PROFILES

AEGEAN HISTORY

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Research on Aegean history takes as its remit a wide-ranging effort to reconstruct political, military, economic and social aspects of the human past around the rocky shores of the Aegean sea, a roughly 215,000 km^2 body of water, punctuated throughout by thousands of islands, that is located between the mountainous Greek peninsula to the west and the sprawling landmass of Anatolia to the east. The expansive topical, spatial and chronological scope of research currently being undertaken by Aegean historians is reflected in the title of this profile, which once would probably have been called instead 'Greek history', a term that might sensibly be taken to signify research on the history of the ancient Greeks, defined broadly as a culturally coherent identity group that emerged over the course of the eighth to fifth centuries BCE (following J. Hall's still-classic treatment of the question in *Hellenicity: Between Ethnicity and Culture* [2002]).

As thus defined, the field of Greek history has produced a great deal of compelling scholarship, including recent titles generative of new perspectives on topics that were already well-trodden about twenty years ago – from the political and military history of Greek city states to the rise and conquests of Macedonian monarchs. A few recent interventions that inject fresh energy into the kinds of political and military-historical topics that have long sat at the centre of Greek historical scholarship include M. Simonton's *Classical Greek Oligarchy: A Political History* (2017; cf. *CR* 68 [2018], 468–70), *Reassessing the Peloponnesian War* (2025), edited by S. Gartland and R. Osborne, and C. Jordan's *The Pioneer Kingdoms of Macedon and Qin: A Triumph of the Periphery* (2025). Also new and notable is the (now nearly complete) *Oxford History of the Archaic Greek World* (2023–), a massive multi-authored initiative co-edited by P. Christesen and P. Cartledge that is like a handbook or companion volume on steroids: the five volumes published so far count a whopping 1,746 pages of content between them, not to mention copious accompanying illustrations and maps.

While recognising the continued vitality of research on core topics in Greek history, my task for this Profile is to try to review something slightly different: Aegean history. Capturing a clear view of a field that might be described as such requires us to open up our aperture considerably, so that it brings into focus an expansive chronological and geospatial route of ground and delineates sharply the activities of groups and individuals who might not necessarily be identified as Greek. Doing so is in fact appropriate in a disciplinary context wherein people who consider themselves historians of Greece increasingly take an expansive view of their subject area. While it is challenging to articulate a coherent set of trends in a field that is increasingly so vast in scope, apparent in macro-view are a blurred series of vectors that may be grouped under three overarching themes. Together they describe an energetic and methodologically omnivorous field committed to critically re-evaluating traditional boundaries, experimenting with new methods and approaches, and redefining its purpose and position within the broader world of humanistic research.

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AEGEAN HISTORY UPSIDE DOWN

A first trend may be conceived of as the field turning itself at least somewhat upside down, with a shift away from political and military historical research, which has tended to emphasise the agency of elite males, and a concomitant turn towards social history (sometimes called 'history from below'). Indeed, research in Aegean history today often poses explicitly social questions, which I define as questions concerning social structure (including gender relationships and relationships between people of different ages and class or rank), the nature and functioning of communities in both urban and rural environments, and the daily lives of ordinary people. A trend towards social history is observable both within and outside the limits of our discipline; it probably responds to a broader recognition in all fields of history that the study of supra-ordinal political and military structures and discrete historical events is incapable of explaining past trajectories if it is not harmonised with examinations of individual- and household-scale organisations and activities.

