



BIG PUZZLES, TENTATIVE ANSWERS  
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William Vernon Harris was born in Nottingham, UK, the son of a socially conscious architect. He was educated at Corpus Christi College, Oxford and, having fallen under the spell of Italy at an early age, started to pursue Roman history at the British School at Rome. He migrated to New York and Columbia University at the age of twenty-six and has stayed there ever since (apart from travels in every continent except Australasia). He chaired the Columbia History Department for six years. His most impactful books have been *War and Imperialism in Republican Rome* (1979); *Ancient Literacy* (1989); *Restraining Rage: the Ideology of Anger-Control in Classical Antiquity* (2002); and (he hopes) *Roman Power: a Thousand Years of Empire* (2016). In recent years, he has concentrated on subjects that overlap with the natural sciences and with economics (the environmental history of the Mediterranean, mental disorders in antiquity, the history of ancient money). He divides most of his time between New York and Pisa. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy. – Address: Department of History, Columbia University, 624 Fayerweather Hall, New York, NY 10027, USA. E-mail: [vw1@columbia.edu](mailto:vw1@columbia.edu).

In superbly hospitable and endlessly stimulating circumstances, I spent ten months trying to answer some large historical problems, and also some existential ones of purely personal significance. In neither case did I find clear decisive answers. On the other hand, one of the articles I wrote (which will later, like most of the other work I did at the Wiko, become part of my dangerously ambitious book about the ancient Mediterranean environment) was – how shall I say it? – one of the least dreadful articles that I have ever written.

I came to the Wiko with a large project about the environment still in its early stages and a secondary project that essentially consisted of refining and expanding a 64-page article that I published in 2016. The latter project – the history of popular medicine in classical antiquity – made very modest progress; I did little more than gather some new material. But the project is very much alive, not least because of the interest in it I encountered among other Wiko Fellows.

The reason why I didn't do more on this subject comes down to deplorable lack of foresight. I did not realize that any "spare time" I might have would be consumed by unplanned reversions to earlier subjects of research, in particular literacy. In November 2016, I was the keynote speaker at a conference in Zurich about literacy in the ancient world, and I had to write up that paper afterwards. Since I have been deeply involved in historical controversies about literacy ever since my book *Ancient Literacy* (1989), this distraction was hard to avoid. And I was able to discuss some new evidence, including just-published writing tablets from the first years of Roman London, in addition to making some methodological observations. And in my eyes at least, literacy is a subject of vital importance for the history of the classical world – not least because it is almost a matter of "making bricks without straw", as the historian Lawrence Stone said to me when I first worked on the subject. Should we idealize the classical world or try to understand the dynamics of its social and cultural development? Anne Kolb of Zurich is editing a volume in which my answer will be (re-)stated.

A year of relative tranquillity was nonetheless invaluable for my environmental history project. It gave me time to re-organize the project and identify the problems that deserve to be answered and can realistically be answered. An interesting tension has emerged that is implicit in all environmental history but seldom recognized: are humans at the centre of the story or not? Normally they take that role; indeed much of what passes for environmental history is little more than the history of what human beings have *said* about various aspects of their environments. And humans are taking up a very large part of my book manuscript – it was humans who cut down trees and planted things; even in the case of climate, which was only to a limited degree affected by anthropogenic change in antiquity, humans come in, not only because they were (of course) affected by climate change but because big theories have been built on that fact (a new book just coming out with a leading academic publisher in the US argues that climate change caused the fall of the Roman Empire – which is nonsense, I think). Human diet, human migration, and human exploitation of metal resources are all topics that I worked on at the Wiko. Questions about agency and technology are insistent.

Nonetheless, an environmental historian needs to resist *to some extent* the anthropocentric approach. I recall Michael Jennions' colloquium talk: looking around that very large room he asked us to imagine the tiny amount of space that one species (us) occupies in the total of all animal species. So one question for me is what trees and bushes and grasses and animals and fresh water and workable minerals – and so on – there were in the Mediterranean world in 1000 BC (there's another serious problem – periodization) and how they interacted with each other over the next millennium and a half (or rather more).

