



2021

Michael Scott. *Ancient Worlds: A Global History of Antiquity*

Leland Conley Barrows

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr>



Part of the [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [International and Area Studies Commons](#), [Political Science Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Barrows, Leland Conley (2021) "Michael Scott. *Ancient Worlds: A Global History of Antiquity*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*. Vol. 85 : No. 85 , Article 20.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol85/iss85/20>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Comparative Civilizations Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

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

Reviewed by Leland Conley Barrows

Michael Scott, Professor of Classics and Ancient History at the University of Warwick in England, who has written prolifically on Ancient Greece and the Greco-Roman world, has broadened his scope in writing the book under review to include consideration of the ancient histories of selected societies in the Near East, India, Central Asia, and China. Scott is motivated by the thought that, scholars, particularly in the West, have been provincial, treating the designation, ancient worlds or ancient history, as if Greece, Rome, and the peripheral areas with which they interacted constituted the sum total of the ancient world. Or, if they are aware of the “ancient” histories of India and China, they treat these histories as if they evolved completely apart or only evoke certain common elements: trade, systems of government, social evolution, religion, literature, concentrating them in what Scott calls “thematic silos” that may be strong in terms of comparisons but weak in terms of connectivity.

Today’s globalization has prompted Scott to set the record straight by exploring what he views as a much earlier globalization, that occurring in Eurasia, evolving from roughly 776 BC to AD 415. He has obtained inspiration from three sources: Karl Jaspers’ 1949 seminal work, *The Origin and Goal of History*, Gore Vidal’s 1981 novel, *Creation*, and the 2015 Chinese feature film, *Dragon Blade*.

Jaspers postulated the idea that during an ‘Axial Age’ extending from 800 to 200 BC, Greece, China, India, Central Asia, and the Near East, faced with similar circumstances, simultaneously and in parallel developed “new understanding and explanations across philosophy, science, religion, and politics.” Vidal, who combines history and fiction, has an imaginary Persian diplomat, a contemporary of Darius and Xerxes, meet and exchange ideas with Zoroaster, Confucius, Buddha, and Socrates. *Dragon Blade* features a fictitious Roman legion operating deep within Central Asia which collaborates with Han Dynasty Chinese forces to impose peace along the Silk Roads and founds a fictitious Roman city, the remains of which, uncovered centuries later, bear inscriptions in Chinese and Latin.

Thus inspired, Scott attempts to identify and describe similar but historically provable examples of parallelism, connectivity, and mutual influences in ancient Eurasian history. He accomplishes his task by citing and describing what he views as three key events in ancient history that are emblematic of three distinct eras. The key events are, respectively, Cleisthenes’ establishment of direct democracy in Athens in 508-507 BC, Hannibal’s crossing of the Alps into Italy in 218 BC, and Emperor Constantine’s victory over Maxentius at the Battle of the Milvian Bridge in AD 312.

The three eras, the descriptions of which compose the three major parts of Scott's narrative, reflect three sets of evolving political and societal relationships in selected ancient societies that were forged over time through, respectively, political evolution, warfare, and religious innovation.

Part 1 traces the development of types of government: direct democracy in the case of Athens, a mixed constitution in the case of Rome having aspects of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy, and in China, the emergence of Confucius' philosophy reflecting a beneficent government patterned after a well-ordered family in which everybody has his place. Scott details the political evolution of Athens from Solon to Cleisthenes and that of Rome from the overthrow of Tarquin the Proud to the adoption of the Twelve Tables in 449 BC and the stipulation in 342 BC that one of the two Consuls must be a Plebeian. Last, he presents Confucius as the antidote to the insecurity of the Period of Warring States in which he lived. Although Confucius' philosophy of government would be rejected by the First Emperor, Shih Huang-di, in favor of the authoritarianism of Legalism guided by which he would unify and expand China, Confucius' more tolerant theories and proposals would triumph during the succeeding dynasty, the Han.

The three chapters composing Part 2 concentrate on the warfare and diplomacy conducted by young leaders: Hannibal, Scipio Africanus, the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus III, Philip V of Macedon, and Egypt's Ptolemy IV; and in China, Shi Huang-di and, later on, Gaudi, the founder of the Han Dynasty. Rome becomes the dominant power in the Mediterranean and much of the Hellenistic world. The expansion of Han Chinese power to the West and the resulting pressure on the Asian nomads beyond lead to the 145 BC invasion of Bactria in what is now Afghanistan by the Sacas, "the first event ever [according to Scott] to be recorded in the histories of both East and West." Rome and Han China, the two large and triumphant empires at the western and eastern ends of the Eurasian landmass, develop the Silk Roads that will be "crucial for world trade" until the 16th century.

