

The Ancient Asheville Project: Making Ancient and Medieval World History More Meaningful

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Abstract: This essay introduces an assignment that leverages the local community and the interests of students to make learning about ancient and medieval world history more meaningful and engaging and helps students to better grasp the commonalities and differences between the ancient or medieval and the modern world.

Keywords: teaching, world history, ancient history, medieval history

Introduction

In discussing their perceptions of studying history on the first day of my World History I classes, many students remark on their dislike or disinterest in history and note that they fail to see the relevance of studying the ancient and medieval past. These students perceive ancient and medieval world history as spatially, chronologically, and even thematically removed from their life experiences and the history of the area where they live.¹ To help students in my World History I survey course at Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College forge a connection between the history they are studying and the world in which they operate, I have developed a project entitled “Ancient Asheville.” For the project, each student selects and explores a different local event, group, art form, or tradition that is inspired or influenced by an ancient or medieval precursor. The students then take the topics they selected and examine the differences and similarities between the topic and its place in an ancient or medieval society and in its modern, local context.

The goals of the project are to make ancient and medieval history meaningful by having students ascertain the ways the ancient and medieval world survives unto the present day in their local community and for students to identify the important similarities and differences between historical and modern societies. With student permission, I have posted select projects on a website which serves as a resource for the community and a repository of examples for students in future semesters at <http://ancientasheville.wikispaces.com/>. Some students have chosen to explore the modern and historical dimensions of topics common to almost any area, such as graffiti, tattooing, and libraries, while others picked topics distinctive to the Asheville area, such as drum circles, beer brewing, and quilting. For all students, however, their topics provide a gateway to better comprehend the connections between the ancient or medieval past and the modern world.

Outline of the Ancient Asheville Project

The final submission of the project is divided into three sections:

- 1) Background research on the modern, local topic
- 2) Background research on the ancient or medieval precursor of that topic
- 3) Posing and answering two questions comparing and contrasting the modern, local topic and its ancient or medieval precursor.

In my courses, the final submission is the culminating assignment of the entire course, and students work toward it in stages throughout the semester. The first of these stages has students select the topic of their project using an online discussion forum. This is normally due around the fourth week of a sixteen week class. On the discussion board, students write a

paragraph in which they state the local site, event, art form, or practiced tradition they will visit and profile and the ancient or medieval culture from which it derives.

To help students select appropriate and fruitful topics, examples should be provided, and ideally, the local connection should be something they are interested in and can physically view, engage in, or otherwise experience in the local area. The ancient or medieval precursor should also be specific and perhaps even a direct forerunner to the modern form. While some topics might have numerous potential historical precursors, such as body piercing or tattooing, both of which were practiced by a number of ancient or medieval societies, I limit students to looking at one ancient or medieval society for the basis of their comparison. This allows students to engage in a more in-depth examination of a historical culture.

Students locate successful topics in different ways. Some students are passionate about one particular ancient or medieval culture, and these students often look around the community for ways in which that culture survives unto the present day. Other students have hobbies, interests, or passions which, often unbeknownst to students, have ancient or medieval origins. While for many hobbies and interests there is a clear historical precursor which students can examine, such as with topics like bow construction or martial arts, for other student interests the ancient or medieval precursor might not be as readily apparent or direct. If a student is particularly passionate about a topic for which there is no direct precursor, the instructor might consider allowing the students to do a thematic comparison with ancient or medieval practices. For example, I had one student who was passionate about roller derby, and while there is no direct connection between the Blue Ridge Roller Girls roller derby team and Roman gladiatrices, giving the student the option to explore roller derby by looking at the broad theme of “women’s sport” in ancient Rome and modern Asheville made the ancient world meaningful for the

student. Although the connection of the modern topic to the ancient world was indirect, in fact the student's thematic exploration still fulfilled the goals of the project by affording her the opportunity to investigate the similarities and differences between ancient and modern societies with regard to gender expectations.

