

# What is Ancient History?

*Ian Morris & Walter Scheidel*

*Abstract: Every society has told stories about ancient times, but contemporary ancient history was the product of two main developments. The first was the invention of writing, which made scholarly study of the past possible, and the second was the explosion of knowledge about the world from the eighteenth century onward. Europeans responded to this explosion by inventing two main versions of antiquity: the first, an evolutionary model, was global and went back to the origins of humanity; and the second, a classical model, treated Greece and Rome as turning points in world history. These two views of antiquity have competed for two hundred and fifty years, but in the twenty-first century, the evidence and methods available to ancient historians are changing faster than at any other time since the debate began. We should therefore expect the balance between the two theories to shift dramatically. We close by considering some possible areas of engagement.*

IAN MORRIS is the Jean and Rebecca Willard Professor of Classics at Stanford University and a Fellow of the Stanford Archaeology Center.

WALTER SCHEIDEL is the Dickason Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Classics and History at Stanford University. He is also a Catherine R. Kennedy and Daniel L. Grossman Fellow in Human Biology.

(\*See endnotes for complete contributor biographies.)

Ancient history is the study of beginnings, and is thus organized around two central questions: 1) how to define the subject matter whose beginning is being studied; and 2) what that beginning means for the world that the students live in. Across the centuries, the answers ancient historians have offered to these questions have changed significantly, largely in response to new evidence and new methods. But now, in the twenty-first century, the evidence and methods available are changing faster than at any time since the eighteenth century, and we should expect the answers ancient historians offer to do the same.

Ancient history has always been with us because, so far as we know, every society has had stories about its beginning. In the absence of writing, however, ancient history could never be much more than myth-making. Such stories usually describe the world's creation and peopling, as well as the origins of the particular group telling the myth. Since most adults in the world were still illiterate as recently as 1960, for most of our time on earth, these hazy,

---

© 2016 by the American Academy of Arts & Sciences  
doi:10.1162/DAED\_a\_00381

once-upon-a-time worlds – worlds which Aboriginal Australians describe with the wonderfully evocative term “the dreamtime” – were the only ancient history possible.

Writing introduced vastly superior evidence for antiquity, and every literate civilization has produced its caste of ancient historians. Remarkably, though, almost all of these groups did much the same as their predecessors with the available data, choosing a particular piece of their own ancient history and pronouncing it exemplary. The best example of this is probably the case of China, where, by the first century BCE, scholars had already nominated the sage Confucius, who lived in the fifth century BCE, as an ancient paragon of virtue. This anointing took place even though – or perhaps because – Confucius himself claimed merely to be reviving the virtues of a still earlier paragon, the Duke of Zhou, of the eleventh century BCE: “I transmit but do not create,” Confucius wrote, “I am an admirer of antiquity.”<sup>1</sup> Confucius’s popularity went up and down, but until well into the twentieth century, the texts attributed to him remained at the center of elite education in China.

In this way, each civilization produced its own version of exemplary ancient history, and until the eighteenth century, no serious challenge to this way of thinking about the distant past appeared. Only then, and only in Western Europe, did new facts make such stories of beginnings seem inadequate, and thinkers responded by coming up with two new ideas that have dominated ancient history ever since. The basic problem – and opportunity – was that ever since Marco Polo came back from Cathay in 1295, evidence had accumulated that there were things in heaven and earth that just did not fit into Europe’s exemplary history; and by the 1720s, groups

of radicals, especially in France and Scotland, were responding to the anomalies by proposing a new paradigm.

What if, they asked, the hunter-gatherers and herders that missionaries, traders, and conquerors had met in other continents were actually survivals of how everyone had once lived? What if, rather than representing the beginning, Jesus and the other moral exemplars of antiquity were really just actors within one stage of history? And what if history had really begun with a worldwide state of nature and had then improved, until humanity reached the heights of enlightened Paris and Edinburgh?

This wild new theory, which its champions called *philosophical history*, shook up salons all over Europe. But by the 1750s, it was already generating a backlash. Philosophical history, its many critics (particularly in Germany and England) observed, had not actually proven that humanity had climbed from foraging, through herding and farming, on to the current age of commerce. To them, the whole endeavor should really be called *conjectural history*, not philosophical history.

