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The feasibility of a decolonized global archaeology in the ancient Mediterranean

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Corinna Riva and Ignasi Grau Mira have identified the nexus of several key issues holding back Mediterranean archaeology in the 1st millennium B.C. These are not necessarily issues *caused* by the application of Big Data methods, but rather preconditions that make this period especially susceptible to the pitfalls associated *with* those methods. These are: a long-standing ethnocentric focus on Greece and Rome, quantitative and qualitative variability of archaeological data, the presence of both text-rich and text-free regions and, I would add, more than 200 years of archaeological and historical framing within a heavily colonialist bias. Riva and Grau Mira rightly highlight, perhaps most strongly of all, the issue of ethnocentric bias and the centering of Greece and Rome in studies of the 1st millennium BC. Just as Athens, by virtue of an imbalance of data, long acted as a type site for the rest of the Aegean, so have Greece and Rome dominated Mediterranean narratives, as though they occupied the center of the world for every inhabitant of the basin.

Archaeology has worked diligently to shed the notion that the foundation of overseas settlements by Aegean Greeks constituted the wholesale Hellenization of the Mediterranean, or that the Athenian experience could serve as generally representative of other parts of the Aegean. Yet the Mediterranean in the mid-1st millennium was only very recently labeled a ‘Greek lake’ (Woolf 2020, 205) – an assessment that would have no doubt come as a great surprise to anyone living west of Sicily (or even Sicilians themselves). As the authors argue, a readily available, rich data set for non-Greek and Roman sites leaves no room to justify ignorance of the rest of the basin, and yet broad knowledge of Mediterranean regions is still wildly uneven. Studies of the western Mediterranean, highlighted by Riva and Grau Mira in their discussion of citizenship and urban belonging, are frequently grouped together in regionally specific thematic studies (e.g. Dietler and López-Ruiz 2009), or are brought together with examples from the central and eastern Mediterranean as part of collections of individual contributions (e.g. Van Dommelen and Knapp 2010). While these are worthwhile endeavours, it is uncommon to see the integration of data from marginalized regions of the Mediterranean brought into direct comparison with data from Greek or Roman contexts (cf. Steidl 2020). A point on which I would invite further discussion is, then, if Mediterranean scholarship remains quite regionally siloed in the 1st millennium B.C., is a decolonized global archaeology a realistic goal at the present time? And how might we best integrate studies of micro-scale diversity within discussion of broader trends?

I find much to agree with in the authors’ characterization of 1st-millennium archaeology, and their contention that a microhistorical perspective is essential to enrich global interpretations is well made (and most welcome). Their case study of citizenship and urban belonging clearly illustrates the value of high-resolution, bottom-up investigations of local contexts for destabilizing overly simplified narratives. The notion of south-east Iberia as an ‘anomaly’ with regard to citizenship in the classical Mediterranean, however, underscores the question of feasibility.

It is clear that use of the term ‘anomaly’ here refers to the specific framework of microhistory, and that the authors themselves do not view Athenian citizenship as a standard norm against which all other modes of belonging should be measured. But such a presentation of contrasting examples is a reminder of how deeply ingrained a Greek- and Roman-centric perspective still is. Riva and Grau Mira acknowledge the depth of this challenge themselves – they note, ‘This process of decentring and decolonization . . . has been put in jeopardy by recent Big History studies of long-term Mediterranean trajectories where the grand narrative’s preference for integration is largely for the Graeco-Roman world and the east of the basin’. The implication is that the Greek and Roman worlds remain at the centre, and ‘new additions’ made in the name of decolonization or decentring must be integrated with them, instead of the reverse.

Riva and Grau Mira’s emphasis is quite rightly placed on the critical contributions of microhistorical archaeology; the degree to which Mediterranean archaeology has been colonized by our obsession with Greece and Rome (Dietler 2005), however, means that many of the themes and phenomena explored by a global archaeology will have been established within the same heavily biased context. That is to say, they have been identified *because* of their relevance to Greece and Rome. Without great care, the exercise in one-sided integration seems likely to repeat itself under a slightly different guise. Riva and Grau Mira are, of course, no strangers to this issue either. They note that their analysis of citizenship in south-eastern Iberia is only possible because notions of Athenian citizenship have been dramatically overhauled in recent years. Even so, we are left considering south-eastern Iberian as belonging as part of a much broader, more socially rooted form of ‘citizenship’ instead of discussing Athenian citizenship as one form of collective belonging exhibited more broadly in urbanizing contexts. The difference is subtle, but the implications are great.

I do not mean to suggest that Mediterranean-wide comparison is impossible; on the contrary, it is essential. But perhaps a modified structure would be more fruitful. Instead of comparing seemingly ‘anomalous’ micro-scale examples to sweeping trends, like might be paired with like, and comparanda could be limited to equally microscopic case studies, evaluated through a shared bottom-up process. By introducing data from traditionally marginalized regions and contexts into direct conversation with Greek and Roman materials (or even eschewing them altogether), a more balanced knowledge baseline might be established. From that baseline, new themes and phenomena may be identified that hold more equal relevance for all Mediterranean regions. Once such a knowledge landscape has been established – one that is less overtly colonized by its very nature – a decolonized global archaeology of the 1st-millennium Mediterranean may be a realistic goal.

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From the Axial Age to the Fifth Sun. The articulation of the local with the global

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In 1949, Karl Jaspers published his enduring book *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*, a volume which set up one classic model of globalism and the local (Jaspers 1949; 1953). It is a book which posits a global, but causationally disconnected, transformation of the Eurasian world

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