



Women in Antiquity
SPRING 2025

MEETING 1

Introduction and Themes

- Gender in the ancient world
- The syllabus
- Themes for the course
- Eras of history
- Evidence



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What is this course?



Women in Antiquity
HIA 311, cross-listed with LEH 354 and WST 311

Tuesdays
6:00 – 8:40 p.m. in Carman 209

markbwilson.com/courses/AA/AA_wia/

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Who am I?



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Carman 292

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Five things today

- 1 Gender in the ancient world
- 2 The syllabus
- 3 Themes for the course
- 4 Eras of history
- 5 Evidence

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Gender in the ancient world

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Why is gender in antiquity so difficult to study?

- Evidence from the ancient era is fragmented
- ... tends to be written by men
- ... tends to deal with the public space
- ... is written by the upper classes
- Interpretation is shaped by modern ideas
- Gender, equality, and participation in society are different discussions
- Translation

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EPITAPH TO CLAUDIA

Friend, I have not much to say; stop and read it.
 This tomb, which is not fair, is for a fair woman.
 Her parents gave her the name Claudia.
 She loved her husband in her heart.
 She bore two sons, one of whom she left on earth,
 the other beneath it.
 She was pleasant to talk with, and she walked with grace.
 She kept the house and worked in wool.
 That is all. You may go.

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EPITAPH TO AMYMON

Here lies Amymon, wife of Marcus,
 best and most beautiful, worker in wool,
 pious, chaste, thrifty, faithful, a stayer-at-home.

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FROM EURIPIDES, MELANIPPE CAPTIVE

"Women are better than men, as I will show
 Women run households and protect within their homes
 what has been carried across the sea, and without a
 woman no home is clean or prosperous.
 Consider their role in religion ... women prophesy the will
 of [Apollo] Loxias in the oracles of Phoebus
 Why is it, then, that women must have a bad reputation? ...
 There is nothing worse than a bad woman, and nothing
 better in any way than a good one, but their natures differ."

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FROM CARCINUS, SEMELE

"O Zeus, why need one say evil of women in detail?
It would be enough if you merely said woman."

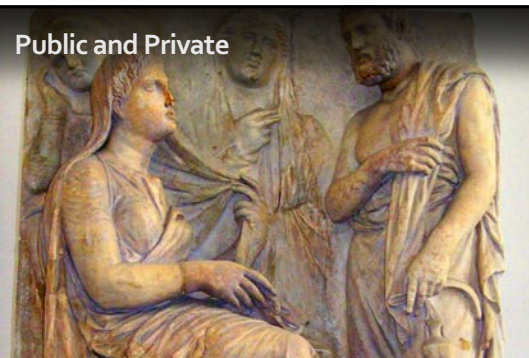
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Subjectivity

- Contemporary expectations of behavior
 - Gender (men as well as women)
 - Class
 - City and nation
- Selectivity of evidence
 - Point of view
 - Survival
 - Preservation
- Modern (anachronistic) interpretation
 - Even perfectly preserved evidence is warped by
 - Our own expectations
 - Unwarranted extrapolation

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Public and Private



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Rich and Poor



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Present and Future

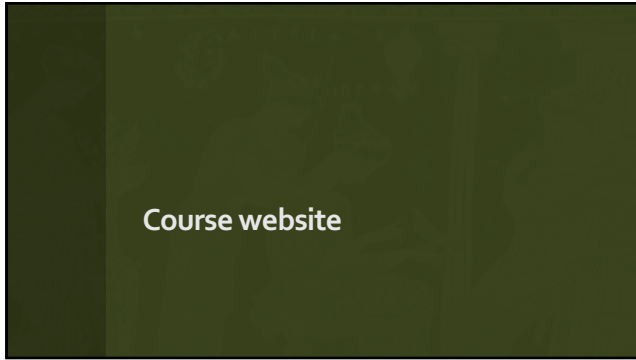


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Mortal and Divine



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Geography

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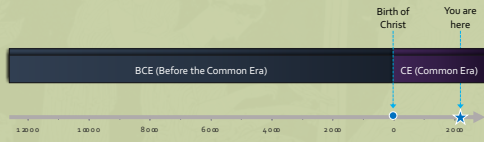


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Periodization

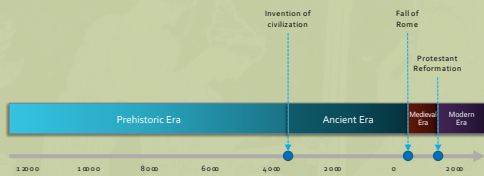
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The "Common Era" calendar



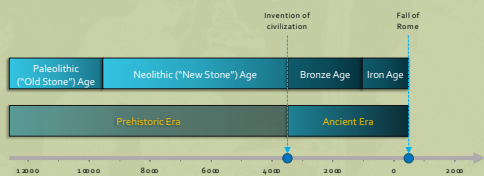
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Eras of (Mediterranean) history



