it was—the shared foundational history of our own world—we realize that the very notion of "ancient history" is grossly misleading. People back then were not ancient; they were young. If anybody is ancient, it is us, held in thrall to what they had set in motion. They were creators and transformers, founders and worldmakers. We remain enmeshed

and trapped in their creations. What they brought about could not possibly be any less obsolete or irrelevant.[13]

What have academics made of this magnificent spectacle? In their hands it has become deformed beyond recognition. In the second chapter, I seek to account for the jarring contrast between the vast scope and unparalleled impact of our ancient history and the intensely fragmented, ethnocentric, and parochial manner in which it is routinely perceived, studied, and taught.

Why have things turned out this way? The avid dismembering of ancient history and the idiosyncratic equation of Greece and Rome with antiquity as such are rooted in different if related developments: while the former reflects a more general nineteenth-century shift toward ever-narrowing specialization, the latter was driven by an overtly Eurocentric and elitist agenda.

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, in a turn away from earlier broader conceptions of antiquity, enterprising academics and other intellectuals managed to elevate the comprehensive and rigorous (even "scientific") study of Greek and Roman culture to an exceptionally prominent position. Justified with reference to the supposedly unique quality and value of the Greco-Roman tradition and often coupled with explicit downgrading of other early cultures, this approach was embraced with particular fervor by the Prussian educational system.

Amplifying earlier forms of selective valorization, this approach proved highly influential elsewhere, not only in Europe but also in the United States. Analogous preferences helped establish Greco-Roman "Classics" as a similarly privileged academic field in nineteenth-century Britain and its remaining settler colonies. Following the decline of classical education in secondary schools, these models survived in specialized academic departments, degree programs, professional associations, and publication venues.

Organizational divergences have had no substantive effects. The holistic Classics template has been largely abandoned in continental Europe but continues to dominate in the United Kingdom,

while Greek and Roman historians working in the United States are just as likely to be housed in departments of Classics as in those of History—yet "Ancient History" as a field generally remains focused on the study of Greece and Rome. Meanwhile, coverage of other ancient cultures—to the extent that it exists at all—is dispersed across a variety of departments and programs, such as Ancient Near Eastern Studies, South Asian Studies, or East Asian Studies, as well as Anthropology, commonly entrusted with the precolonial history of the Americas.

Pause for a moment to consider this sorry state of affairs. Ancient historians of all stripes have long been contending with the prejudice that their subject is proverbially irrelevant. Slicing and dicing it every which way only makes matters worse; privileging bits of it at the expense of all the others is even more counterproductive. None of this serves to ensure continued engagement; nor does it help us gauge ancient history's true impact on our lives today.

Instead, we find ourselves caught in a paradox. On the one hand, we are inclined to view ancient history as alien, distant, and therefore no longer relevant—wishing it away just as Isabella Romer's character wished away his adultery. And yet the exact opposite is true. On the other, we remain beholden to a trimmed-down Greco-Roman version of "ancient history" as an organic element of "Western Civilization"—which requires it to be accessible, close, and germane, as well as exclusionary. (This, I hasten to add, is not merely a Western phenomenon: the Chinese tradition of firmly connecting present conditions to ancient ancestries operates in much the same way.) This second approach is blinkered at best, toxic at worst. Neither one of them does justice to our world's actual, omnivorously transformative ancient history.

What can we do about this? In the third chapter, I discuss different ways of aligning scholarship and teaching with the necessity of understanding ancient history as a global process. There are two reasons why this perspective calls for a planetary turn in ancient

studies—on a scale that goes far beyond the necessary and valuable efforts that are already being made to expand area-specific fields of coverage or identify connections between them. One is intellectual in nature: if ancient history represents a worldwide process of foundational development, it ought to be studied in those terms. If we lose sight of the whole as we zoom in on disjointed elements of this process, submitting to the tyranny of time and space, we cannot see the forest for the trees.

The other reason stems from considerations of equity. What does "ancient history" mean in a multiethnic, multiracial cosmopolitan society such as the United States, or indeed more generally in a world that is increasingly interconnected and globalized? Surely not just Greeks and Romans or their regional equivalents, such as India's ancient Hindus whom politicians and partisan historians like to declare the country's only true ancestors and creators. Genuine ancient history is by its very nature diverse and inclusive. After all, we cannot hope to understand this world unless we understand its shared foundations. All of ancient history is "our" ancient history.

How can we hope to execute this much-needed global turn? Global(ized) history is a broad church: it comes in many flavors and accommodates a wide range of preferences and capabilities. Most importantly, it is perfectly compatible with enduring commitments to professional specialization and expertise, commitments to which we owe the enormous expansion of knowledge during the last couple of centuries.

However arcane their subject matter, area and period specialists can engage with global perspectives by explicitly framing their work within broader contexts and relating it to larger issues. A focus on connectivities, an increasingly popular element of cross-cultural scholarship, likewise invites and indeed relies on engagement by experts. So do comparative approaches: properly designed, they do not require polymathic breadth or excessive reductionism. These as well as more ambitious forms of global history all stand to benefit from collaboration in research and teaching.

Conceptually and organizationally, this vision calls for a shift away from a status quo that either siloes specialists of ancient affairs in area studies programs or marginalizes them within larger disciplinary entities such as History departments. But what does that mean for the self-styled "Classics," a field that lays claim to all matters Greeks and Roman? The recasting of ancient history as global foundational history is fundamentally incompatible with the definition and practice of Classics as institutionalized at (mostly) Anglo universities.