The embrace of social history amongst Aegean historians is manifest in new research foci on a range of social groups. The force of this trend is immediately apparent from even an extremely limited sample of recent book-length studies from major academic presses. In addition to continued efforts to reaffirm women's place in ancient Greek history (e.g. K. Kapparis, *Women in the Law Courts of Classical Athens* [2021]); J. Connelly, *Portrait of a Priestess: Women and Ritual in Ancient Greece* [2007], cf. *CR* 58 [2008], 510–12; K. Backler, *Athena's Sisters: Reclaiming the Women of Classical Athens* [2026]), recent titles attest to keen interest in the agency and experiences of children (E. Gooch, *Experiencing Childhood in Ancient Athens: Material Culture, Iconography, Burials, and Social Identity in the 9th to 4th centuries BCE* [2025]), the poor (C. Taylor, *Poverty, Wealth, and Well-Being: Experiencing* Penia *in Democratic Athens* [2017]; cf. *CR* 68 [2018], 479–81), slaves (D. Lewis, *Greek Slave Systems in their Eastern Mediterranean Context* [2018], cf. *CR* 69 [2019], 503–5; S. Forsdyke, *Slaves and Slavery in Ancient Greece* [2021], cf. *CR* 72 [2022], 203–5), rural populations (A. Rizakis and I. Touratsoglou [edd.], *Villae Rusticae: Family and Market-Oriented Farms in Greece under Roman Rule* [2013]; M. McHugh, *Agricultural Labour and Lived Experience in Ancient Greece* [2026]), migrants and non-Greeks (D. Kasimis, *The Perpetual Immigrant and the Limits of Athenian Democracy* [2018]; B. Boyxen, *Fremde in der hellenistischen Polis Rhodos: Zwischen Nähe und Distanz* [2018]; D. Dimitriou, *Phoenicians Among Others: Why Migrants Mattered in the Ancient Mediterranean* [2023]), craftspeople and labourers (E. Lytle [ed.], *A Cultural History of Work in Antiquity* [2020]; E. Hasaki, *Potters at Work in Ancient Corinth: Industry, Religion, and the Penteskouphia Pinakes* [2021]; cf. *CR* 74 [2024], 234–6) and generally 'subaltern' or 'subordinate' groups (G. Zuchtriegel, *Colonization and Subalternity in Classical Greece: Experience of the Nonelite Population* [2017]; C. Courrier, M. de Oliveira, J. Cesar [edd.], *Ancient History from Below: Subaltern Experiences and Actions in Context* [2022]; S. Gartland and D. Tandy [edd.], *Voiceless, Invisible, and Countless in Ancient Greece: The Experience of Subordinates, 700–300 BCE* [2023]; cf. *CR* 75 [2025], 23–31). Reflecting the broader posthuman turn in historical and archaeological thought, even animals have begun to get their due as socially important members of ancient Aegean communities (T. Fögen and E. Thomas [edd.], *Interactions between Animals and Humans in Graeco-Roman Antiquity* [2017]; E. Anderson, *Minoan Zoomorphic Culture: Between Bodies and Things* [2024]).

The results of such studies prompt considerable re-evaluation of how ancient Aegean social organisms functioned as a whole. Accordingly, it is unsurprising to observe that Aegean historians increasingly recognise that supra-ordinal political institutions did not operate unilaterally, imposing the will of elite actors and agents on a hapless and inert social

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body, but rather functioned in mutual constitution and constant dialogue with individuals and groups occupying a variety of statuses and roles, who in turn contributed to crucial social and political functions. Such revised approaches to state power and participation may be found in the influential work of J. Blok, which (amongst other things) argues that male and female citizens shared equal responsibility for maintaining the viability of an Athenian community as such (*Citizenship in Classical Athens* [2017]; cf. *CR* 68 [2018], 138–40) and J. Ma's ambitious recent history of the Greek *polis*, which highlights its multilateral, corporate and participatory essence (*Polis: A New History of the Ancient Greek City-State from the Early Iron Age to the End of Antiquity* [2024]). Likewise ascendant have been invigoratingly revisionist approaches to Mycenaean political economies of the Late Bronze Age. Rejecting the long-festering view that palatial elites presided over command economies characterised by robust redistributive systems that strongly governed regional agricultural regimes, most Mycenaean scholars now reconstruct instead complex economic systems integrating multilateral contributions negotiated amongst a variety of individuals and non-state organisations, wherein the palace was an important but non-dominant participant (D. Pullen, *Social Groups and Production in Mycenaean Economies* [2025]).