What was needed, these critics argued, was not just-so stories about civilization’s emergence from so-called “savagery,” but serious scholarship – like that being done at the time on the literature and sculpture of ancient Greece and Rome. Faced with the mass of new facts being generated by philologists and connoisseurs, conjectures about hunter-gatherers were revealed as not just unprovable, but also unimportant. What really mattered to these reformers was that two-and-a-half-millennia earlier, the Greeks had invented a unique civilization based on the principles of reason, freedom, and beauty. The towering intellects of ancient Greece – Homer, Plato, Aristotle, Thucydides – had wrenched humanity out of its long slumber. This, and not conjectures about Am-

azonian hunters, was the beginning we should be studying.

In one sense, classicists of the eighteenth century could legitimately be accused of trying to go back to an exemplary model of antiquity, but in another sense, they were moving far beyond it. They accepted the emphasis of conjectural historians on comparison with the new data coming in from other continents, but insisted that what that comparison actually showed was that the Greeks and Romans were incomparable. When Johann Joachim Winckelmann in 1755 contrasted the “noble simplicity and quiet grandeur” of the Greeks with the decadence of Etruscan and Egyptian art, he saw it as evidence for the complete superiority of the Greeks; and by 1808, Wilhelm von Humboldt was ready to go much further.<sup>2</sup> “Our study of Greek history,” he wrote, is “a matter quite different from our other historical studies. For us, the Greeks step outside the circle of history. . . . We fail entirely to recognize our relationship to them if we dare to apply the standards to them which we apply to the rest of world history. . . . [F]rom the Greeks we take something more than earthly – something godlike.”<sup>3</sup>

Unable to compete with classicists’ methodological sophistication and weight of data, conjectural history collapsed in the early nineteenth century. However, it is hard to keep a good theory down, and as information from other fields of scholarship continued to accumulate, it soon came back revived and revised. In the 1850s, Herbert Spencer, the first theorist to use the word “evolution” in something like its modern sense, argued that every field, from geology and biology to history and metaphysics, could be tied together in a single story of “the advance from the simple to the complex.”<sup>4</sup> Classical civilization was just one stage in a larger story, Spencer asserted, and “had Greece and Rome

never existed, human life, and the right conduct of it, would have been in their essentials exactly what they are now.”<sup>5</sup>

Many evolutionists, including Marx and Weber, granted Greece and Rome a bigger place in the story than this. However, by 1900, it was clear that *cultural evolution*, as the theory came to be known, was not going to collapse like conjectural history; it was able to organize far too many facts, and its theoretical frameworks were far too robust for that. The invention of radiocarbon dating in the 1940s and the calibration revolution of the 1970s provided a global framework for comparisons, and fossil and DNA data pushed the story of mankind’s beginnings back millions of years.

Despite the high quality of much of the scholarship being done on Greece and Rome, the twentieth century was one long retreat for the classical vision of ancient history, in part because evolutionism proved vastly more exportable on the world stage. Herbert Spencer was one of the first English-language nonfiction writers to be translated into Chinese and Japanese, and his work quickly spawned Asian imitators. European classical scholarship did have a significant impact on the methods of Asian ancient historians (China’s “Doubting Antiquity” movement and Japan’s Tokyo and Kyoto Schools all drew inspiration from European *Quellenforschung*, the philological analysis of sources) but its core claims about Greco-Roman exceptionalism were largely ignored.

Within Western education, evolutionary and classical approaches to beginnings coexisted, the former mostly colonizing the new social science disciplines, and the latter dominating the older humanities fields. But even within the humanities, the classical vision steadily lost ground. The University of Chicago, where both the authors of this article once taught, is a good example. The university is probably best known for its commitment to the social

Ian  
Morris  
& Walter  
Scheidel

sciences, but it has also been a staunch defender of the classical heritage. When the university was founded in 1892, it organized separate departments of Greek and Latin, because classics was too important a field to confine within a single unit; the Classics Building, which opened its doors in 1915, is still one of the finest structures on campus. However, by the time we arrived in Chicago (Morris in 1987, Scheidel in 2000), Greek and Latin had been condensed into a single classics department, and its denizens had been penned into one corner of the second floor. There were rear-guard actions, to be sure: In 1948, the history department began offering a wildly popular course on the history of Western civilization (which both of us once taught). This year-long sequence, running – as student wisdom put it – from Plato to NATO, was required for all undergraduates for decades. Even in the 1980s, by which time the course was optional, most students took it anyway, and some still camped out overnight to get into their preferred sections. In 2003, however, the university closed it down.

