Conducting Research in (Ancient) History

Introduction

Whether in the sciences or the humanities, research is always the "investigation or experimentation aimed at the discovery and interpretation of facts, revision of accepted theories or laws in the light of new facts, or practical application of such new or revised theories or laws".[1] However, as the humanities are usually unable to conduct experiments, as there simply is not a second world one can rebuild to test hypotheses, research is undertaken differently compared to the sciences. This is especially true for (ancient) history, as there is also a temporal distance involved. Up until the 20th century, most (western) historians were busy trying to establish fundamental truths about the past, inspired by Plato's and Aristotle's conception of truth as something that is different from the world we perceive, and thus something that must be discovered, but also as something that can be objectively determined once and for all through systematic observation and analysis.[2] This objectivity, and the idea that writing history is "moving ever closer to the objective truth about the past", led to the belief that 'historical facts' are "prior to and independent of interpretation" and can and should be discovered and added to the ever growing body of knowledge like bricks to a wall.[3] This *Positivism* or *Empiricism* has been criticised after the Second World War, and a growing body of scholarly literature has since been produced which is explicitly or implicitly based on and developing historical theory.[4] As a consequence, modern historiography is no longer simply the amassing of facts, but the interpretation of the past, having realised that there is neither objectivity nor truth to be established. Nevertheless, historical research continues to be rooted in sources (texts written at the time of interest), and results contrary to or in conflict with such sources are generally not accepted by the scholarly community.

Theory

Every piece of historical writing, whether the author admits it or not, is based on some sort of theory, some specific way to look at the world and to ascribe meaning to things. This is especially true for texts that attempt to explain or understand historical developments, the life of humans in the past, and the structures, cultures, and interaction that influence humans and are influenced by them. It is thus imperative to be aware of one's own perception of history, and to consciously and transparently employ theory when writing history.[5] While it is not necessary to devote hundreds of pages of each and every paper to the detailed elaboration on one's perspective on history, it is important to acknowledge and state one's beliefs about what drives history, how history relates to individual humans and groups, and from which perspective one analyses a given period, issue, problem, group, or individual.

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[1] https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/research (04/11/2019).

[2] *Cf.* Plat. *pol.* 514a–520e; Szlezák, Thomas A., Ideas, theory of, in: DNP Online, URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e522210 (04/11/2019); Detel, Wolfgang, Epistemology, in: DNP Online, URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1574-9347_bnp_e401610 (04/11/2019).

[3] Novick, Peter, That Noble Dream. The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession, Cambridge *et al.* 1988, quotes: p. 1 & 2. *Cf.* also Weber, Max, Wissenschaft als Beruf, Berlin 2016.

[4] Faber, Karl-Georg, Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft, München 1971, pp. 10–22.

[5] *Cf.* Dray, William H., Philosophy of History, Englewoods Cliff NJ ²1993; Lemon, Philosophy of History. A Guide for Students, London / New York NY 2003.

Practice

History is not the simple memorisation of facts, nor is all already established and it set into stone. On the contrary, history is made anew every single day, with every new critical interpretation of the evidence. Thus, apart from a few very basic issues, answers to historical questions are not 'right' or 'wrong' but persuasive or unpersuasive, coherent or incoherent, well- or poorly justified. In order to be able to analyse an issue within the domain of ancient history, and to present and discuss the result of this analysis, one needs to employ both ancient sources (primary and secondary) and modern literature, analyse the sources using a diverse set of methods, and put one's results in relation to the existing body of literature.

The first step in this process is to get an overview about what we know about the past, and on what this knowledge is based upon. There are many means one can use to establish such an overview: lexica, companions, handbooks, textbooks, journals, and books. These are the most important ones:

Lexica

- *Paulys Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (RE or Pauly-Wissowa), German, partially available online: https://de.wikisource.org/wiki/Paulys_Realencyclop%C3%A4die_der_classischen_Altertumswissenschaft.
- *Brill's New Pauly (DNP Online),* an updated and condensed version of the RE, and according to the editors "the most complete and most authoritative modern encyclopedia of the ancient world currently available." Available online in German and English: https://referenceworks.brillonline.com/browse/der-neue-pauly?lang=en.
- *The Oxford Classical Dictionary (OCD)*, usually considered the most important English lexicon on the ancient world. The 4th edition is available in the library, the 3rd edition also online: http://pm.nlx.com/xtf/view?docId=ocd/ocd.00.xml;chunk.id=div.ocd.1;toc.depth=2;toc.id=div.ocd.1;hit.rank=0;brand=default.
- *The Cambridge Ancient History*, a multi-volume work form prehistory to Late Antiquity, with longer entries on broader periods and issues written by specialists. Available online: https://www.cambridge.org/core/series/cambridge-ancient-history/010C506409EE858277F898C129759025.
- *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, according to the editors a "comprehensive collection of twenty-first century scholarship available on the entire ancient Mediterranean world". Available online: https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/book/10.1002/9781444338386.

Companions, Handbooks, and Textbooks

There is a plethora of such works available, the most convenient, important, and authoritative are:

- The *Oxford Handbooks*, available on various topics (Papyrology, Hellenic Studies, Roman Studies, Byzantine Studies, Numismatics / Coinage, Religion, Authors, etc.).
- The *Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World* ("sophisticated and authoritative overviews of periods of ancient history, genres of classical literature, and the most important themes in ancient culture", according to the editors).
- The *Cambridge Companions to the Ancient World*, syntheses of scholarly literature on a wide range of topics, written by specialists.

