

*Andrija Banović i Igor Krnjeta*

# Intervju s Nevilleom Morleyem

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*Profesor Neville Morley je profesor klasičnih studija i stare povijesti na Sveučilištu u Exeteru. Njegovi stručni interesi su usmjereni na ekonomsku i socijalnu historiju klasične civilizacije, teorijske i metodološke pristupe staroj povijesti te naposljetku fenomen recepcije antičkih tekstova i njihov utjecaj na suvremeni svijet sa posebnim istraživačkim fokusom na Tukididovu pisanu ostavštinu i njezin utjecaj.*

Profesor Morley je održao predavanje na Filozofskom fakultetu Sveučilišta u Zagrebu 27. listopada 2017. na temu „Tukidid i ideja povijesti“. Nakon predavanja, profesor je pristao sa nama podijeliti svoje misli o istraživanju antičkoga svijeta i o njegovim odjecima na modernu historiografsku misao i javno mnijenje.

***Napomena: Dijelovi intervjuja su prerađeni poradi sažetosti i jasnoće.***

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**PT: First of all, thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. We would like to ask you what exactly sparked your interest in ancient history, especially the theory and methodology of the field.**

NM: It's a long and slightly complicated story. I was always going to be a historian, but not originally an ancient historian. I did study Latin and Greek at school, and I did first encounter Thucydides – one of my particular interests – then. And I had an interest in methodological questions at that point because I was studying the beginning of his work where he talks about how *he* does history. And I had many questions about it: Why does he say this, this is *not* right. This is not how you do it. I then went on mainly to study medieval history until I – in my final year of bachelor studies, there wasn't very much medieval history on offer, so I felt I would have

to do a lot of modern history – which didn't appeal to me – unless I changed my degree program to focus on ancient history. And at that point that felt more appealing, and I then just carried on in that direction. My focus for a long time – and it's still a topic I spend quite a lot of time on – was on ancient economic history. Which always raises methodological questions because the ancients did not have economics or any concept of an economy. So there are always debates about whether we can understand their world in modern terms... How do we use modern concepts... So I think it began with that. And then it made sense that I took on the teaching of courses focused on theory and methodology, and so my interest developed further in that way.

**PT: One question that seems to always be a point of contention: When does ancient history start and when does it end? Is there anything resembling a consensus in the academic community?**

NM: No. There are... tendencies. I think you could map the subject and you would see that most people operate in the same general area. So ancient history mainly begins 6th to 5th century BCE. And then, at the other end, it mainly starts to fade away at the fifth, sixth century CE and blurs into early medieval history. But those are not fixed boundaries; that's just where most people are working. There is always quite a lot of work which would take the period earlier or take it later. And, well, all chronological boundaries are arbitrary and mostly meaningless. You can draw the boundaries in different places depending on what you think is important, but that is always potentially misleading as well. So when did the Roman Empire come to an end? Actually, a case can be made that it *still* has not fully come to an end. But certainly, it's not the traditional date of 476 – that's a meaningless political event. It's... I mean, I became interested in debates about chronology, and what are the consequences of trying to draw all these lines. So the traditional dates for ancient history were mainly defined by the tradition of idealizing classical culture, and particularly literature. Ancient history traditionally begins in the fifth century because that's where we start getting Thucydides and the dramatic poets, that's when we get the sculptures on the Parthenon. But of course you also have Homer several centuries earlier. Traditionally, it comes to an end in late antiquity because that is felt to be less "properly classical". You know, the poetry isn't as good, it's all becoming Christian. The art is declining. But clearly these are simply value judgments. Which, from a historical point of view, often are not helpful.

**PT: Yes. And ancient historians are hardly the only ones who have a similar situation regarding periodization. Regarding this matter, our studies here are organized around the concept of periods, specifically ancient history, the Middle Ages, the early modern period and modern and contemporary history. Do you find that such a division contributes to history in a**