In the mid-2010s, the sheer bulk of archaeological evidence organized by evolutionary models, the elegance of evolutionary theory, and the rhetorical power of narratives like Jared Diamond's *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997) or Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens* (2011) seem to have won over educated opinion.<sup>6</sup> Now, the origin story that seems to matter most began not in first-millennium-BCE Greece and Rome, but with the invention of agriculture in the Middle East more than ten thousand years ago, or the evolution in Africa of modern humans more than one hundred thousand years ago, or of the genus *Homo* nearly three million years ago.

Given this view of history, Greece and Rome might be interesting topics, but they just are not very important ones. In Morton Fried's anthropological classic *The Evolu-*

*tion of Political Society* (1967), read by tens of thousands of college students, Greece and Rome each show up on just three of the 270 pages. They fare better in David Christian's hugely influential world history *Maps of Time* (2004), each cropping up sixteen times – but that book has 642 pages.<sup>7</sup>

And yet at Stanford, where both of us now teach, nineteen of the twenty-seven professors whose research focuses on any aspect of humanity before AD 600 work chiefly on Greece and Rome. Our casual survey of websites suggests that Stanford is in no way unusual; many American universities devote twice as many faculty to Greece and Rome as they do to the rest of the ancient world combined. Even if the lopsided distribution of resources is, in large part, a matter of institutional inertia, the battle over beginnings that opened in eighteenth-century Europe is clearly far from over.

That said, it might be time to take the battle in a new direction.

One of the most remarkable things about the 250-year-long back and forth between evolutionary and classical models of ancient history is how little each side has engaged with the other's arguments. This is most obvious in the classical model, which willfully ignores millions of years of history along with most societies that have ever existed. A century ago, classical historians regularly claimed that Greece and Rome were the beginning of the history that mattered, but nowadays the very few who do so tend to be dismissed as reactionaries or racists. Most classicists seem to be getting on with careful research, without worrying too much about the wider significance of their work, even though this seems likely to ensure the classical model's continued retreat.

However, a similar dynamic is at play within the evolutionary model. No one

familiar with conventional history could fail to be struck by the way that evolutionary histories tend to have a lot to say about the agricultural revolution and the origins of states, and about the integration of the world in the early-modern period and the subsequent industrial revolution, but very little about anything that transpired in between. The geographer Alfred Crosby apparently speaks for many when he says, in his wonderful book *Ecological Imperialism*, that “between [2500 BCE] and [the] time of development of the societies that sent Columbus and other voyagers across the oceans, roughly four thousand years passed, during which little of importance happened.”<sup>8</sup>

This flyover zone, of course, includes almost all of recorded history. It saw the world’s population increase one hundred-fold, the largest cities grow twentyfold, and writing, markets, money, wealth, inequality, empires, war, institutional capacity, and the stock of knowledge each transform the human experience. A version of history with a blind spot that obscures all of these changes is arguably little better than a version that cannot see anything outside the history of Greece and Rome.

It seems to us that this peculiarity of evolutionary history confronts classical historians – whichever part of the world they may work on – with both an opportunity and an obligation to respond. Evolutionary historians often seem to imply (or, in Crosby’s case, state explicitly) that once agriculture began in the Near East after 9600 BCE, everything else followed automatically, with cultural differences counting for little. This is a huge claim to make, with enormous implications for where the world might go in the centuries to come; and no one is better placed than classical historians and archaeologists to find out whether it is true.

Rising to the challenge and obligation, however, will necessarily take classical his-

torians far beyond the field’s established comfort zone. Deep knowledge of particular cultures and mastery of their languages will remain important, but perhaps no more so than broad knowledge of world archaeology, quantitative methods, the social sciences, linguistics, and evolutionary theory. Conventional boundaries between prehistory and ancient history, ancient and medieval history, and cultural traditions will lose much of their meaning.