While it may be useful for an instructor to create a list of possible topics and local sites for students, an instructor might be more successful in allowing students to locate connections on their own (subject to approval) rather than dictating specific topics. Some of the best projects students have undertaken in my courses were also projects I would not have been able to come up with on my own. I once had a student visit a rural alternative community at which the residents eschewed modern technology and undertake hide tanning, brain tanning in particular, wherein traditionally the skin of the animal is soaked in the liquefied brains of the animal as part of the tanning process. After experiencing hide tanning, the student located Early Modern English handbooks on tanning and compared the two processes. This intriguing historical connection between the Early Modern era and local practices is one I would probably never have discovered. By creating a framework within which students can be creative, instead of imposing a list of specific topics, the instructor can more fully harness the unique passions of individuals and amplify them while also freeing students to locate entirely unexpected projects.

After students have selected their topics, I use another discussion forum to have them identify the scholarly sources they intend to use for their research and develop the two questions they will answer that compare and contrast their local topic with its ancient or medieval precursor. This stage is generally due around the half-way point of the class. As the topics students select are generally very specific, students will likely need to use interlibrary loan to obtain needed materials, making it important for students to identify scholarly sources on their

topics well in advance of the final submission. Students also need time to think critically about the compare and contrast questions they will be using the sources to answer for their final submission. All of the modern, local topics students explore are in some way “disconnected relics,” meaning the items are separated from the ancient or medieval societies in which they originally acquired meaning.² Through their two questions students should highlight aspects which make their topics different from the original as well as aspects of the original meaning or form which remain.

In formulating their comparison and contrast questions, the instructor should encourage students to think about the broader social context of their topics. While students might have one “nuts and bolts” question on how the specific process is different, such as comparing the types of tools used in beer production in ancient Mesopotamia and today, they should also have a thematic question which highlights the role of their topic in society, such as the role of beer or the status of the beer producer in ancient Mesopotamia in comparison to the modern day. By asking the questions before having the resources in hand, students may well need to alter their questions in light of what they uncover during their research. This affords the instructor the opportunity to teach students about an important part of the historical process, namely, revising questions and the way in which history is framed in light of the evidence uncovered during research.

The final submission of the project also can be completed using an online forum. By the time of final submission, students should have conducted targeted research on the ancient or medieval and the modern aspects of their topics, building off the sources, questions, and instructor feedback on previous forums. After their submission to the online forum, students might make in-class presentations about their projects. In my courses, I also ask students for

permission to place their project on the Ancient Asheville website. Through in-class presentations or the placement of projects on a website, students can reflect on and build off the work of their peers. Working alone an individual student may change their view on the global and historical implications of their specific topic, but by making them aware of the similar revelations of their peers, the students can better appreciate of the influence of the ancient and medieval world at work throughout their community. Only when the projects are brought together do they reveal something entirely new—how their whole community transcends the local and the “now.”

Trends and Results

The types of topics selected by students to explore have reflected the diverse interests and backgrounds of students, and students have responded positively to having the option of selecting topics of individual interest. One theme which emerged is that many students used the project to explore their heritage by locating local topics with a historical connection to the areas from which their ancestors migrated. One African American student explored religious worship in an African American church in Asheville and compared those practices to historic worship practices in West Africa. Similarly, a student of Scotch descent explored changes in the social role of golf by looking at the topic in Early Modern Scotland and contemporary Asheville. Other students selected topics on the basis of their religious traditions. Some of these students compared the historical and modern role of religious structures, such as churches, synagogues, and mosques. Others looked at religious rituals, such as mass or meditation, and still others looked at traditions such as weddings, baptism, or customs surrounding holidays like Christmas or Halloween.

Another way students personalized the project to fit their interests was examining hobbies, and often the students who examined hobbies were the most active participants in exploring the modern dimensions of their projects. Among the activities undertaken have been martial arts, acupuncture, tea ceremonies, blacksmithing, brewing, and hide tanning. One student who compared a local tattoo parlor with tattooing as done by the Scythian Pazyryk culture even went so far as to get a tattoo on his left arm which was a copy of one found on the shoulder of a Scythian Pazyryk ice mummy. While not all students may display this level of commitment to the assignment, if students are exploring the ancient or medieval roots of hobbies that they regularly engage in, the assignment will still make another type of lasting impression—altering how they perceive this hobby in the future.