Jumping ahead four centuries, Part 3 describes how religious evolution in several selected societies strengthened governments over expanded and increasingly connected areas and/or offered solace in societies undergoing stress — like China following the collapse of the Han Dynasty. He details the processes by which Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Emperor Theodosius and of the Armenian Kingdom under its ruler, Tiridates the Great and *Catholicos* Gregory. In India, the Gupta rulers, who reunified much of the subcontinent, drew strength from a reformed Hinduism but also from Buddhism. And Buddhism, that was brought into China over several trade routes, particularly the overland silk roads, became well assimilated in the decentralized political environment prevailing in China for about two centuries following the collapse of the Han Dynasty.

Although a foreign religious/philosophical system, it became widely accepted thanks to its adaptability and compatibility with the prevailing Confucian and Daoist ideologies.

Much of this book consists of engaging and sometimes humorous anecdotes intended to illustrate the more profound points that the author wishes to make. The reader learns, for instance, of Confucius' disgust when Duke Ding of the State of Lu permitted himself to be distracted from the weightier duties of government by eighty beautiful maidens presented to him by his political rivals and that the founder of the Arian heresy, to which the Gothic tribes would be much attracted, died while using a public latrine in Constantinople. Scott introduces the reader to the difficulties of sourcing and writing ancient history. He points out that the ability to read Egyptian hieroglyphs was lost for 1400 years because the strict imposition of Christianity in Egypt led to a declaration that reading them was heresy.

Through concentration on specific episodes in the three main periods covered by his text, Scott has produced very good parallel or, if one wishes, comparative histories. However, he has not said anything particularly new or earthshaking about connective history more than what most students of general history will already know. Ancient Greece influenced ancient Rome in many ways. Thanks to Alexander the Great and his Hellenistic successors, Greek civilization influenced Indian civilization. Buddhism, a product of India, percolated into and profoundly influenced China. The Silk Roads carried Chinese silks to Rome and Roman linens and gold and silver coins to China. On the other hand, Scott has little to say about Africa even though Axum, the direct ancestor of today's Ethiopia and Eritrea, was the third empire, following Armenia and Rome, to adopt Christianity as its official religion.

A response to Scott's complaint that too often history or histories are presented in strictly delimited thematic and geographical silos is to remind him of the obvious reality that history as a discipline is so vast that specialists have to compartmentalize it one way or another. Scott himself is clearly a specialist on ancient Greece and Rome as demonstrated by the emphasis of this book and others that he has written. He is currently preparing a biography of Themistocles. The "three specific 'moments'" that anchor this book are all highpoints of standard Eurocentric classical history.

Scott seems to be unaware of the expanding development of World History curricula in secondary and tertiary education in the United States that are rapidly superseding the Western Civilization surveys traditionally required of college undergraduates. These courses plus the advanced World History courses offered in secondary education that lead up to the College Board Advanced Placement (AP) Examinations prove that in the United States World History is alive, well, and expanding. But it, too, is fitting itself into its own silo.

Definitely Scott's foray into global ancient history is a very entertaining read even if readers who are not somewhat familiar with the histories of the areas covered will need to fill in the gaps before, in between, and following the time periods that he stresses in order to make sense of what they are reading. One can legitimately complain that Scott sometimes treats myth as reality, perhaps to round out a good story, as he does with the account of Aeneas's tryst with Queen Dido of Carthage and the latter's subsequent founding of Rome — never mentioning Virgil and the *Aeneid*. Also, Scott's editor has let some strange errors stand like the claim that following the Council of Tyre in AD 335, the assembled bishops travelled "north" to Jerusalem to witness the dedication of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher. Scott designates distances, sometimes in miles and sometimes in kilometers. He fails to explain to the uninitiated why he never recognizes the Bishop of Rome as the Pope.

This book is valuable. In addition to being very readable, it is gently opinionated in ways that will stimulate readers to read further and to discover for themselves the richness and the varieties of World History.