**positive or negative manner?**

NM: Oh! “Both” would be the obvious answer. We have to break things down into smaller bits because otherwise it’s too big to comprehend. As historians we know that the modern period is different from the pre-modern period in lots of important ways. So it always makes sense to break history up into smaller parts to study them in depth. But it also always makes sense to look at the periods of change in different ways so as to look precisely at these supposed boundaries. And to think about what changed from one to the other. Why did it change? Why are they different? And to emphasize all the ways in which actually there is always continuity. So I think it’s a practical necessity; where there is a problem is if we believe it is anything *more* than just a practical necessity. And there is a problem if specialists in each area talk only to themselves. So I think you cannot fully understand antiquity... Certainly you cannot fully understand late antiquity unless you talk to the medieval specialists who carry on from where you as an ancient historian are, and compare and contrast. Early modernists have to have some understanding of what comes before and what comes after. And also there is always scope for different divisions. Economic history often does not follow the same boundaries. So it does not always make sense to divide ancient economic history from medieval economic history – except in practice that happens so often. But that can be a problem if you... if you believe that everything changes because there is an arbitrary line between one section and the next. As long as we remember that it’s arbitrary and to use that as a point for communication and debate it should be fine.

**PT: Something similar to what Le Goeff said in his latest book.**

NM: (laughter) Well, yes, of course I have to say I’m something of a disciple of Braudel. So I think all of this as a sort of, you know, trivial history of events nonsense, actually in the long term it’s the same thing and that the changes are exaggerated...

**PT: (laughter) And somewhat over here too, so...**

NM: Right. But certainly a lot of the periodization is very focused on the political side of things, which, often, is quite irrelevant to other areas of life.

**PT: Ok, on the example of ancient history: Are we sometimes guilty of overspecialization? For example, is it necessary for Egyptology to be a separate academic field from ancient history? Or a subfield, if you will.**

NM: I think we are often guilty of overspecialization or, I suppose, of... making the boundaries too concrete and too fixed. I think we need specialists in particular areas. But they then need to talk to specialists in other areas. I mean, I would say that research should always be collab-

orative, and the more collaborative the better, rather than the model of the “lone scholar must know everything”. For example, Egyptology has got lots of very, very, specialized skills and requirements. You’re dealing with a very unusual region, and it therefore develops quite unusual structures of politics and society. There are lots of ways in which Egypt is special, and especially Egyptology as the study of the much earlier period of Egyptian history is very, very, different from anything which mainstream ancient history would do. Studying Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt is less separated, but it’s still got a special set of skills, say, using papyrology. Now, I don’t think it makes sense for me to spend several years learning how to do those as a specialist, but I don’t want to be completely separate from what they’re doing. So it is partly that I need to know enough about what Egypt specialists do so that I can understand their research, and, ideally, that they communicate their research, not just among themselves but more broadly. There is always a temptation to, yes, to take refuge in specialization. You know, we can feel safe in an area where we feel we know everything there is to know. Venturing out of that area is always a bit of a risk, of seeming ignorant and having to confess that you don’t always understand... but I think, you know, that is actually essential. In ancient history I think we sometimes have an advantage that we do have a long tradition of being interdisciplinary, partly because the evidence is just so much more limited than for later periods. There simply has been a tradition of not just looking at ancient economic history but studying that through literary texts, putting the economic together with the cultural, thinking about it in relation to the political... comparing different regions. So I think we have some, actually, quite strong advantages in some ways. Whereas if we had more evidence it would be easier for us just to sit in our archive and not look at anything else.

**PT: That actually answers two of our questions regarding interdisciplinary approaches, so thank you. (laughter) For the next question, if you could provide us, in short, with a general opinion on the state of historiography, and specifically, ancient history. Do you ever find that theory or methodology are neglected in ancient history?**

NM: I think they are less neglected than they used to be. When I was studying back in the late 1980s, early 1990s, there was a tradition of a theoretically informed ancient history, but it was quite marginal. It was a sort of a distinctive set of scholars in different countries. Who were influential, but certainly not the mainstream. I think, you know, that, thirty-odd years ago, the mainstream of ancient history, at least in the countries whose scholarships I know well, was quite anti-theoretical. And there were some very fierce arguments in the 1980s and 1990s over the status of theory, in the sense that theory was dangerous and theory was anti-historical and so forth. That sort of view does continue, but I do think it’s become less dominant. That more historians are much more conscious of methodological issues and that they may not focus on this as a topic, but that they will pay attention to it in setting up their research... in some areas

more than others. I think there are areas of ancient history where it's almost impossible to avoid contact with theory and methodology. So anything on the social and economic side, and much work on the cultural side. It's taken entirely for granted. There are some topics which are still often done in a more traditional manner: some political history, some military history... there is still a tradition of very, very old fashioned biographical history, where theory appears to be entirely absent. But mostly I think the balance is between sort of *more or less* theoretical. So, you know, how important theory is, rather than whether there is any at all.