Most of these can be accessed through the Stanford Library: https://searchworks.stanford.edu/.

Journals & Books

The most up-to-date scholarship is published in journals and books. Many can be accessed—or at least found—through the Stanford Library. Journal articles can be found specifically through JSTOR (https://www.jstor.org/) or Google Scholar (https://scholar.google.com/).

Texts and Translations

Most ancient texts are available online, either in the original, in translation, or even billingual. The most convenient sources are:

- *Loeb Classical Library*: A collection of the canonical literature of ancient Greece and Rome, available online: https://www.loebclassics.com/
- *Perseus*: A digital library and collection of humanities resources, including many texts from ancient Greece and Rome, available online: http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/
- *Chicago Homer*: A multilingual database about the works of Homer, available online: http://homer.library.northwestern.edu/
- *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum (CIL)*, a comprehensive database of Latin inscriptions, available online (in Latin): https://arachne.uni-koeln.de/drupal/?q=en/node/291.
- *Inscriptiones Graecae (IG)*, database of Greek inscriptions, available online (in Greek): https://epigraphy.packhum.org/.
- *Trismegistos*: an online database of papyri and inscriptions, with links to images and translations, available online: https://www.trismegistos.org/. See also http://papyri.info.

Websites

There is a large and ever-growing number of websites on ancient history out there, some more reliable than others. While the internet and one's favourite search-engine can be very convenient in finding information quickly, most of the results one finds are not of sufficient quality to be used in history courses on a university level. It is thus generally discouraged to simply search for information through search engines, as many results are of dubious nature, even if they appear to be professional and / or legitimate. As a rule of thumb: if one is unable to determine the author, a website should not be used; if one is able to determine the author, one should establish whether this author has the necessary credentials to be trusted, and proceed with extreme caution.

While the two most readily-available non-scholarly online lexica (https://www.ancient.eu/ and https://www.wikipedia.org/) usually are largely correct on basic facts, they should not be used for more than looking up names and dates, or to find first ideas for further literature. They are not considered scholarly literature and thus should not be cited.

Working with Sources

Ancient sources are the basis for every historical analysis. The discipline of history focusses mostly on textual / literary sources, but historians also use epigraphic (inscriptions), numismatic (coins), papyrological (papyri), and archaeological sources. Each of these groups has its own specialists, methods, and limitations.

While there is a steady increase in papyri, coins, inscriptions, and archaeological sources, the textual corpus is largely constant, and, compared to modern history, small enough to be surveyed within one's career. This is due to the coincidence of transmission, as only a small fraction of ancient material survived until today, some of it transmitted consciously, some not. Especially sources from early periods exist only in fragments, *i.e.* quotations of other authors or actual, physical fragments of papyri etc. This creates unique challenges and frustrations for ancient historians, but also specific advantages.

A first challenge is the fact that ancient texts were not written for modern historians of antiquity, but for a contemporary audience, usually either to please or to convince. Thus, scholars must consider the genre of each piece of literature, and the possible intention and biases of the author, especially in the case of letters, speeches, memoirs, invectives, etc.

A second challenge when working with textual sources is the fact that these are written in languages no longer spoken, in the case of Roman history mostly Greek and Latin. Thus, most students will read these sources in translation, meaning that students experience the ancient world only and always through the interpretation of someone else. It is impossible to translate anything from one language into the other without losing some meaning and adding other, not only because some ancient words and constructions do not exist in the target language, but also because modern languages are constantly changing (e.g. "thou" and "you"). Translations are thus interpretations of ancient texts, as translators aim to enable readers to understand the ancient text, and not to reproduce the text as faithfully and authentically as possible, and should be treated with additional caution.

A third challenge to be addressed is the issue that many sources, while written in what we now call "antiquity", are actually decades if not centuries removed from the events they describe, especially in the case of historical accounts. While some ancient historians are diligent in their use of sources and tell the readers who wrote what when, it is quite often impossible to firmly determine the origin of the accounts, and thus their reliability.

A fourth challenge is the fact that, with very few exceptions (mostly papyri), there are no originals (autographs) still extant. Most texts are transmitted in medieval manuscripts, which themselves are often copies of copies of copies (…), often no older than a thousand years. Since the Renaissance, scholars have collected these manuscripts and compared different manuscripts in order to reconstruct the original. In this process, the older manuscript is not necessarily the better.

This editorial process in order to produce critical editions involves quite often some conjecture, or other decisions made by the editor, who determines the trustworthiness of different manuscripts; these decisions are mentioned in the apparatus on the bottom of each page. It is thus imperative not only to question these decisions made by editors, but even more to disclose which edition of the text is used, both in the original and in translation.

Working with Modern Literature

Much of what concerns the possible biases of ancient sources applies also to modern scholarship: authors write for a specific audience, have intentions, are in conversation with earlier accounts, are subjected to trends, and interpret sources to present a narrative or an argument. One can thus not simply rely on a single piece of literature (especially if the text was written in the 20th century or before), but must compare different accounts and ascertain that the text does reflect the most current scholarship, and to be as diligent in the critical analysis of scholarly literature as of ancient sources.