Arriving at such 'bottom-up' revisionist perspectives often requires scholars to engage creatively and in novel ways with the available data or even to develop entirely new approaches generative of data that allow us to glimpse lives not enlightened in textual records. Archaeological evidence has been especially conducive to providing information about ancient people whose voices are generally lost to us, but maximising its potential in this regard has required considerable methodological innovation. The dataset available for understanding rural communities, for example, has been greatly enhanced by the proliferation of regional pedestrian survey projects, whose practitioners diligently scour surface assemblages in the countryside for traces of rural activity and then work just as committedly to wring human stories about life in the Aegean hinterland from the unprepossessing sherds they have quarried from the plough soil (see, e.g., E. Athanassopoulos, *Landscape Archaeology and the Medieval Countryside* [2016]; D. Pettegrew, *Corinthian Countrysides* [2024]). Equally important for this mission have been the efforts of scholars employed by the Greek Archaeological Service, whose publications include a genuine bonanza of detailed vignettes of life in the ancient countryside gained from innumerable rescue excavations across rapidly urbanising agricultural regions. The relevant reports have, perhaps, not yet been integrated as fully as they might be into anglophone scholarship. Many are regularly published not only in the well-known Ephorate-issued journals, such as *Αρχαιολογικόν Δελτίον*, but also in summary volumes published by regional archaeological authorities, such as *Το Αρχαιολογικό Έργο στη Μακεδονία και Θράκη*, *Το Αρχαιολογικό Έργο στην Πελοπόννησο*, *Το Αρχαιολογικό Έργο Θεσσαλίας και Στερεάς Ελλάδας*, *Το Αρχαιολογικό Έργο στην Αιτωλοακαρνανία & τη Λευκάδα* etc., as well as proceedings of thematic conferences (e.g. E. Andrikou [ed.], *Διασχίζοντας τα Μεσόγεια μέσα στον χρόνο* [2024]). The contemporary publishing environment, which enables the widespread dissemination of such volumes by regional organisations in beautiful, full-colour PDF formats, has facilitated welcome improvements in the availability of such valuable outputs.

Additional analytical gains in understanding life beyond urban centres have arisen from an explosion in archaeobotanical and archaeofaunal studies, highlighted at a European scale now by the *European Research Council*-funded PLANTCULT project, directed by S.M. Valamoti. The results contribute greatly to Aegean social history, insofar as most people through all periods of the past likely would have been engaged in the agro-pastoral economy to some extent. The relevant research has been reviewed by E. Margaritis in a recent issue of *Archaeological Reports* (71 [2025], 131–48). Quotidian realities of daily life illuminated by

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studies of plant and animal remains often provide strikingly intimate glimpses into the complex considerations that weighed upon ancient households and communities in choosing how to organise local labour. For example, analyses of faunal data from the Geometric-period settlement of Zagora on Andros indicate that the community made decisions about animal husbandry practices differently depending on whether such decisions impacted caring for cattle and pigs, since these remained close to the settlement and involved input from household labour pools, or whether they impacted caring for wide-ranging sheep and goat herds, which involved different labour pools already accounted for as outside the normal household ambit (R. Alagich, K. Trantalidou, M. Miller and C. Smith, *Archaeological and Anthropological Sciences* 13 [2021]).

