

Multiperspectivity and Many “Faces” of Ancient History. Interview with Oswyn Murray

Oswyn Murray is a professor emeritus Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford and a member of several other academies. His main interest is ancient Greece, and he has published a number of important works in this field, such as *Early Greece* and *Symptotica*, in which Greek history and society were viewed from a variety of different perspectives. Murray was also the editor of *The Greek City* and *Oxford History of the Classical World*.

On May 21 2019 Professor Murray held a symposium on *Symptotic history* at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb, where he discussed Greek symposiums, including different aspects of this phenomenon. The symposium in ancient Greece refers to a separate part of feasts where after eating and drinking, the guests would enjoy mentally stimulating activities such as musical performances, poetry recitations, and discussing the issues of the day. We would like to express our gratitude to Mr. Murray for agreeing to an interview on the occasion of the symposium.

PT: We were wondering, why did you choose to study Antiquity? What exactly sparked your interest in the discipline?

OM: At school I wanted to learn Latin and Greek because they were the two most difficult subjects in the humanities, and therefore they attracted the most intelligent students and the best teachers. But I discovered I was better at history, which involves making connections between disparate objects and ideas, than at philology.

PT: In which parts of your work could one recognize Arnaldo Momigliano's guidance and his ideas? Which among his many lessons would you consider crucial for modern-day historians of Antiquity to apply in their work?

OM: Momigliano, professor at London, was appointed my doctoral supervisor because there was no-one in Oxford competent in the Hellenistic world. From the start I worshipped him, and we became close personal friends over thirty years. He was the fiercest of critics of his colleagues, but wonderfully helpful to those junior to him. You would go to him with a historical problem, and he never gave an answer; but five minutes of conversation transformed the problem, and inspired you to look for a new solution. Apart from the fundamental seriousness of true historical research, I think what I learned most was the importance of the classical tradition, and not to dismiss earlier scholars, but to try to understand why they wrote as they did. He knew everything, including what problems had not yet been solved.

PT: A couple of questions regarding your work. Would you consider your book *Early Greece* which covers phenomena such as inter-cultural exchange between the Greeks and the inhabitants of the Black Sea and Oriental regions as something of an antecedent to writing global history? Would you characterize the

Mediterranean world in the examined period (especially after many new discoveries since the book came out) as a proto-globalized sphere?

OM: Yes, I have been asked to write a new edition of the book, and it will begin with global history and the Mediterranean world as a place of interchange. It will start with the Minoans and the Near East, and include new work on the Jewish mercenary settlements in Egypt. It will also include a new chapter on the Persian Empire as a global phenomenon. These ideas were already hinted at in the earlier editions, but I did not know enough to write about them.

PT: What caused your shift from writing or editing "all-encompassing" histories or encyclopedias of the classical world and macro-historical works such as your analysis of Hellenistic political thought into more anthropocentric subjects exemplified by your work in the history of symposia? Did the *Annales* school and their focus on *histoire totale* and *histoire des mentalités* have any influence on your work generally or particularly on this shift?

OM: I began my doctoral work from a footnote in Rostovtzeff's *Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World* which said that research was needed on the Hellenistic theory of monarchy. My encyclopedic work was mainly a result of publishing commissions. The shift to the symposium is the subject of my talk on Tuesday; but yes it was inspired by the work of Vernant and the *histoire des mentalités*, as well as by the discovery of art history and the tradition of Aby Warburg.

PT: Speaking from a continental perspective where we mostly study ancient history as part of human past instead as a part of classical studies, do you think it is possible to study ancient history outside the framework given by the discipline of classics?

OM: The great advantage of studying ancient classical history is that one can seek to master all the relevant disciplines by the end of one's life: you can at least aim to create a total picture. It follows that these cultures being literate, one must study the ancient languages and literature in order to understand how they thought. Equally, one must be aware of other periods and their problems. So one must try to be both a classical scholar and a general historian. That is very difficult at the start, but if art is long, so too (with luck) is life. One should never stop learning new skills.

PT: In your opinion, what is the fundamental relevance of studying the classics and ancient history in the 21st century? Also, would you say ancient history has become more politicized in recent years?

OM: The 20th century was a disaster, as bad as the 17th in terms of persecution of intellectuals; the 21st century does not look much better. How can we save humanity? At least ancient history enables us to see a culture as a whole, without modern prejudices: the coals are still too hot in modern history. One thing I have fought against all my life is the politicization of all historical phenomena: that is just to falsify history in order to create a modern myth for the

worst elements in our own over-politicized culture. We should try to write a cultural history without politics, warfare, economics and perhaps without religion. My other great hero is of course Jacob Burckhardt, the wisest man in the age of nationalism.

PT: As someone whose career in the field of classics and ancient history has spanned more than half a century, what do you think how much was the discipline open to new impulses from other sciences and disciplines in that period? In which directions and topics of interest do you think the discipline will possibly be moving in the near future?

OM: We were fascinated by Marxism, structuralism, anthropology, sociology: we did our best to keep up with these our colleagues. People now seem to have retreated into positivism and technical problems, as if great ideas no longer existed. Perhaps they don't: if so, history will cease to be interesting. If there is hope, it surely lies in the crossing of frontiers between art, history, literature, and between different historical traditions in China, India – and perhaps in environmental studies and the biological sciences. I have been much impressed by the work of Stephen Jay Gould, also now dead.

The interview was conducted by
Andrija Banović
 (archaeology and history
 graduate student)
 and **Igor Krnjeta**
 (mag. edu. hist.)
 In Zagreb, May 19, 2019.



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Klub studenata povijesti – ISHA Zagreb
(za: Uredništvo Pro tempore),
Filozofski fakultet Sveučilišta u Zagrebu,
Ivana Lučića 3, 10000 Zagreb

Kontakt
pt.urednistvo@gmail.com