Equally important, engaging with the evolutionary vision will have consequences for how ancient historians are taught. Currently, in most institutions of higher learning, ancient history is part of a humanistic curriculum, emphasizing languages and the details of a specific literary, historical, artistic, and philosophical tradition. Simply adding more requirements to graduate programs that are already too long does not seem like a very good solution, but neither does turning training on its head, and abandoning the knowledge of primary sources and particulars that has always been classical history’s strength in favor of the training that comparativists receive in the social sciences.

Possibly the least poor compromise would be to approach ancient history in a manner similar to how anthropology used to be taught. A graduate student interested in, say, how politics functioned in prestate societies was not expected to learn everything that could be known about every acephalous group on earth. He or she might, instead, combine a broad cross-cultural survey with immersion in one specific group, learning its languages, living among its people, eating its food, and catching its diseases. Insights, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz once suggested, are not made by “regarding a remote locality as the world in a teacup or as the sociological equivalent of a cloud chamber,” but by recognizing that “small facts speak to large issues . . . because they are made



to.”<sup>9</sup> Studies of the size of ancient Greek houses or Athenian worker’s wages or the cost of raising foundlings as slaves in Roman Egypt do not have to speak to broader theories of how premodern economies work – but they can be made to.<sup>10</sup>

So far, the topic that has attracted most attention of this kind is probably the “Axial Age,” which lends itself to a variety of approaches that could potentially combine classical and evolutionary thinking about ancient history. Struggling in the 1940s to come to terms with the moral crisis of his own day, the German philosopher Karl Jaspers coined the phrase to describe the middle of the first millennium BCE because, he said, this had been the axis around which the world’s history had turned. From China to the Mediterranean, the centuries on either side of 500 BCE saw an explosion of moral thinking, producing Confucianism and Daoism in China, Buddhism and Jainism in India, and Greek philosophy and the Hebrew Bible in the Mediterranean region and Near East. This really was the beginning of the history that counted, Jaspers asserted, because this was when “man, as we know him today, came into being.”<sup>11</sup>

Jaspers did not gloss over the deep differences between Chinese, Indian, Iranian, Israelite, and Greek thought; after all, no one could possibly mistake Plato’s *Apology* for Confucius’s *Analects*. He observed, however, that all the way from Greece to the Yellow River, intellectuals began debating similar questions at roughly the same time. The new thinkers tended to be similar kinds of people, usually coming from the lower ranks of the elite and from small, marginal states rather than from great empires. They also tended to reach the conclusion that while the nature of goodness was indefinable, people could still transcend the evils of this world. Attaining *ren* (Confucius’s “humaneness”), *nirvana* (the Buddha’s “snuffing out” of

consciousness), *dao* (Zhuangzi’s “way”), or *to kalon* (Plato’s “good”) was a matter of self-fashioning, looking for the answers within rather than waiting for kings or priests to provide them. The secret, however, always involved compassion. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you, the Axial Age founders said, and you will change the world.

For some decades, social scientists seemed to find the Axial Age more interesting than humanists did, perhaps because the roughly simultaneous appearance of similar intellectual systems in such distinct cultures, without much evidence of diffusion, was easier to analyze in evolutionary terms than within the culture-specific frameworks that classical historians favored.<sup>12</sup> There were exceptions, but in the last few years classical scholars have begun claiming the topic as their own.<sup>13</sup> Few scholars have the talents to master the relevant skills thoroughly enough to become experts on the primary sources from multiple Axial Age civilizations (the eminent historian of ancient science Geoffrey Lloyd is the obvious exception), but there are other ways to approach the problem.<sup>14</sup> For instance, scholars might set focused studies of the Presocratics, *Upanishads*, or Mencius against the larger Axial background, or, more broadly, ask why there was no Axial Age in the second millennium BCE, or the New World.<sup>15</sup>

In their teaching and research, ancient historians deal with one of the most consequential phases of human cultural evolution, a time when modestly sized local groups of people – villages, towns, chiefdoms, and the like – were increasingly absorbed into ever-larger networks of cooperation and, more often than not, control. Models of social organization differed considerably, from small but cohesive independent communities to large but heterogeneous and highly hierarchical empires. The ancient Mediterranean produced both

of these outcomes in paradigmatic form: the Greek city-state culture, the largest of its kind in all of history, and the Roman Empire, the biggest empire ever to exist in that region, which, in an added twist, had grown out of a small city-state.