That leads me to remark that one of the greatest advantages of a Wiko year for me was the scientific majority. This quite apart from being able to ask questions over lunch with a superlative economist, not to mention being able to go to the opera with a superlative musicologist (see below!). We historians were in a very small minority, and I would have regretted that if it had not been for the fact that in normal life I am surrounded by historians. Few of the latter know the tough questions to ask about environmental history; with scientists it is different. The soil is thin in Mediterranean lands, said a highly informative scientist at my colloquium talk. Four months later, I had learned a lot of things that an environmental historian needs to know about soil. My work has gradually come to depend more and more on natural scientists, and I owe increasing debts to quite a number. But there was another, less predictable but also useful effect of listening to scientists' colloquium talks: I now realize more clearly that they are not omniscient either.

Mentioning soil leads me to my most solid results of the year in the area of environmental history. I succeeded in putting together what I think is a quite satisfying model of the relationship between marginal land, inheritance patterns, fertility practices and migration in the Mediterranean world throughout antiquity. The concept and identification of marginal land had never been investigated properly, and migration has been the subject of a long-running controversy. This paper argues that when there were no strong Malthusian "positive checks", the natural growth of Greek and Roman populations, together with their succession practices, created a dilemma for many of the poorer people: they could try to survive on marginal land or they could emigrate – except that the latter option, wide open in some periods for mainly political and military reasons, was in other periods not available, or at least not available to many. The paper will come out in 2018, in a German journal, *Historia* (but in English).

The use of metals is another deeply intriguing topic. One might be able to write a history of the ancient Mediterranean around the history of gold, silver, tin, copper, lead

and iron. There are many puzzles. I confess that I spent six weeks at the Wiko trying to make some history out of the change from bronze tools, weapons and so on to iron. Without success – lots of details, no patterns; that material is now on the shelf. But then I turned to metal use in the high and then declining Roman Empire. Lots of puzzles once again (did resources fail before the “barbarian” invasions or only in the wake of them?). Very soon I shall have the complete draft of a chapter on this subject.

But all that is only half the story of anyone’s year at the Wiko. There are such layers and layers in Berlin that it enters into your psyche in ways that are hard to keep track of. Some Fellows wish that the Wiko were somewhere in the centre of the city. But the greenery and lakes of Grunewald are a wonderful grandstand. How satisfying, too, to stroll along the shores of the Hubertussee, even if one is the sort of aspiring environmental historian who often needs to consult the *Kosmos Baumführer* to identify the trees. Should I have spent even more time being a tourist (all year I meant to go up to the Baltic coast, where I have never been) or making local friends? Only on the very last day did I visit the Museum Berggruen. Time, time ...

And friendship means time too. That is a lifelong problem. Like most of the other Fellows, I have spent my life so far in a university full of people it would be fascinating to get to know – but there is only time to know a very few. So too, alas, at the Wiko – there were missed opportunities as well as the beginning of some (I hope) lasting friendships.

Then there was the music. Living in New York is not awful in this respect, but our only opera house is expensive, and the best concerts often sell out very fast. I will not forget the Komische Oper’s production of Mussorgsky’s *Der Jahrmarkt von Sorotschinzi* or Carolin and Jörg Widmann performing Schönberg and Bartok at the Pierre Boulez Saal.

Such was one person’s experience at the Wiko, first in the late summer and bland autumn, then in the depths of winter. Never have I welcomed spring less – the beginning of the end. But to conclude, hearty thanks to everyone on the Wiko staff for making all this possible. I can’t single out any one person from such a wonderful group – yes, I can, Anja Brockmann, who not only obtained books for me, but also advised me what to read; and Eva von Kügelgen, who struggled so patiently to improve my German conversation. But I miss you all, staff and Fellows alike.