No less intimate and bracing visions of daily life in ancient communities have arisen from studies of human skeletons, which have great potential to underpin granular social histories (E. Nikita, *Archaeological Reports* 70 [2024], 193–211). In addition to basic demographic characteristics of populations, such as distributions of sex and age at death, the study of skeletal assemblages may inform scholars about everything from subsistence bases (through wear patterns in dentition and isotopic ratios in bone collagen) to work regimes (based on the study of skeletal stress indicators) to whether an individual moved across regions prior to adolescence (extrapolated from strontium isotope analysis). Social approaches to bioarchaeology in the Aegean were pioneered by scholars such as S. Triantaphyllou and E. Nikita, who began conducting sophisticated studies of human remains in the 1980s and 1990s, far ahead of trend. Once few and far between, detailed and thoughtful analyses of Aegean skeletal assemblages now appear regularly in venues such as the *Journal of Archaeological Sciences: Reports* and in specialist studies included with excavation publications, where proper treatment of environmental and skeletal remains has become a required element of best practice. A sterling example of such is M. Liston's study of Iron Age human remains, included in J. Papadopoulos and E. Lord Smithson's *Agora Volume XXXVI. The Early Iron Age. The Cemeteries* (2017), pp. 503–60, which documents several examples of adult females who appear to have suffered laborious and difficult life courses before their deaths in middle age, as well as a younger woman, from Tomb 81, who appears to have died while pregnant with her first child following a short life characterised by extensive manual labour and frequent illness. In Liston's capable hands, what might be dry discussions of archaeological detail achieve genuine emotional resonance that connects readers to these ancient individuals in a way that is not quite equivalent to what might be gleaned from a first-person account, but which surely moves us closer to an understanding of individual subaltern experiences than we would be without such analytical results. The broader interpretative potential of bioarchaeological datasets has been demonstrated by C. Sulosky Weaver's *Marginalised Populations in the Ancient Greek World: The Bioarchaeology of the Other* (2024; cf. *CR* 73 [2023], 629–31). Drawing on the results of numerous skeletal studies placed in dialogue with observations from textual and material cultural evidence, Sulosky Weaver argues that multiple aspects of peripheral social status (i.e. intersectionality) led to poor health outcomes amongst marginalised groups in Archaic and Classical Greek communities. Such finds indicate that the rising tide of Archaic and Classical Athenian fortunes, *sensu* the 'Greek economic miracle' identified by many ancient historians, may not have risen all.

AEGEAN HISTORY INSIDE OUT

Alongside a thorough embrace of doing Aegean history 'from below', a second major overarching trend may be conceived as a general disciplinary turn inside out, as views from

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the centre are eclipsed or at least increasingly well balanced by explorations of places, peoples and chronological periods that once constituted notional peripheries. Beginning with spatial peripheries, as noted above, scholars researching Greek history have traditionally – and reasonably, given the priorities implicit in that term – focused on the Greeks. Such research often viewed Greek initiatives as a prime mover in Mediterranean developments, such as the outward-bound population movements encapsulated within the phenomenon of Greek colonisation, the region-wide political implications of Greek resistance during the Persian Wars, Athenian or Spartan initiatives during subsequent intra-Greek conflicts, and global impacts of the great campaigns of Philip II, Alexander the Great and the Macedonian successor kingdoms. Recent veins of scholarship have questioned whether focusing so much on the agency and action of Greeks may have generated unsalutary distortions in general historical narratives, and alternative viewpoints from around the Mediterranean are emerging.

A particularly searing case in point comes in the form of C. López-Ruiz's forcefully argued *Phoenicians and the Making of the Mediterranean* (2021; cf. *CR* 73 [2023], 162–4). Drawing on a wide range of textual, archaeological and artistic evidence, López-Ruiz makes a strong case for repositioning the Phoenicians as the main agents behind the explosive economic and commercial growth apparent around the Mediterranean starting in the earlier first millennium, not to mention the source of several purportedly Greek innovations, such as the political form of the city-state. Elsewhere, the claim that Greeks invented democracy has been questioned from an eastern Mediterranean perspective, as increasing scrutiny of evidence from a variety of early contexts shows elements of self-governance and democratising ideas well beyond the shores of the Aegean (C. Horst [ed.], *Der Alte Orient und die Entstehung der Athenischen Demokratie* [2020]). A general reassessment of the relationship between notional centres and peripheries is also apparent in recent research on various regions of western Anatolia, which centres developments on the eastern side of the Aegean that have often been marginalised in traditional Greek historical narratives (see, e.g., papers in *Cityscapes and Monuments of Western Asia Minor: Memories and Identities*, edited by E. Mortsensen and B. Poulsen [2018]; *Ionians: Sages of the Aegean Shore*, edited by Y. Ersoy and E. Koparal [2022]). Even further additional cause for reconstructing a multilateral geopolitical world in the first millennium Mediterranean arises from work in the recently concluded *Migrations and the Making of the Greek World* project, funded by the *European Research Council* and led by N. Mac Sweeney at the University of Vienna. The project investigated processes of cultural development in several regions between 1000 and 500 BCE. Its preliminary results seem to support a scenario in which multiple scales and iterative episodes of population movement shaped every region of the Mediterranean, including the Aegean, throughout the early first millennium. Such results encourage the establishment of an inverted research framework that is open to identifying all manner of mechanisms through which non-Greek people shaped the trajectory of Aegean history, rather than assuming that influences mainly flowed outwards from Greeks to others. A large-scale, public-facing argument along these lines has appeared in the form of J. Quinn's *How the World Made the West: A 4,000 Year History* (2024), which argues that the entire course of Graeco-Roman and Western civilisation as we know it was borne of constant interconnection and multilateral interactions.