For several reasons, these developments are best studied from a comparative perspective. Since empires tended to appear wherever ecological conditions allowed, the driving forces behind the rise and fall of any one of them cannot properly be assessed in isolation. That modern scholars have managed to propose more than two hundred different reasons for the fall of the Roman Empire strongly suggests that conventional academic focus on just a single case is simply a dead end, and that comparative analysis of a process that occurred so many times in history promises far more compelling results.<sup>16</sup>

Moreover, the tension between city-state and empire as competing and complementary forms of sociopolitical organization throws light on a very big problem of history more generally: the relationship between state formation and human welfare. Our colleague Josiah Ober has powerfully argued that the pluralism of the Greek city-state culture delivered important benefits, especially when it sustained participatory democracy, as it did in classical Athens.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, one of us has found that human social development peaked whenever some of the largest premodern empires were at the height of their power.<sup>18</sup>

Understanding the costs and gains associated with different forms of macrosocial cooperation has been a major challenge across academic disciplines, and ancient history has much to contribute. After all, the modern West grew out of a highly competitive state system that had gradually emerged from the wreckage of the Roman Empire. Unlike in other parts of the globe, where failed empires were often replaced

within a few centuries by new empires, no comparable behemoth ever again took over all of temperate Europe. The Roman state and the Chinese Qin and Han Dynasties had built huge empires that became more similar as they matured, and yet Europe and China embarked on very different trajectories once these early superstates had failed.<sup>19</sup> The subsequent divergence between the periodic restoration and abatement of universal empire in East Asia (and elsewhere) and enduring polycentrism in Europe requires explanation, a task only made possible by systematic comparison.

Global contextualization of this kind forces ancient historians to reformulate their own questions: If the Roman Empire was unique, why did it appear in the first place? By privileging its decline and fall over its rise, have we trained our sights on the lesser challenge? Are there specific environmental obstacles to empire that the Romans somehow overcame – and how could we possibly hope to know them unless we also look at other parts of the world? Most importantly, does the lasting disappearance of the Roman Empire help explain one of the most momentous historical transformations, the Industrial Revolution, and the resultant “Great Divergence” between the West and the rest of the world? The reasons for this breakthrough remain contested, with some scholars favoring relatively recent or contingent factors and others arguing for the relevance of more deeply entrenched, long-term causes.<sup>20</sup> By fostering competition and preserving alternative pathways of development, did the absence of anything like the Roman Empire in the West prepare the ground for modernity?<sup>21</sup>

However one chooses to approach these big questions, both the Axial Age and the successive political and economic divergences between Europe and the rest of the world strike us as areas where twenty-first-century classical historians have im-

portant things to say about the beginnings of the world we occupy and where it might be going next, as classical and philosophical historians alike tried to do in the eighteenth century. But just as both these groups of scholars did a quarter of a millennium ago, if today's classical his-

torians want to make contributions to explaining beginnings, we will need to raise our game, master new evidence, methods, and questions, and recognize that the ancient world was much bigger – and ancient history much longer – than our predecessors made them seem.

#### ENDNOTES

\* Contributor Biographies: IAN MORRIS is the Jean and Rebecca Willard Professor of Classics at Stanford University and a Fellow of the Stanford Archaeology Center. He has excavated in Britain, Greece, and Italy, and published fourteen books, including *Foragers, Famers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve* (2015) and *Why the West Rules – For Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future* (2010).

WALTER SCHEIDEL is the Dickason Professor in the Humanities and Professor of Classics and History at Stanford University. He is also a Catherine R. Kennedy and Daniel L. Grossman Fellow in Human Biology. He is the author of *Death on the Nile: Disease and the Demography of Roman Egypt* (2001) and editor of *Fiscal Regimes and the Political Economy of Premodern States* (with Andrew Monson, 2015), *State Power in Ancient China and Rome* (2015), and *The Oxford Handbook of the State in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean* (with Peter Bang, 2013).