**PT: Going back to the question of an interdisciplinary approach: What are your thoughts on what would be the official distinction between ancient history and classical archaeology, especially since archaeology, since the processualist revolution in archaeology especially, has taken a more anthropological turn, and started to intertwine with the goals and interests of ancient history?**

NM: Oh, that's a really, really difficult question. I think it does... it does relate mainly to the identity of classical archaeology. I think that, within ancient history today, there is a general awareness of the importance of material evidence for very many topics. Not automatically, but again, because we don't have all the evidence we would like. I think people working in social history would pay attention to, say, the layout of houses, or what we know about the physical infrastructure of Roman towns, things like that. You can't study ancient economic history without studying pottery and amphorae and so forth. So, from the ancient history side, material evidence is taken for granted in most areas. Where there is room for debate is that classical archaeology as a discipline contains very, very different sorts of activity. So there is classical archaeology which is barely distinguishable from the archaeology of any other period. You know, it's fully engaged with processual, post-processual theoretical approaches, its practitioners could happily sit in any archaeology department without being out of place. It's a bit... I mean, I sometimes refer to myself as a historian who does ancient things rather than as an ancient historian. I think that's certainly true of some archaeologists, you know. They are archaeologists who study classical material rather than being a special sort of archaeologist. But there is still a tradition of classical archaeology which is text-led. Which was always its problem – that people have begun with the texts, they've begun with the questions asked by classicists and historians. And they have then orientated their research like that. So, I mean, I've always felt this in looking at survey evidence from Italy, or any sort of archaeological evidence from Italy, that there was always a tendency that you would find a layer of destruction, and then try to find the nearest available battle, so that you could date that layer of destruction. Now that's an absurd idea. Because, you know, a villa could burn down for many different reasons. But it's a mode of thinking driven by a historical framework. In the same way, it's the constant assumption that if a site is being excavated

you want to give it a name. If a villa is being excavated you want it to be the Villa of Cicero or the Villa of Caesar. So the drive to tie everything into the traditional historical framework is a problem. It's not a major problem, it's just sometimes slightly silly. But that from the point of view of a mainstream archaeologist looks very strange – that there is a tendency to subordinate the archaeological evidence to the historical evidence, and to let the historians define the questions. Where I would actually say as a historian that I would rather that the archaeologists approach their material from an archaeological perspective, and I can then ask historical questions. Whereas if they interpret everything from a historical perspective, that may make their material less useful for what I want to do. So that can be a problem. But I think even more it is the tradition in classical archaeology which is more a kind of art history, so that there are classical archaeologists who are looking at material because of its perceived artistic value, who are studying Greek painted pottery in order to identify individual artists and their schools. And that, from a mainstream archaeological perspective, is simply bizarre. I think it is problematic because it means material is being valued for its artistic qualities. And that can have an effect on what is excavated and preserved. It can have an effect on which sites are excavated. It simply distorts the whole activity. Now I have to say I've never understood the fascination for Greek painted pottery, which may be my personal flaw, but certainly if the pottery is only understood as an art object, that's a very narrow and unhelpful perspective. And I think that does create problems. I think there is a tendency, of course, to condemn all classical archaeology, as if all classical archaeologists do that, as if they are all connoisseurs studying artistic development. Which is certainly not true. But it is the case that, yes, it's a specialized skill. It's... It fits rather awkwardly with what most archaeologists do, and what most archaeologists think of as proper archaeology. And I think that can be a problem. I mean, certainly when it comes to disputes within archaeology in very, very pragmatic terms about what post is advertised and what sort of person would be appointed, then these sorts of debates of “is this proper archaeology or not” can really be quite difficult.

**PT: Thank you. Could you elaborate on the differences and concepts between ancient history and the classics? What would you identify as the pros and cons between ancient history studied as part of history, and it being studied in the context of the classics?**