Such revisions occur in parallel with a concomitant enthusiasm for research that engages formerly peripheral chronological periods, as the linear grand narratives that long formed the basic scaffolding of ancient Greek history – and that elevate some eras as cultural high points worthy of greater attention than others – are subject to increasingly pointed critiques (A. Vlachopoulos, *Unthinking the Greek Polis* [2009], pp. 229–40; cf. *CR* 59 [2009], 507–9). The textbook account of Greek history has always been strongly driven by overall

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narratives of rise and fall, as embedded in the terms used to describe each subsequent era. From humble beginnings in the primitive Early Iron Age, the Archaic, Classical and Hellenistic eras divide Greek history into a tripartite scheme marked by adolescence and maturation, florescence and achievement, then decadence and decay. Rise and fall narratives also characterise the narrative structures that scaffold the diachronic narrative of Aegean prehistory, where spare ceramic chronologies are often garnished with culture-historical terms tracing the rise of complex palatial states and their eventual demise (e.g. Protopalatial, Neopalatial, Postpalatial). By signalling a situation in which certain periods are placed at the centre of the frame and therefore deemed worthy of more attentive research than others, such overarching narratives have tended to introduce many peculiar structural features into discourse.

For example, it is often insisted that the study of the Greek Early Iron Age is essential for scholars hoping to understand Greek history because this period served as the crucible in which historical Greek political forms, especially the *polis*, were forged. Scholars of the Aegean Bronze Age, meanwhile, often emphasise the need to 'bridge the gap' between prehistory and history, arguing that later developments could surely not be understood without foundational knowledge grounded in Mycenaean or Minoan political, economic and social institutions. Such arguments have definitely succeeded in cementing these periods as mainstream elements of Aegean history. The robusticity of research on the Early Iron Age, once dismissed as a dreary Dark Age, is evident in numerous recent book-length treatments, from F. Gaignerot-Driessen's *De l'occupation postpalatiale à la cité-État grecque: le cas du Mirambello (Crète)* (2016), to M. Rönnberg's *Athen und Attika vom 11. bis zum frühen 6. Jh v. Chr.: Siedlungsgeschichte, politische Institutionalisierungs- und gesellschaftliche Formierungsprozesse* (2021), not to mention the epic, two-volume *Companion to the Archaeology of Early Greece and the Mediterranean*, edited by A. Kotsonas and I. Lemos (2020), and the long-awaited *Cambridge Companion to the Greek Iron Age*, edited by J. Carter and C. Antonaccio (2026). Scholars working mainly on the Bronze and the Iron Ages now occupy posts in Classics faculties where this might have been unthinkable 50 years earlier.