- <sup>1</sup> Confucius *Analects* 7.1, 12.1.
- <sup>2</sup> Johann Joachim Winckelmann, *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works in Painting and Sculpture*, trans. Elfriede Heyer and Roger C. Norton (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1987), 33.
- <sup>3</sup> Wilhelm von Humboldt, “The History of the Decline and Fall of the Greek Republics” (1808), sec. 1, as cited in *Humanist Without Portfolio: An Anthology of the Writings of Wilhelm von Humboldt*, ed. Marianne Cowan (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), 79.
- <sup>4</sup> Herbert Spencer, “Progress: Its Law and Cause,” *Westminster Review* 67 (1857): 465.
- <sup>5</sup> Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography*, vol. 2 (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904), 43.
- <sup>6</sup> Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997); and Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015).
- <sup>7</sup> Morton Fried, *The Evolution of Political Society* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967); and David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).
- <sup>8</sup> Alfred Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900 – 1900*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 42.
- <sup>9</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 23.
- <sup>10</sup> We have immodestly chosen examples from our own work and that of Richard Saller, our colleague and collaborator, formerly at Chicago and currently at Stanford. See Ian Morris, “Economic Growth in Ancient Greece,” *Journal of Institutional and Theoretical Economics* 160 (4) (2004): 709 – 742; Walter Scheidel, “Real Wages in Early Economies: Evidence for Living Standards from 1800 BCE to 1300 CE,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 53 (3) (2010): 425 – 462; and Richard Saller, “Human Capital and Economic Growth,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Roman Economy*, ed. Walter Scheidel (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 73, 85.
- <sup>11</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1953), 1.



- <sup>12</sup> See Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986); Johann P. Arnason, Shmuel N. Eisenstadt, and Björn Wittrock, eds., *Axial Civilizations and World History* (Leiden: Brill, 2003); Robert Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2011); and Robert Bellah and Hans Joas, eds., *The Axial Age and its Consequences* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2012).
- <sup>13</sup> See especially *Dædalus* 104 (2) (Spring 1975), “Wisdom, Revelation, and Doubt: Perspectives on the First Millennium B.C.”
- <sup>14</sup> Geoffrey Lloyd, *Adversaries and Authorities: Investigations into Ancient Greek and Chinese Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Geoffrey Lloyd, *The Ambitions of Curiosity: Understanding the World in Ancient Greece and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Geoffrey Lloyd, *Ancient Worlds, Modern Reflections: Philosophical Perspectives on Greek and Chinese Science and Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); and Geoffrey Lloyd and Nathan Sivin, *The Way and the Word: Science and Medicine in Early China and Greece* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2002).
- <sup>15</sup> For the thoughts of one of us on the latter questions, see Ian Morris, *Why the West Rules – For Now: The Patterns of History, and What They Reveal About the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 254–263; and Nicolas Baumard, Alexandre Hyafil, Ian Morris, and Pascal Boyer, “Increased Affluence Explains the Emergence of Ascetic Wisdoms and Moralizing Religions,” *Current Biology* 25 (1) (2015): 10–15.
- <sup>16</sup> See the 210 factors identified in Alexander Demandt, *Der Fall Roms: Die Auflösung des Römischen Reiches im Urteil der Nachwelt* (Munich: C.H. Beck Verlag, 1984), 695; and Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vols. 4–6 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939). Toynbee’s work embraced a global vision of the fall of civilizations, but we have since come a long way in terms of both methodology and factual knowledge.
- <sup>17</sup> See, most recently, Josiah Ober, *The Rise and Fall of Classical Greece* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2015).
- <sup>18</sup> Morris, *Why the West Rules – For Now*, especially pages 281, 332, and 385 for notes on the period up to 1500 CE.
- <sup>19</sup> Walter Scheidel, ed., *Rome and China: Comparative Perspectives on Ancient World Empires* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); and Walter Scheidel, ed., *State Power in Ancient China and Rome* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- <sup>20</sup> Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000); and Peer Vries, *Escaping Poverty: The Origins of Modern Economic Growth* (Vienna: Vienna University Press, 2013). Vries offers the most comprehensive survey of the debate.
- <sup>21</sup> One of us very much thinks so. See Walter Scheidel, *Escape from Rome: The Death of an Empire and the Birth of the Modern West* (forthcoming Princeton University Press).