NM: I think the answer is again: It depends. There are many different ways of doing ancient history. It's a spectrum rather than an absolute divide. There are ancient historians who very clearly come from a classical background, and that can mean that they over-privilege the texts and the perspective of the texts. Certainly, if we go back a century or so, this is very clear. So the world is seen through the perspective of the upper-class males who wrote the sources. And that leads to a very distorted view of the past. But it's not... inevitable. You know, there are people who come from a classical background; they have got highly developed language skills which they can use for historical purposes. They may focus on literary texts as their particular area



of expertise, but that does not mean they have a false view of what those texts can and cannot tell us. So that's on the classical side. On the more historical side, there are people who come to ancient history from history rather than classics or who come to ancient history through a confused mixture. And I would say I'm... you know, I have a degree in classics... but I would tend to think of myself as a historian. There are certainly advantages in having knowledge of the languages, but often, engaging on the historical side is vital for having a broader sense of what are the interesting questions, what are the interesting debates. You know, I think it is absolutely vital that ancient historians engage with historians, and have a sense of what's going on elsewhere in the discipline. But I don't think we should cut ourselves off from the classicists either. I mean, classics can be seen as focused solely on the languages, but it can be much a broader approach, as in the German, *Alttertumswissenschaft*. So a general study of antiquity as inherently interdisciplinary... so that it is always literary and historical and cultural and archaeological... I think is one of the great things about it, potentially, as a discipline, it becomes a sort of a total study of antiquity. But, of course, that is an ideal – in practice there are narrow approaches which, I personally would say, are too linguistic, too dominated by language. There certainly can be a problem, when there is the idea that classics is superior because of the command of the language and that all of our other approaches are somehow secondary. Now that's a particular problem in Britain where knowledge of the ancient languages is strongly associated with a private education, with coming from a more privileged class. Not invariably, but there is a strong association. And classics has this long tradition as the more prestigious discipline, and others are seen as secondary or even inferior. I think that can become a problem, if there is a claim that one particular approach to antiquity is inherently better, or superior, or even that it is somehow, just sort of, 'Proper Classics'. *That*, I think, becomes a problem for the students... It becomes a problem for people working as academics if their interests and activities do not fit neatly under that label. Again, you know, all boundaries are artificial – they can be necessary. But you have to remember that they are... inventions. That drawing a line between different approaches to studying the same period of history... it can help but very often it can mislead us into having a very partial perspective.

**PT: What are your impressions or preconceptions on Croatian historiography? Is there a noticeable difference in approaches and topics of interest?**

NM: I simply have to be honest and confess pretty well total ignorance... I do not read a word of Croatian. I know about three spoken words of Croatian: "please", "thank you" and "beer". I am not at all able to engage with anything written in Croatian, and to be absolutely honest, I've never paid much attention to this region. It is partly the consequence of having had quite a traditional British training in ancient history. You focus on Greece, you focus on Italy, and then you tend, at least in Britain, to look westwards rather than eastwards. So I know quite a lot about Gaul, Spain and North Africa in the Roman period, and much less about the Eastern Mediterra-

nean. So – from this perspective – Croatia is this wild region up to the north of classical Greece and it’s – from a Roman perspective – there as part of the general history of the expansion of the empire, and the processes we sometimes call “Romanization”, but it’s not a region I have ever looked at in its own right. And I just tend to assume it follows a similar pattern to the regions I know more about.

**PT: That is perfectly understandable.**

NM: So what it is that Croatian scholars do with this material I simply don’t know. It may well be that this is something I ought to know about, but just haven’t encountered it.

**PT: That is perfectly understandable. We were simply wondering whether anything we do reaches Britain anyway.**

NM: Nothing I have encountered. I would certainly say, except for someone specializing in the study of this region, only if it is published in English or in another major European language, and more and more, sadly, only if it’s published in English. In Britain, fewer and fewer people read modern languages other than English. There is almost an assumption that because more things are translated, therefore anything which is not translated cannot be important. That is entirely wrong. I spent quite a lot of time in Germany and I know there is a lot of very good and important German scholarships which do not appear in English, but the perspective from Britain and the US is: If it is important it will be translated, if it is not translated, therefore it is not important. And that is true even for French or German. So with smaller languages... really not a chance.