Yet, some practitioners begin to see issues with a rhetorical position according to which prehistoric periods should be seen as mainly of interest insofar as they are formative or transitional, since such rhetoric subordinates them to the historical eras to follow. As C. Judson points out (*JHS* 145 [2025], 115–34), scholars now regularly use the name 'Early Greece' instead of 'Dark Age' as a shorthand for the Aegean Bronze and Early Iron Ages, but have thus far done so without critically examining the implications. While the former surely sounds less ideologically weighted than the latter, the new phraseology embeds an assumption that this period is mainly relevant insofar as it preceded some notionally more proper Greece. The editors of the *Companion to Early Greece* describe the term as a useful heuristic that is less unwieldly than other options, and this seems fair enough ('The Companion to the Transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age in Greece' does not exactly roll off the tongue). There is also at least some empirical basis for identifying this period as such, at least for those who might still choose to define Greek history as the history of Greek-speaking people in the Aegean, insofar as the earliest evidence for the use of Greek language in the Aegean dates to the Bronze Age. Still, Judson's general critique is well taken: seeing Aegean history through the lens of early–middle–late trajectories, which tend to align with state-centred rise-and-fall narratives and trace overdetermined paths from one privileged cultural or political high point to another, surely must obscure many interesting interpretive possibilities. The point is not necessarily to quibble about vocabulary. All historians are probably doomed to niggle about periodisation for as long as sentient humans occupy this mortal coil, and there is no reason to imagine that Aegean historians will escape

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such a general fate. More urgent is flagging up a broader recognition that jettisoning long-obsolete master narratives could have the powerful cumulative effect of opening considerable new avenues of discourse that centre periods traditionally viewed as being of peripheral or marginal interest.

That such discourse has already gained considerable momentum may be perceived in many recent research outputs that are indeed squarely focused on eras once seen as culturally or historically peripheral to Aegean history, such as the Postpalatial Bronze Age and the Late Roman and Byzantine periods. As in other areas of research, Greek scholars have led the charge. Exciting publications of Postpalatial finds include offerings from all over the Aegean, for example, from Naxos by A. Vlachopoulos, from Thessaly by V. Adrimi-Sismani, from Achaea by I. Moschos and C. Paschalidis, from Rhodes and the Southeastern Aegean by M. Georgiadis, and from the Argolid by J. Maran and A. Papadimitriou. Notable new titles on the Byzantine Aegean include V. Agrigoroaei's *The Culture of Latin Greece: Seven Tales from the 13th and 14th Centuries* (2022), F. Kondyli's *Rural Communities in Late Byzantium: Resilience and Vulnerability in the Northern Aegean* (2022) and E. Tzavella's *Byzantine Attica: An Archaeology of Settlement and Landscape, 4th to 12th Centuries* (2024). Moving even later in time, an especially eloquent testament to the opening up of Aegean history to previously unheard chronological apertures comes in the form of J. Hall's *Reclaiming the Past: Argos and its Archaeological Heritage in the Modern Era* (2021; cf. *CR* 73 [2023], 197–9). All this appears rather consonant with the general tendency towards openness and breadth in the twenty-first century field of Aegean history.

AEGEAN HISTORY AS HUMAN HISTORY

The themes discussed thus far cumulatively reflect a rather remarkable series of disciplinary transformations, as Aegean history becomes an ever more expansive and open field of inquiry. These developments probably reflect a broader intellectual milieu in which scholars of Aegean history feel increasingly compelled to justify their own existence. Since it is no longer uncritically accepted that Classical Graeco-Roman history necessarily matters any more than any other branch of history, practitioners in the field must explain to themselves and to others why they continue to merit the allocation of precious resources required to support research and teaching. It seems that a common strategy in the face of this imperative is to highlight Aegean history's relevance for addressing modern concerns and pivoting to focus scholarship on topics that speak to such concerns.

Perhaps not coincidentally, a parade of ambitious recent 'big' books marketed to non-specialist audiences seek to explain what Greek history is all about in general – and why the field remains relevant in the modern world. Some such works, for example R. Beaton's *The Greeks: A Global History* (2021; cf. *CR* 73 [2023], 182–4) and R. Netz's *Why the Ancient Greeks Matter: The Problematic Miracle That Was Greece* (2025), argue that ancient Greek history was indeed unusually consequential, insofar as some special characteristics of Greek society, like an open attitude towards countervailing and contradictory discourse, provide enduring models that may be helpful as we seek to concoct likewise tolerant, consensus-building communities going forward. Other specimens in this genre take a more critical line, seeking to excavate the reasons why modern historians have tended to position the Greeks as special – and exposing the essentially spurious and often dastardly reasons they have done so. An engaging treatment along these lines can be found in N. Mac Sweeney's *The West: A New History in Fourteen Lives* (2023).

