

Walter Scheidel – Research Interests

The study of the history of the Greco-Roman world is part of the study of history in general. History, in turn, is just one branch of the study of human behavior, which is embedded in the study of all forms of life on earth. In my work, I have been trying to take account of these multiple contexts. As a result, my interests largely center on three thematic and methodological issues.

First, a strong emphasis on the fundamentals of life in the past, embodied by critical determinants of well-being such as longevity, health, nutritional status, economic opportunity, and reproductive success. I have studied some of these factors in my earlier work on the organization of labor in Roman farming, and more recently in my research on demographic conditions in the ancient Mediterranean. Following a series of technical studies of mortality patterns, I am currently preparing a general handbook on ancient population history for Cambridge University Press. I am also planning a book on population, labor, and development in the ancient Mediterranean that will revise and synthesize the results of a number of my earlier articles.

Second, a cross-cultural comparative perspective that puts Greco-Roman history in a broader context. Only comparisons with other civilizations make it possible to distinguish common features from culturally specific or unique characteristics and developments, help us to identify variables that were critical to particular historical outcomes, and allow us to assess the nature of ancient Mediterranean societies within the wider context of pre-modern world history. For these reasons, I am trying to study key institutions cross-culturally, focusing on the interrelated themes of economic development, empire, and slavery. Together with my colleagues Ian Morris and Richard Saller, I co-edited the new *Cambridge Economic History of the Greco-Roman World*. This project will be complemented by a companion volume on the Roman economy edited by myself. Ian Morris and I are the editors of a forthcoming volume on the dynamics of ancient empires that has grown out of a series of conferences sponsored by Stanford's Social Science History Institute. We are likewise collaborating on a concise general introduction to the academic field of ancient history. Together with Peter Bang of the University of Copenhagen, I am preparing a handbook of state formation in the ancient Near East and Mediterranean, and I am also editing a general handbook of Roman studies jointly with my colleague Alessandro Barchiesi. In addition, I have launched an international research initiative promoting comparative study of imperial states in the ancient Mediterranean and ancient China that has resulted in a pair of collaborative volumes bringing together experts from different areas. This project has been complemented by a year-long research seminar and a concluding conference on what I have proposed to call the 'First Great Divergence' between eastern and western Eurasia in the second half of the first millennium CE. Starting in 2009, my comparative history initiative expanded to encompass a wider range of early empires and draw on the resources of several partner institutions. This has led to a new project, a comprehensive world history of empire to be co-edited with Peter Bang and Chris Bayly. I have also started work on theoretical models for the study of ancient empires. In addition, I co-edited a conference volumes on fiscal regimes in early states (with Andrew Monson) and on the global history of slavery (with John Bodel).

Finally, transdisciplinarity, again exemplified by my interest in historical demography, a field of research which depends as much on the findings and models of the life sciences as on more conventional historical data. In recent work, I examined the interdependence of demography and disease in parts of the ancient Mediterranean. I am also planning to expand on my earlier studies of historical evidence for institutionalized nuclear-family incest. Interpretations of incest and incest avoidance lie at the heart of competing theories of human nature, and must be evaluated from biological as well as cultural angles. In this area, preliminary forays into genetics and behavioral studies have given me a rare opportunity to open a dialogue with the scientific community. My goal is a more comprehensive study of brother-sister and parent-child marriage in pre-modern societies that seeks to improve our understanding of the limits of human behavioral plasticity. I have also been involved in collaborative interdisciplinary projects that employ information technology to expand our understanding of the Roman world: these include cost-surface analysis for the purpose of reconceptualizing the physical properties of the Roman empire, and computer simulations of demographic and economic change in Roman Italy. I am also interested in the contribution of genetics to our understanding of ancient population movements and more generally in the ways in which science expands our knowledge of ancient living conditions by means of the analysis of ancient and modern DNA, osteological study, and paleoclimatology.

In late 2005, Josh Ober and I launched the 'Princeton/Stanford Working Papers in Classics' (www.princeton.edu/~pswpc), the first-ever electronic repository of working papers in this field anywhere in the world. This site currently contains some 100 papers by faculty and graduate students and has already attracted attention well beyond the Classics community. In May 2012, Elijah Meeks and I launched the interactive website 'Orbis: The Stanford Geospatial Network Model of the Roman World', which attracted over 350,000 visitors within the first two months.