Other students engaged in internships related to the professional field they wanted to enter, and they explored the ancient or medieval roots of those professions. Providing this option is particularly meaningful for adult learners returning to school for job training or to improve their career prospects, a very common demographic at a community college such as mine. Often my adult students seem to see history and other general education courses merely as obstacles to their professional goals, and by making the historical and practical connections to their career explicit, the project motivates these students while also enriching their appreciation of the importance of historical consciousness. One such student responded on a class survey that “the Ancient Asheville project allowed me to use skills I already had, and apply those skills to understanding the past.”

While many students responded positively to the project due to their selection of topics which were of personal or professional interest to them, the community-based focus of the assignment built off common ground shared by all students, their local community. By using

community resources as the basis for the assignment, the project demonstrates to students the historical relevance of the course content to their life experiences in ways not possible with a more abstract examination of the impact of history. The topics explored by students reflect the community from which they are drawn, and the project offers learning experiences to students that are unique, meaningful, and tailored.

While the project responds to the local community, the hope is that the project also broadens students' paradigm of "their community." In the case of my courses, by illustrating the ways in which Asheville is connected to global developments, Asheville history is shown to be more expansive than its traditional narrow confines of United States, Southern, or Appalachian history. The project shows students that global is not "out there"—global is in their local area. The mental connection students make between the local community and the global community will likely continue long after the class is over. In their daily lives former students regularly encounter local sites, events, or traditions that were Ancient Asheville topics, and in so doing, they are continually reminded of the ways in which their local community is a microcosm and product of the ancient and medieval world. This recognition of the global and historical dimensions of their local area trains students in an important twenty-first century skill—interpreting globally.

To help drive home these connections between the ancient and medieval world and their community, mapping can be a powerful tool. On the Ancient Asheville website, I have mapped student projects on a world map, a regional map, and a city map. Each plot point on these maps is color coded by continent, and with a simple click, the map provides information on the project and a link to their full assignment. Students can zoom down to the street level to see the ancient and medieval connections in their neighborhood, or they can look at the world map and click to

explore the local connections to Siberia, Japan, or the Caribbean. While a digital map is useful and allows students to access the projects after the course is completed, having students plot their projects on a physical map in-class as they complete presentations on their project can have a similar dramatic impact, as students get to see a world or local map slowly fill with plot points as the presentations progress.

Conclusion

Historian Frederick Jackson Turner noted that “local history can only be understood in light of the history of the world.”³ In much the same way, the history of the world is scattered in fragments throughout local communities, albeit often unrecognized and under-appreciated, and a project like Ancient Asheville enables an instructor to utilize these fragments to teach world history and make the past meaningful to individual students. Asheville is a medium-sized city with a metro area population of slightly over four hundred thousand. The area cannot claim any particular connection making it more globally diverse than most cities of comparable size, and as can be seen in the examples provided in this article and on the Ancient Asheville website, no such distinctive global connections are required to undertake the project. The success of the assignment stems from the fact that the activity is rooted in an authentic local context and culture, which is something every community possesses.⁴

¹ Dry, David. "Making the Local History Connection: Community Colleges, World History, and Distance Education," *World History Bulletin*, XXVIII No. 1, (Spring 2012): 8–9.

² Johnson, Mark. “Is education a 'disconnected relic'?” *Improvisation Blog*.

<http://dailyimprovisation.blogspot.com/2012/03/is-education-disconnected-relic.html>

³ Turner, Frederick Jackson. “The Significance of History” in *Frontier and Section*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1961, p. 21.

⁴ Special thanks is due to Randee Goodstadt who encouraged the development of this assignment and offered productive feedback. Whatever the merits of this project, her advice and support has made it much better than it otherwise would have been.