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Whether arguing for or against a position according to which the Greeks were truly special, the conversations contained in such big books reflect a situation in which Aegean historians of all stripes regularly find cause to examine why and how the history of this region should be pursued – far more than they might have done a century or even a few decades ago. All such works, moreover, seem to cohere at least roughly into a conviction, lately given powerful voice in W. Scheidel's *What is Ancient History?* (2025; cf. *CR* 76 [2026], 73–8), that the study of the Graeco-Roman past is now best conceived as merely one branch of the bigger tree of global, human history (see also J. Bromberg's *Global Classics* [2021]; cf. *CR* 72 [2022], 347–9). An obvious implication would be that Aegean history should identify its goals as likewise similar to those that drive research in global historical, anthropological and archaeological perspectives. Rather than finding meaning in grandiose civilisational cycles, many such studies are focused on basic questions and observations about the many ways in which humans have interacted with their environment and with each other through time, often highlighting and celebrating the remarkably idiosyncratic, diverse and unfamiliar ways in which they have done so.

An ambitious work of global history following this sort of approach is D. Graeber and D. Wengrow's widely read *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (2021). While many archaeologists have taken issue with the details of the book, its main point is worth reflecting on. Graeber and Wengrow argue that the most interesting thing about the past is that it is full of unexpected episodes that do not fit the civilisational patterns and narratives that historians have often tried to impose upon it. These episodes, in turn, are important to recognise as proof that there is a wide – rather than limited – range of possibilities available to humans when it comes to choosing how we wish to organise our societies. Such phenomena are worthy of special interest insofar as they invite us to consider the wide variety of configurations (beyond hierarchical states) that human communities may successfully adopt, should we decide that hierarchical states are not currently working out so well for us. Moreover, they invite us to contemplate with new wonder and curiosity the messy, helter-skelter trajectory of human society as it has unfolded on Earth across the past 300,000 years.

Indeed, whether consciously or not, Aegean historians seem to be doing something that is consistent with the kind of globalising and curious approaches to the past suggested by scholars as different in background and intellectual temperament as W. Scheidel and D. Wengrow. It seems to me that Aegean historians now see the main goal of the field as the pursuit of human-scale insights into life during a variety of dynamic periods, each in turn full of evidence for innovation, experimentation, creativity and alternative solutions that are worthy of study on their own terms, wherever they may fall within the field's now rangy chronological and geospatial matrix. Reading works on the history of Aegean communities these days, one is not very likely to encounter a detailed treatment of the course of the Battle of Thermopylae; far more characteristic are explorations of the survival strategies of unruly subordinates and inventive communities solving problems through collective action, even though such historical swirls and eddies do not necessarily articulate with the mainstream that sweeps along our traditional civilisational narratives.

AEGEAN HISTORY AND CREATIVE HUMANISM

This brings me to a final point. Thoughtful recent big-picture treatments of why concepts like 'The West' and 'The Greeks' matter offer a salient reminder that historical writing is almost always ideological, insofar as it conveys messages that we historians think are important to set out in the present. If contemporary issues inevitably shape the arguments

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historians decide to make about the past, what kinds of arguments might Aegean historians decide are important to make in the current sociopolitical environment? Looking backwards across the last decade of research, it seems that recent such choices may have arisen in part from a desire to engage meaningfully in contemporary discourse about, amongst other live concerns, the challenges of building an ethnically and racially diverse yet harmonious society, the implications of economic inequality, and the impact of Eurocentric attitudes on western cultural institutions, challenges that surely loomed large in academic conversations during the 2010s and early 2020s. Looking forward, it seems to me that the challenges human society will face in the late 2020s and 2030s may arise most acutely from our technological milieu. Along those lines, and continuing with the vector towards emphasis on creativity and non-linear human pasts, I wonder if Aegean historians might increasingly be inspired to construct arguments aimed at convincing audiences that there is no match for the unique, creative, unpredictable power of the human imagination.

