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Introduction

Research on Afro-Eurasian empires and their economies in antiquity has unfolded within diverse communities of scholars who approach the topic of the ancient world from a number of different research traditions. Because of the scale of the subject and the diversity of approaches, these scholarly communities have interacted in sporadic and often superficial ways. Despite the increasingly global nature of scholarship, they remain halting conversation partners today.

In this handbook, we integrate knowledge from across the landscape of studies on Afro-Eurasian history in order to develop our own new understanding of economic developments in the space. As we do this, we find ourselves faced with data and interpretations predicated on different understandings of history. The vision of the ‘Silk Road’ in Chinese scholarship differs quite sharply from what lives in the mind of historians writing in the Western European tradition. A German Hellenistic historian’s understanding of the Bactrian kingdom is perhaps unrecognizable from the perspective of a Russian-trained archaeologist working in Central Asia. Superficially, these differences appear to be explained by a focus on different bodies of evidence. In fact, the differences run deeper, reflecting the diverse research traditions that undergird scholarship. These genealogies of knowledge are powerfully formative, since history and archaeology are processes of cultural sedimentation, where each layer builds on what came before it.

Research traditions in this sense are the constellations of institutional and social networks that surround individual scholars and give structure to the worldview through which they study the past. Discussions of how research traditions structure studies of the ancient world have been ongoing for decades, although they have received more explicit attention from archaeologists than ancient historians.¹ Choices about where and what to excavate, as well as how to organize, categorize, and present data shape the archaeological record. As such, the ‘archaeological record’ is not a neutral reflection of the past, but rather a creation of modernity that reflects the priorities and interests of the scholars involved in its creation, and that goes on to affect the shape of future research.² Although the material character of archaeology makes these issues particularly present and relevant, historiographical research has highlighted a similar process of interpretational accumulation in ancient historical scholarship, in which educational networks and disciplinary conventions clearly shape normative spheres of inquiry.³ Finally, research agendas are also informed

1 For example, Trigger 1984; Díaz-Andreu and Champion 1996.

2 Patrik 1985; Shanks and Tilley 1987; Schlanger 2002; Murray 2012; Wylie 2017.

3 See for example the papers collected in Lianeri 2011.

by what might best be termed ‘identity relationships’ that link communities of researchers to the populations and pasts that they study.

As we examine these research traditions, however, we need to take care not to essentialize them: there never has been a single ‘Western European’ vision of the Roman Empire any more than there has been a single ‘Chinese’ vision of ancient China. Instead, research traditions are shifting phenomena with fuzzy borders and overlapping spheres of activity. Furthermore, these traditions are not parallel in structure: some are rooted in a particular modern nation-state or research language, while others are bound together by a specific disciplinary approach.

A complete treatment of all the historical traditions that study economies and their connectivities in ancient Afro-Eurasia is impossible. The following chapters are selective and do not run strictly parallel. The two on Chinese/Japanese and Indian historiography – in which the ‘Silk Road’ and transcontinental exchange have played relatively minor parts in research on the ancient periods – concentrate on economic history writing without treating questions of connectivity. Dominant paradigms in Western Graeco-Roman historiography, meanwhile, include both economic and trans-regional approaches which, in combination with the more abundant historiographical research, allows this chapter to touch on both sets of questions. The chapter discussing Russian scholarship, in contrast, had to deal with the fact that for most of the twentieth century, economic questions have been enmeshed with materialist approaches to history and archaeology more generally, making it problematic to treat traditions of economic history in isolation. Finally, the chapter on Central Asia traces why comparatively little scholarship has been generated about its ancient economic history, showing instead the impact of the ‘Silk Road’ paradigm on receptions of the Kushan economy. Thus, we focus on a set of examples that highlight the fact that different questions have been important to different communities of scholars and demonstrate how these priorities, preconceptions, and contexts have shaped understanding.

References

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