

## TOP SCHOLARS IN CLASSICAL AND LATE ANTIQUITY

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## ABSTRACT

*This article takes off from a recent attempt by Walter Scheidel to “collect and analyze bibliometric evidence for the impact of published research in the field of Ancient History”; this, criticized by Nathan Pilkington; and Scheidel, answering with revisions. The contributions of the two are here accepted in their metrics and in their focus on “impact”; but criticisms are advanced against their choices of focus and method. The aim here is to suggest the qualities of work that have earned frequent citation across a wider selection of the exemplary — much wider than the two quoted scholars attempt.*

## KEYWORDS

*citations, impact, scholarship, History, Ancient History*

Recently online are several articles by Walter Scheidel and Nathan Pilkington (their names abbreviated in my text to their initials, adding dates of publication for the several items by Scheidel). They offer ranking of scholars in Ancient History.<sup>1</sup> Their results will need discussion later, but at the outset, they are agreed on their mission: it is, as Scheidel says, to measure scholars’ “impact” (WS 2013, 2; 2019, 1, and elsewhere); and with this focus, Pilkington agrees (NP 2013, unpaginated, on the opening page).

By “impact” I understand whatever shapes people’s ideas, values, and behavior — one would hope, beneficially. It is apparently what Scheidel and Pilkington intend, applied to the particular population of ancient historians. Within it, they pick out those who are most admired, exemplars. Pilkington (NP 2013) in his opening three pages explains his focus

<sup>1</sup> Walter Scheidel, using as his vehicle the *Princeton/Stanford Working Papers in Classics*, “Citation scores for ancient historians in the United States, Version 1”, February 2008; “Updated citation scores for ancient historians in the United States”, September 2011; “Measuring Finley’s impact”, April 2013 (see also the version published in D. Jew, R. Osborne, and M. Scott, eds., *Moses Finley. An Ancient Historian and his Impact*, Cambridge 2016, 288–297); and “Citation scores for Greco-Roman historians in North America, 2019”, September 2019; Nathan Pilkington, “Google Scholar and the Web of Knowledge: Citation scores for Ancient Historians”, 2013, [https://www.academia.edu/3420110/Google\\_Scholar\\_and\\_the\\_Web\\_of\\_Knowledge\\_Citation\\_Scores\\_for\\_Ancient\\_Historians](https://www.academia.edu/3420110/Google_Scholar_and_the_Web_of_Knowledge_Citation_Scores_for_Ancient_Historians), last accessed 21.05.20.

on “ranking ... [through] measurement of citation at the elite level of journal article and book ... [W]e can measure the impact of a scholar adjusted for career length ... It illustrates the totality of a scholar’s penetration into the field ... Citations scores ... represent an important metric of a scholar’s impact.” He does not need to add that penetration is, so to speak, by permission, through peer review of both books and articles. But we must also bear in mind “scholarly development [into] their strongest works, with consequent attention from younger scholars”. These latter are in fact the principal concern of the present article.

For his part as well, Scheidel (WS 2019, 1, as in his articles of 2008 and 2011) measures “impact” by “citation scores” (WS 2013, 3), which constitute “a powerful marker of prestige”; he recognizes the “luminaries” (WS 2018, 7, at n. 23, naming Brown, Momigliano, and Finley), the “top” historians (WS 2019, 2 and elsewhere); yet it is important (WS 2019, 1) to measure scholars also against each other; for “what matters is not the absolute number of citations but the relative ranking of scholars”. Beyond this, however, a further level of understanding must depend on “how we define ‘impact’ on peers’ thinking and writing, on the academic job market, on the perceptions of the general public” (WS 2013, 1). In these matters only “extraordinary effort ... to measure” can avail; but such an effort neither Scheidel nor Pilkington will undertake.

Both Scheidel and Pilkington, as also the creators of the several databases they rely on, recognize the need to define the population impacted. These are not the general public, amateurs, the casually curious, nor even students at the undergraduate level. They are rather the professionals, scholars talking to each other. Just where is their conversation reported? An obvious data source is the bibliographic journal of Antiquity, *Année philologique*, 91 years old, in its more recent years since 1975. That latter year serves as baseline for Pilkington (NP, 2nd paragraph) and Scheidel (WS 2019, 3, n. 13). The number of scholars publishing since 1975 can then be seen and counted conveniently at three intervals: about 7,400 in 1975; half-way on to the present, about 30,730 in 1997; and 45,900 in 2016 (publication date in 2018, the latest issue available). The growth rate shown in these three totals invites conjectural explanations — which cannot be tested: Was it, for example, an increasing diligence in data-gathering that explains the growth, as indicated by increasing numbers of editors sharing the work of polling? But the number of journals themselves, in which the editors have gone trawling for their data, does not seem to support that conjecture (about 850 journals in 1975; about 985, in 1997; the same in 2016). Further, these citation-numbers show us only individuals who in one of those three chosen years happened to get

something into print but who in another year might have done better. How many were they? There is no saying.

