

“New perspectives in Darwinian history”
Walter Scheidel & Jörg Wettlaufer (organizers)

Evolutionary theory still occupies an extremely marginal position in the study of history. The few existing practitioners mainly come from outside the historical profession (usually from anthropology and psychology), and mostly receive attention within the HBES community but remain largely unknown to mainstream historians. Meaningful contacts have been limited to inherently interdisciplinary areas such as historical demography. While ideological preferences among historians may well account for much of this enduring separation, practitioners of Darwinian history also need to address the possibility that this lack of communication may persist for more rational reasons. Hence, the four papers in this panel share a common objective: to explore the relationship between evolutionary theorizing and the methods and concerns of mainstream history, and to assess the chances of Darwinian history to gain recognition within the historical discipline. Comprised of two historians (Scheidel, Wettlaufer) and two anthropologists (Betzig, Hakami), this panel is designed to stake out some middle ground for mutual interaction. Betzig, in the first paper, expands on her earlier work on the relationship between political power and reproductive success. In a further step, Wettlaufer makes a case for a ‘Darwinian cultural history’ that links biological features to cultural transmission. Hakami takes a fresh look at the connection between kinship and war that lies outside the ambit of conventional historical studies, and reconsiders the compatibility of evolutionary and culturalist approaches. Finally, Scheidel draws on these contributions and existing publications to address the question to what extent Darwinian theory can be of use to historians, and sketches out an agenda for future work.

Speakers and titles:

Laura Betzig: Politics and sex in the Bible

Jörg Wettlaufer: History, culture and evolution: new perspectives in Darwinian history

Khaled Hakami: Fitness: inclusive or infrastructural?

Walter Scheidel: Is Darwinian history possible?