**PT: Last question, I promise. What is your opinion on the currently ongoing controversy regarding the concept of race in ancient Rome, for example, when professor Mary Beard defended the cartoon which showed the ethnic diversity of Roman Britain? Would you say that the relevance of classics and ancient history is now increased because of the current socio-political climate in Britain?**

NM: That’s a really good question. I was involved in a small way in that controversy. I wrote a blog post which was also discussed. One of the things which surprised me is that there is a debate at all. Because from the perspective of historians of the Roman Empire, of course in modern terms it’s diverse and multicultural. The Romans do not conceptualise “whiteness” in the way that we do today, they do not have the same way of thinking about ethnicity and cultural difference, but it’s very clear that the Roman Empire is made up of peoples from all sorts of ethnic groups, there are people coming into the Mediterranean region from sub-Saharan Africa, from the depths of Asia and so forth. This is simply not a matter that we spend any time discussing. We actually focus more on detailed studies, so, for example, in Roman Britain, there have been



attempts at analyzing the mineral composition of bones to identify where that person grew up. Because you can identify isotopes and say: This is someone who is originally from such and such a region. There are much more detailed studies which ask: We know that there is an ethnic mix, but what's the balance? So the fact that this debate was actually about questioning the existence of the mix was really astonishing. It was as if ten or twenty years of scholarly research does not exist. And, of course, that is the problem, that the people getting angry about the cartoon have got a perception of the Roman Empire which is old-fashioned and inaccurate. There is a long tradition of showing the Romans as basically white and the Britons as basically white and at the most you might have some African-looking slave. So it may be that some people in this debate are genuinely surprised and shocked at things which the academics take entirely for granted. So there is a kind of a failure at communication of the specialist understanding to the broader public. And you could say the aim of the cartoon is to play a role in that education, and to say it is entirely reasonable to think that there were dark-skinned Roman centurions in Britain. They may have not been shown in illustrations thirty years ago, but why not show them now? But it is also clear that many of those getting angry about the idea are not interested in historical truth at all. That for various reasons they have got a strong belief in their image of Rome, and cannot see any reason to abandon it because it is partly just a matter of political conviction; so, from their perspective, the BBC showing a dark-skinned Roman is pushing forward a liberal, political-correctness agenda. That this is about making everything about race, that this is about pretending that the past was like that so that it can force people today to accept migrants. It comes down to that crude notion that they have, at times, a powerful and basically mythical idea of Greece and Rome as the foundations of Western civilization which must be defended... which must be defended against evil, foreign civilizations. And part of that involves thinking of the Greeks and Romans as our ancestors, white Europeans just like us. Anything else is an attack on that image. In the same way for the later Roman Empire there is, at least in Germany, France and Britain, a tendency to see white European Romans being overrun by terrifying hordes of fanatics from Asia, so a direct, very, very political comparison. And the aim is, of course, to say that, yes, everyone thinks that Rome is great – that's civilization, that's the birth of Europe and it is threatened by these terrifying dark-skinned foreigners. I mean, the problem is, they already know what they think, and they are not going to change their minds. They come up with more arguments to explain why the academics are lying. The question, and I think the problem, for the academics is: How do we make sure that they do not dominate the conversation? Do we spend a lot of time arguing with them? We know it's pointless for them, but there are others listening to the conversation, so perhaps it is a way of reaching a more general audience who don't necessarily have a very sophisticated idea of ancient history but would be open to persuasion. That they might think of the Romans as being white Europeans, but when they hear people like Mary Beard saying: Actually, the evidence suggests it's more complicated, they might listen to it. So, it's possible that this massive argument over the summer [of 2017] will introduce some people to a better understanding of the past. And I certainly do think it's the duty of specialists

to step in and say something, if we feel the past is being misrepresented and especially when it is obviously being misrepresented for political ends, I think we do have a duty to combat lies and myth-making. But I think we have to be aware also that this is difficult, and it doesn't always work. There's a particular problem that our professional duty is also to say that things are uncertain, that actually the evidence is patchy and not as good as we would want it to be. And, of course, for our opponents that's a sign that we are feeble, we are equivocating, we're trying to evade the truth. But I think for the integrity of scholarship we have to say that, even though it runs the risk of seeming like a less convincing argument. I think it certainly is the case that over the last five years, the classical world has become more politicized. It seems to me that there are more debates around these ideas, that Greece and Rome are being introduced into conversations where you would not expect to find them; the claims particularly of various alt-right groups that they are defending European heritage, and European heritage means, among other things, the glories of Greece and Rome. This is something which feels to me relatively new, that there is more of it than it used to be. So I think it is getting harder for ancient historians to believe that our work is completely separate from present concerns, but most of the time when it is being discussed it's being discussed in ways that are very problematic and worrying.

# Pro tempore

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Časopis studenata povijesti



# **Pro tempore**

Časopis studenata povijesti, br. XIII

Zagreb, 2018.

# Pro tempore

Časopis studenata povijesti

Godina XIII, broj 13, 2018.

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