Here I refer to the widespread capitulation of academic administrators and some colleagues within the professoriate to propagandistic arguments being put forward by for-profit companies marketing the services of Large Language Models (LLMs) and associated Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) engines to students and universities. Such capitulation often comes paired with an appeal to pragmatism: an AI-driven future is inevitable, so we had better get on board or be left behind. As a committed humanist, I must respectfully disagree. Archaeologists and historians know better than anyone that the human past is full of instances where groups and individuals have rejected innovations for a variety of reasons (see, e.g., C. Frieman, *An Archaeology of Innovation: Approaching Social and Technological Change in Human Society* [2021]). Indeed, far from supporting a general model according to which the diktats of a few ambitious elites most often determine the course of human history, the trends outlined suggest to me that most Aegean historians now see something more like the opposite to be true: that the course of human history is more strongly driven by the agency of unpredictable individuals and intransigent communities determined to pursue their own interests, goals they often achieve by working creatively against the grain of elite initiatives.

In emphasising the historical role of creativity and unruliness in driving the course of Aegean history, I can hear the voice of the Greek historian turned (extremely creative) global historian Ian Morris, reminding me of the hoary Marxian chestnut that ‘men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please’ because ‘the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living’ (from K. Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* [1852]). Indeed, a great deal of research has dissected the tensions between structure and agency in human history and society along many theoretical vectors; it is clear enough that the past plays a role in shaping the future and that inherited reality constrains present action.

To my ear these days, however, Marx’s bromide sounds much more like a description of how LLMs work rather than an accurate approximation of human history. We need only ponder a few examples from Aegean history to appreciate that the power of the human imagination is far more unpredictable, wondrous and compelling than anything even remotely resembling the pablum regularly emitted by AI chatbots. No quantity of Mycenaean Linear B training data would equip an LLM to devise the playful little Greek poem about the encroaching threat of Aphrodite’s desire that someone wrote on a Geometric drinking cup at Pithekoussai in the eighth century BCE, nor would a model trained on Hesiod’s curmudgeonly agricultural advice ever conjure Thucydides’ ambitious approach to historical argument. Nothing in earlier Bronze Age material culture would lead to the natural expectation that a figurine-maker at the site of Phylakopi on Melos sometime in the twelfth century BCE would stick a horse’s hind parts where a human rear end should be, thus creating

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the world's first three-dimensional model of a centaur. Several hundred years later, near the end of the seventh century BCE, some Corinthian ceramicists came up with an elaborate and technically complex scheme to make roofs out of interlocking ceramic tiles after centuries of deciding that peaked thatch roofs worked just fine. How did such unexpected, non-linear turns and inventions come about? The answers to such questions are undoubtedly murky; they seem, however, largely coherent in describing a human nature that is not very predictable or entirely path-dependent. Instead, the humans we research are notoriously mischievous, sometimes naughty, often recalcitrant and always full of surprises, equipped with endlessly vivacious creativity.

The past plays a role in shaping the future, and so does our technological milieu, but one thing Aegean history shows us is that neither the past nor the structures we inherit from it wholly determine what happens next. Nor does the technology of the world we inhabit require us to engage with the physical realities that surround us in any specific way. The path forward always presents a vaguely bounded set of navigable possibilities, but it is humans who decide what exact course to chart. In an equal and opposite direction, the way in which we describe the past will vary dramatically depending on what sort of discourse we decide to construct; the evolution of Aegean history over the past ten years has laid bare the many benefits of embracing a sort of discourse that is open to complex historical unboundedness untethered from linear narratives. Whether the next ten years of research in the field will be as vital, exciting, innovative and creative as the last decade remains to be seen.

University of Toronto SARAH C. MURRAY
sc.murray@utoronto.ca

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