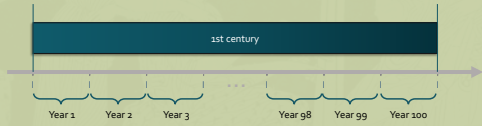
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Ages of technology



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Counting centuries



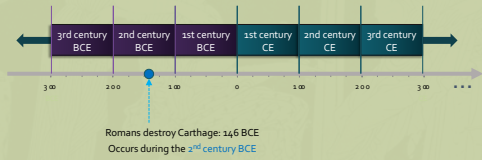
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Counting centuries



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Counting centuries



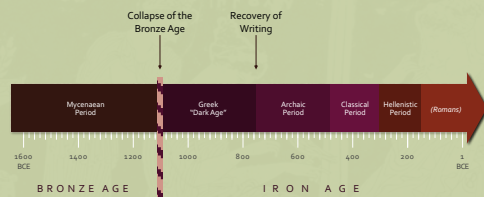
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Periodization

- Historians divide history into "eras" based on how we can characterize society
- Archaeologists divide history into "ages" based on changes in prevalent technology
- These periods help organize our studies, but also overgeneralize places and times within each period

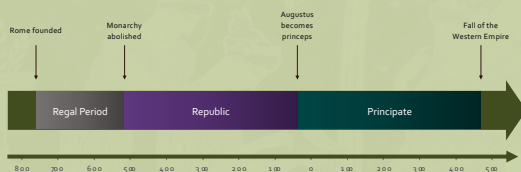
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Periods of Greek History

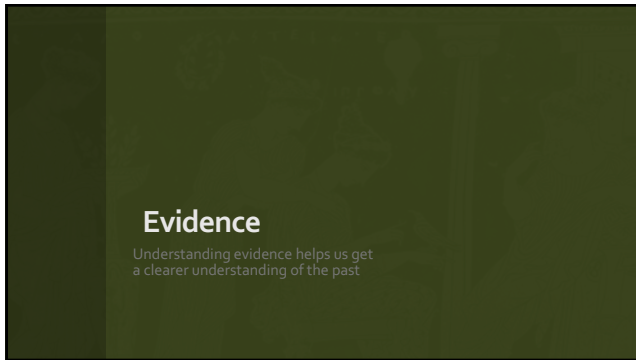


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Periods of Roman History



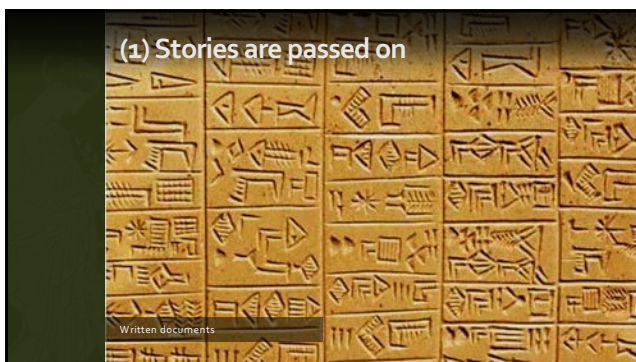
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Kinds of evidence

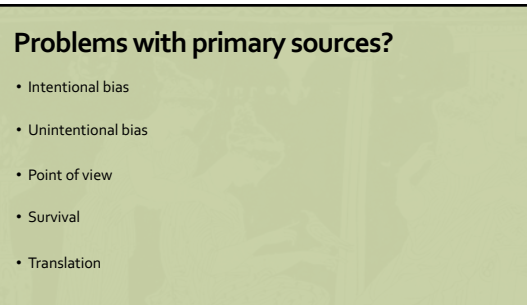
- Primary source
 - Eyewitness testimony from the place and time being studied
- Secondary source
 - A scholar collects and interprets primary sources on a subject
- Tertiary source
 - General scholarly consensus on a subject
 - Includes encyclopedias, textbooks, and almost everything on the web
 - NOT ALLOWED as a source for history papers

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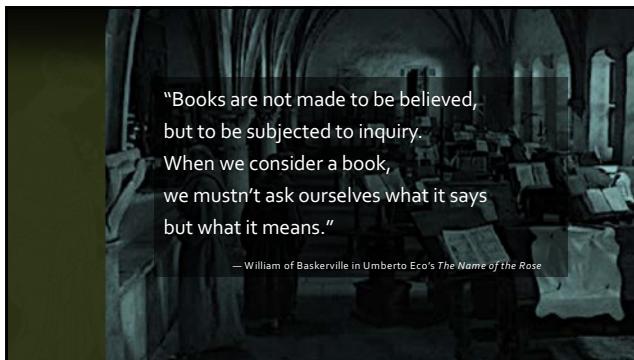
Problems with primary sources?

- Intentional bias
- Unintentional bias
- Point of view
- Survival
- Translation

CONCLUSION:
There are no facts in history



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"Books are not made to be believed,
but to be subjected to inquiry.
When we consider a book,
we mustn't ask ourselves what it says
but what it means."

— William of Baskerville in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*

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Example: Pliny the Younger, 79 CE



Eruption of Mt. Vesuvius, 79 CE

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