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Book Review 1

We often have a skewed idea of history. We see history as this singular timeline leading up to the present day, when more realistically, history is much more complex. More accurately, history is a variety of different timelines colliding and connecting and, all impacting the world as we know it. As opposed to viewing history as one-sided or mutually exclusive, it is important to view history in this way, as a web of different worlds affecting one another so that we can properly understand both sociohistorical context and its impacts and ideas that have lasted thousands of years. In Michael Scott's *Ancient Worlds: A Global History of Antiquity*, published in 2016, Scott, an associate professor in classics and ancient history at the University of Warwick, United Kingdom, asserts that a truly global perception of ancient history requires that we abandon a solely western-based vision of the past to, instead, include the significant connection between Greco-Roman civilization as well as the established empires of Asia. The political, economic, and religious spheres of our world today are results of the clashing and intertwining of a truly global past, and it benefits us to examine their origins in order to appreciate and understand our world. While he is successful in providing an accurate, detailed account of ancient global history, Michael Scott fails to draw upon specific connections to the present day when emphasizing the importance of his expansive view of history.

Scott's book, *Ancient Worlds*, is divided into three major parts which he believes really constitute the connections between the cultures of the ancient world. The first section details

foundational political thinking taking place in Athens, Rome, and China. Scott describes the influence of Athens' political structure on Rome, comparing and contrasting the two, while also throwing China into the mix, similarly drawing upon similarities and differences. Even still, while Scott mainly details the political developments and interactions, we see how the economic exchange between these worlds, particularly Athens and Rome, was inevitable: "Implicit in the narratives of Rome's transition from monarchy to republic are ideas, triggers and catalyst-like individuals that we can immediately recognise from the political intrigues of Athenian politics in the centuries leading up to the development of democracy. Nor should these particularly surprise us. These two cultures were heavily engaged with one another: there was huge cultural and economic contact between Greece and Rome during the sixth and into the fifth centuries BCE" (Scott 2016, 48). This quotation summarizes and highlights how we are inevitably inspired or otherwise impacted by the ideas of other people, cultures, communities, etc. because we are able to observe what tactics, systems, or and/or structures and what did not in order to create a flourishing society. The second section asserts how warfare reshaped the world, spurring both unification and destruction. Notably, warfare incited the establishment of the Roman empire and the Han empire and thus the connection between the two, paving the way for the Silk Road. Specifically within Asia, Scott details how it was not just for economic gain and power that the Silk Road began to be established, but legitimately for the survival of people and communities: "So it was by the end of the second century BCE, a meshing set of factors – a martial clash of cultures in central Asia and a subsequent expansion of Chinese power, a harsh physical environment that encouraged mobility and connectivity for the sake of survival, and the endeavors of human communities that appeared to have business and trade in their blood had led to the emergence of a concrete and official commercial chain of interaction across Asia" (Scott

2016, 214). Here, it seems the Silk Road was an inevitable result of people and communities trying to survive and thrive; it portrays how different communities need each other to weather the troubles of a harsh and changing world, resulting in trade of not just material goods, but ideas as well. Lastly, the third section focuses on the development and exchange of religious ideas within and without ancient worlds. The two large religions we see emerge are Buddhism and Christianity. First focused in the west, Christianity flourished in the Roman empire, ultimately spreading south and east. On the other hand, more widely practiced in the east, Buddhism took hold in India, then making its way to China. Above all, rulers of empires attempted to use religion to usurp, maintain, and/or increase their power. For most of the book, Scott focuses on man's relationship to man and thus groups of people's relationships to other groups of people, but in this third section, Scott shifts to examine the ever-complex relationship of man to the divine and how that, in turn, complicates, the other relations between men and groups: "Man's relationship with the divine had been recast in tandem with relationships between communities and between individuals. In Rome and Armenia, this had led to the definition of a single kind of Christianity being accepted at the expense of others. In contrast, in India and China there was a diversity of religious practice, mandated by the different religions inherent to the country, but also in China by the diffuse way in which Buddhism had arrived in so many different forms (not to speak of China's ongoing political fragmentation)" (Scott 2016, 338-339). This quote articulates how religion in the ancient world was not something exclusive from the rest of life; it was, and still is, inextricably connected to politics and broader culture. Religion necessarily has expansive implications, historically having to do with power and domination.

In his book, *Ancient Worlds*, Michael Scott is effective in widening the audience's perspective to include more than just Greco-Roman history, emphasizing its connections to the

ancient Asian world, but he falls short in relating why and specifically how a widened perspective has impacted our world today. He is specific in explain the history, but he is not specific in drawing connections to today. While he succeeds in explaining the importance of examining all aspects of history, it would be even more helpful to point out specific areas in which paying attention to global history has had current societal/cultural impacts. Scott is extremely descriptive, detailed, and organized in laying out the history of these ancient worlds of Greece and Rome and China and the rest of Asia, allowing the audience to get the full picture of what was happening in the ancient world. The information was definitely presented thoroughly which made me trust that the author was presenting accurate information. Honestly, sometimes I think I got lost in all the details and think that the author could have condensed all the details and gotten the same point across, perhaps even more effectively. Even though there was a plethora of detail and historical information, it was still well explained and easy to understand as there were no tricky, technical terms used, or if there were, they were explained or placed in a context where they could be easily understood. Because there was so much historical evidence and specific commentary and analysis, the author was Scott was successful in convincing me of his argument about the significant interconnected of the ancient western and eastern worlds and everything in between. The organization, too, being divided into political advancements, warfare reshaping, and religion of these ancient worlds helped to strengthen the argument in clearly articulating the connections between and throughout the east (Asia) and the west (Greece/Rome) really paving the way for the Silk Road. Ultimately, this book is extremely useful for historians in making sure they are considering an inclusive and expansive examination and analysis of history, understanding it is never one-sided, but that the entire globe is constantly connected.

This book is definitely an academic read, and I would recommend it to both undergraduate and graduate students in a general education history course/as a prerequisite for other history classes. I think it is especially useful in a course such as this one, *The West and the World I*, because it provides a firm foundation for studying the rest of history; it is important to have a strong foundation so you can properly follow the complex and convoluted, interwoven timelines of global history. In those academic settings, at both the graduate and the undergraduate level, I think the audience would appreciate the text because of its purpose in reframing our idea of history to include the connections of the east and west in the ancient past. Furthermore, I think that the author is qualified to write this book because of his position as a professor of ancient and history and classics, certainly having done extensive research and study in both of those fields which are literally the topics of this book. He is also definitely a credible source, having written and presented for National Geographic, History Channel, Nova, and BBC. I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in history in any way because of how impactful it is in widening the lens of ancient history, drawing upon the contexts and connections of both Greco-Roman and Asian empires and how they shaped the world we know today through political advancements, warfare, and religion.

Bibliography

Scott, Michael. *Ancient Worlds: A Global History of Antiquity*. New York: Basic Books, 2016.