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THE DEVELOPMENT OF ROMAN SOCIAL HISTORY

Chapter Summary

As the ancient Greek word *historia* ("inquiry") suggests, the pursuit of history is an inquiry into the past. But it is often also a reflection of contemporary concerns and interests, as these tend to influence the questions any given historian seeks to answer. This tendency is a major justification for history as an academic study: history provides a safe context in which to consider today's issues and the similarities and differences between then and now are both useful in our understanding of our own society. The study of ancient history has always been undertaken as an education for the present, but earlier historians traced only what they considered the admirable qualities of the Romans for the purposes of emulation. More recent historical investigations focus on the experience of members of the population beyond the elite to investigate issues that are of contemporary relevance.

Social historical studies in ancient history employ a wider base of evidence than was traditionally used: literary evidence is no longer the exclusive window into the past, nor are the words of ancient authors considered a mirror of past reality. The benefits of epigraphic, archaeological, iconographic, numismatic, and papyrological evidence are now widely recognized. In addition, methods drawn from different disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, literary theory, and political studies are used to illuminate investigations into antiquity. These methods are problematic, but the debate surrounding their appropriateness is a productive force in studies of ancient Roman history and society (pp. 18–19).

Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, students should be able to:

- explain the concept of social history and describe the differences between it and cultural studies;

- discuss the development of the study of Roman social history, highlighting traditional and contemporary approaches before and after the 1960s;

- identify and describe key events in the scholarly adoption of social history, particularly within Roman studies;

- recognize the aims and approaches to ancient history embraced by social historians in Classics; and

- demonstrate an understanding of the different kinds of sources and ancient evidence used to explore Roman social history.

Suggestions for Discussion

Instructors should encourage students to consider the development of historical studies and the approaches that scholars employ in examining the social history of ancient cultures, particularly ancient Rome. Students should recognize that history is never static, but research in new areas of inquiry, such as social history, continues to expand our understanding of ancient lives. Questions to consider include the following:

1. What forms of ancient evidence and types of sources are used to examine Roman social history?

2. How has the study of Roman social history changed over time? What debates and problems have new (and old) forms of historical inquiry raised?

3. What are some implications of the evolution of social history in Roman studies?

4. How can social history shed light on political history?

Sample Essay/Exam Questions and Answers

1. **Primary sources, especially literary ones, have formed the cornerstone of historical inquiry. How has the relationship between the historian and the primary sources developed over the past 40 years? How can/should primary sources be interpreted? Is there any "right" way of understanding the ancient sources?**

   First and foremost among these problems is the proper relationship between the historian and the ancient sources, particularly the literary sources. Some have been resolute that the historian must follow the sources. Fergus Millar champions a reading of the sources uninfluenced by any sort of extraneous theory. Others have been equally adamant that the treatment of the sources as "sacred texts" is misguided, not least of all because writing about these works in languages other than Latin or ancient Greek means that historians cannot avoid interpreting the words. Yet other historians, being less certain about the appropriate treatment of the sources, fall in between the extremes. Believing that ancient sources convey "the unvarnished truth" (to quote Fowler) is

now uncommon, but how should they be interpreted? Do they describe what was normal or what was exceptional? If they describe stereotypes, what is their relationship to reality? If different sources give contradictory impressions of society, which one is to be followed? And which should have priority: the sources or the theoretical framework used to interpret them? In other words, should the sources be subordinated to the theory to form a sort of "best fit"? Or should the theory be subordinated to the sources, such that the former is proven unsuitable if enough sources seem to contradict it? If so, how many contradictory sources should suffice? One? Two? A dozen? (pp. 12–13)

2. **What methods or principles of inquiry from other disciplines can be applied to Roman social history? How and why?**

Moses Finley would come to believe that ancient history was poorly served by the habits of his contemporaries, who in his opinion merely reiterated the words of the ancient literary sources and asked only those questions that were prompted by such sources. He instead advocated the productive potential of approaching ancient society through the consideration of a wide array of different kinds of sources, with the help of "models." Models in this sense are questions raised in, and theories drawn from, other disciplines (such as anthropology, economics, and sociology).

In Finley's opinion, historians, not ancient sources, could raise questions and their answers were not immutable truths but an interpretation of the sources. He also felt that the sources could not provide answers without the help of theoretical hypotheses, and he protested against the isolated consideration of historical phenomena or institutions.

Some historians (who, not surprisingly, often had backgrounds or interests in different disciplines) saw the potential of opening lines of inquiry that were simply not possible if single-minded dependence upon traditional approaches was maintained. For example, Keith Hopkins, a key figure in this movement and another who would later become chair of ancient history at Cambridge, was trained and employed as a sociologist as well as an ancient historian. In a series of controversial studies in the 1960s and 1970s, Hopkins used sociological methods to investigate the life cycles and consequences for social structures of the general Roman population.