I address this problem in the fourth chapter by arguing that there are several reasons for dispensing with the Classics format that go far beyond the need to reintegrate Greek and Roman history into a universal version of ancient history. Classics is frequently and justifiably criticized for its intrinsic Eurocentrism, elitism, and historical association with white supremacy and colonialism. There are no simple remedies. Adjustments that aim to strengthen or upgrade Classics without altering its core commitments—for instance, by relabeling the field or by expanding its scope to include adjacent Mediterranean and/or West Asian cultures—inevitably fail to decenter Greece and Rome.

Classics suffers from structural defects that cannot be overcome by cosmetic changes. At the same time, the notion that more radical reform might endanger what is left of the study of Greece and Rome is self-defeating: Classics, just like the study of ancient cultures more generally, already finds itself in the position of a slowly boiling frog. Instead of managing decline, it would seem preferable to attempt a fresh start.

Any genuine relaunch is more likely to transcend than to preserve existing formats. Thus, the more we expand the scope of Classics in terms of space and time, the more we destabilize the very concept of Greco-Roman Classics. A truly global "Global Classics" that brings together foundational traditions from around the globe is no longer Classics as we know it. And that is as it should be. The proposed globalization of ancient

history—alongside that of other elements of ancient studies—offers an effective alternative.

But talk is cheap, and change is easier to propose than to accomplish. In the conclusion, I confront the thorny question of whether such reforms are likely to occur. Implementation is certainly feasible, even at no extra cost. Even so, it faces two major obstacles: self-selection of scholars (in favor of established modes of inquiry and instruction) and institutional inertia. Though real, the former is part of a zero-sum game: as some budding traditionalists are turned off by change, others who are currently discouraged from engaging with the ancient world would be drawn in.

Inertia is undoubtedly a force to be reckoned with. But in the long run, a unifying vision of a foundational ancient history that is truly global and inclusive ought to gain an edge over positions committed to a status quo that reifies outmoded and divisive conventions. Both students and much-reviled academic administrators might well be more sympathetic to such a vision than to versions of business as usual that exposes highly particularized, insular, and intellectually timid forms of engagement with selected antiquities to gradual cuts and downgrades. At the very least, reform should be worth a try.

It should be worth a try not least because this is not just about early history and its legacy, enormous as it is. This is also about much bigger questions, about the need to reframe, reorient, and reorganize teaching and research in the humanities in order to secure its presence in the academy and the public imagination. The issues I raise—relevance, collaboration, consolidation—matter more widely.

In the late eighteenth century, scholars who devoted their careers to one particular slice of antiquity—Greece and Rome—proved to be inordinately successful in setting the terms regarding professional norms and discipline formation well beyond their own emerging field. Some 250 years later, the study of early cultures is as good a place as any to start the next round of conversation.

It will be clear even from this briefest of outlines that my account is layered. I talk about substance and tradition, about the big picture of the historical imagination and the practicalities of academic life. All this hangs together: seemingly mundane practices of training and research shape how scholars think about what they teach and study; we cannot deal with questions of content without dealing with the rules of engagement.

Intended to be a manifesto, this book is also more than just that. This has forced me to be parsimonious—to be more abstract and selective and to generalize more boldly than the topic deserves. In an attempt to compensate for those sins, I have for the most part made heavy use of quotations by others to give some sense of the richness of traditions and debates, which are best captured in the voices of those involved.

This has resulted in what are in effect two pairs of interlocking essays on what one might call globalizing and classicizing approaches:

Globalism	*Classicism*
(chapter 1) how to define a global ancient history	(chapter 2) how modern scholarship compartmentalizes and warps the study of ancient history
(chapter 3) how to advance the globalization of ancient history	(chapter 4) how to address one of the biggest obstacles to (3)

Concluding observations on the feasibility of (3) and (4)

Had I sought to reference all the claims in the first chapter, or to track the genesis of different national traditions of "Ancient History" in as much detail as I do for Germany in the second chapter, or to illustrate all the globalizing strategies in the third chapter by describing relevant empirical work, this book would have ended up several times longer. Worse still, it would be (even) more

flawed, for the simple reason that no one person could hope to provide all these references and illustrations in an even-handed way, without privileging familiar or otherwise more accessible bits over others. That is exactly what a project like this must avoid.

In the end, I hope to convince my audience that the potential payoff is worth the push: a vision of our foundations that is not beholden to the peculiar sensibilities of a bygone age; a rebalancing that brings engagement with Greeks and Romans in line with that of other ancient times and places; wider vistas and better access.

Studying the distant past is already hard enough as it is: poor evidence, difficult languages; there is no shortage of hurdles. Yet in their desire to conquer these obstacles, generations of scholars have contrived to add to them by retreating into ever-smaller enclosures, ending up "ingrown into their nook," as Friedrich Nietzsche memorably put it—into nooks first dreamed up a quarter of a millennium ago that carve up history in ways that make it so much harder to approach and understand, and that actively divide people around the world. For all their boundless ingenuity and indefatigable commitment, when it comes to framing and perspective, those who study and teach the ancient world have become their own worst enemies.[14]

But in the end, this is not about them, about insiders. What matters most is that the established way of handling ancient history has distorted the public's perception of what once was and how it has shaped what is now. Reparation is well overdue. It is not just scholars and their students who deserve a better ancient history. Everybody does.

INDEX