In addition, methods drawn from different disciplines such as art, anthropology, sociology, literary theory, and political studies are used to illuminate investigations into antiquity.

The willingness to make audible the voice of under-represented or indirectly represented groups in literary sources made scholars turn their attention to women, slaves, ex-slaves (freedmen and freedwomen), children, the poorer citizens, and the non-citizens. The relationships between different social elements could be analyzed along with their contribution to the religious life or the economy. Studies on slavery and family have seen an increase. The study of funerary art has made possible to understand how highly valued the family was among ex-slaves. Beryl Rawson's study on tombstone inscriptions has been extremely important to comprehend the composition of non-elite families in the early Empire. These methods are problematic, but the debate surrounding their appropriateness is a productive force in studies of ancient Roman history and society. (pp. 9-11, 19)

3. **What are the advantages and disadvantages of employing cross-cultural comparisons to help understand marginalized and poorly attested social groups in ancient Rome?**

Cross-cultural comparisons are an attractive way to investigate the lives of poorly attested segments of the ancient population because, by considering their better documented counterparts in other societies, it is perhaps possible to recapture something of the ancient experience. The personal accounts of slaves in the antebellum American South have been used, for example, as ways to think about the lives of ancient Roman slaves and to suggest modes of resistance.

As promising as the approach might be, however, cross-cultural comparisons are often problematic. The comparison of the practices or ideologies of two different societies demands that the societies compared be internally homogenous to some extent. But most societies experience either local variation or change over time, which raises the question of which places and times are being compared. Even if these details could be narrowed down, the choice of such-and-such society at such-and-such a time as a comparative situation often risks being criticized as arbitrary. What is the common element that suggests that the comparison is apt, and why should it be more important than the differences? For example, do all pre-industrial societies present as possible points of comparison for the structures and values of ancient society? Are economics and technology the only factors that drive social and cultural characteristics? Or are there other, possibly even more important, factors? If so, what are they? (pp. 14–15)

4. What are the limitations of studies focused on daily life in ancient Rome?

While daily life is an important part of the social experience, we have evidence only for a few individuals and frequently we have also some gaps in specific periods. Roman society was very diversified. It was composed of people with different economic and legal statuses, living in areas with different historical and local traditions. Age, gender, social and economic status played an important role. Not all categories have left evidence of their daily commitments, struggles, and achievements. For example, the everyday life of women, even though heavily influenced by men, was different based on their social status. There was not any category that enjoyed one single common experience. Even slaves could have quite different lives. Thus, a study on daily life would indeed be very misleading. (pp. 16,18)

Readings

- **Aubert, J-J., and Z. Varhelyi, eds. 2005. *A Tall Order: Writing the Social History of the Ancient World: Essays in Honour of William V. Harris.* Munich: K. G. Saur Verlag.**

  This collection includes 15 essays on socio-historical topics (e.g. imperialism, law, economy, and religion) that challenge traditionally accepted notions regarding ancient Greek and Roman history.

- **Morley, N. 2009. "Economic and social history." In *A Companion to Ancient History,* edited by A. Erskine, 112-122. Oxford: Wiley.**

  Morley offers an overview on the main issues of economic and social history.

- **Parkin, T., and A. Pomeroy. 2007.** *Roman Social History: A Sourcebook*. **London and New York: Routledge.**

  The authors present a comprehensive range of primary sources (including inscriptions, papyri, and legal texts) related to the social history of the Roman world during the late Republic and first two CE centuries. Topics such as the Roman family, gender roles, the role of slaves, and attitudes to gladiators and violence are covered.

- **Shelton, J., ed. 1988.** *As the Romans Did: A Source Book in Roman Social History.* **Oxford: Oxford University Press.**

  This rich anthology focuses on primary readings from both Greek and Latin sources on topics relating to the average Roman's everyday life (e.g. family, housing, education, entertainment, and religion).

- **Treggiari, S. 2002.** *Roman Social History*. **London and New York: Routledge.**

  Treggiari introduces the study of Roman social history, discussing its development within the discipline, the kinds of evidence used, and approaches to analyzing and learning from this evidence.

- **Wiseman, T.P.** *2015. The Roman Audience: Classical Literature as Social History.* **Oxford: Oxford University Press.**

  Wiseman's approach is an attempt to look at the whole history of Roman literature from the point of view of those who listened to it. In the ancient world, books were written in order to be then recited. The author's intent is to make the modern readers of classical texts better understand the difference of social and cultural conditions in which the texts were created.