However, there is no reason to doubt that these three years are representative of publish-or-perish at full steam over all forty-odd years to the present. They show an output in pages indeed too many to be digested. Such is an impression among librarians of my university, that works by authors of only one monograph are, half of them, never taken off the shelf. My own impression, for what it is worth, is that the same disregard is shown to a good half of journal articles, excluding their first page or abstract.

It is thus forgivable that, in listing the most-cited scholars, Scheidel and Pilkington should focus only on the very top, only on a fraction of one per cent of the whole publishing population, “because”, as Scheidel says, “distances between scores greatly shrink as one moves down the scale, increasing the likelihood of accidental omissions. The reliability of tabulation diminishes close to the bottom of the list” (WS 2019, 2). He himself prefers to list no more than the top 30 names, or 40 (WS 2011, 1 n. 3 and Tables 1 and 2; 2019, 2; cf. NP’s listing of 101 top scholars). His preliminary Tables underlie Table 4 (WS 2019, 2) and then Table 5, which “amalgamates [the number of citations of] active and retired scholars’ scores for the overall top 15” in North America. These leaders he nominates “with confidence”. Let this be the last word on the most widely respected scholars in ancient historical studies, as identified in the most recent rankings.

Figure 1

Fifteen foremost Ancient Historians alive in North America  
(with relative number of citations of their works, Scheidel 2019, 7, Table 5)

Peter Brown (20,229)	Roger Bagnall (6,459)
Ian Morris (10,098)	Brent Shaw (6,108)
Ramsay MacMullen (8,036)	Walter Scheidel (5,883)
Glen Bowersock (7,682)	Sarah Pomeroy (5,582)
Josiah Ober (7,348)	Kurt Raaflaub (5,326)
William Harris (6,846)	Victor Hanson (4,873)
Erich Gruen (6,831)	Christopher Jones (4,560)
Richard Saller (6,622)	

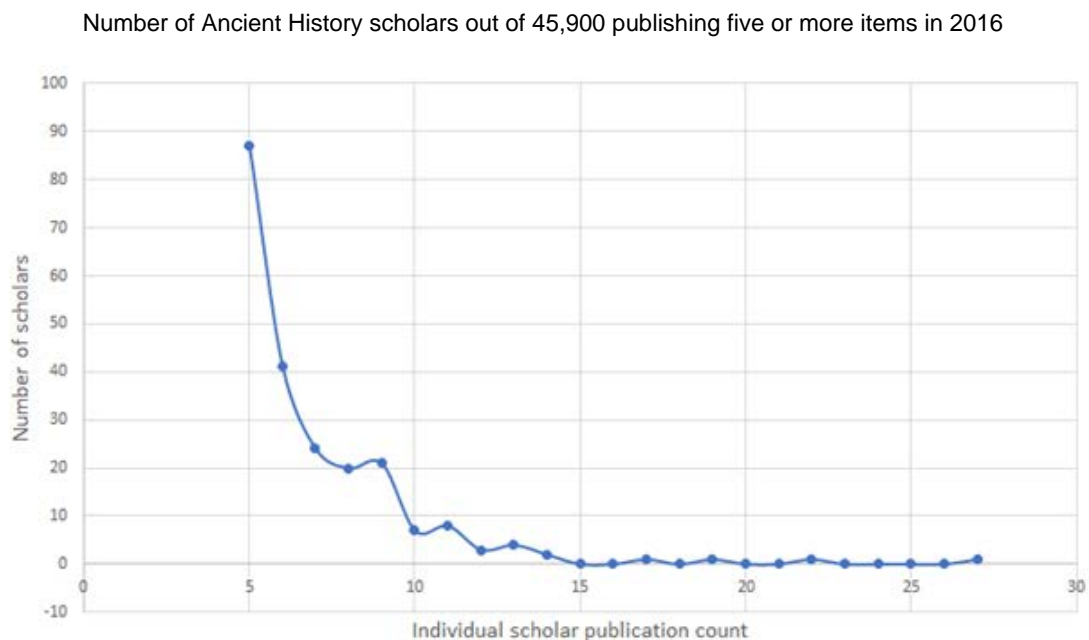
In *Année philologique*, my count indeed confirms the good sense of looking only at a tiny fraction of any one year’s whole product. In the most recent issue, two great fat volumes in small print devoted to 2016, publications by some 50,000 scholars are listed. For the vast majority, how-

ever, only one single publication is reported.<sup>2</sup> A far smaller number managed two publications in the given year; far fewer scholars still, those who published three and four titles which were taken into consideration in the *Année* (two such active scholars appear in Scheidel's and Pilkington's lists). At this point, we have considered the vast majority indicated in my line-graph below by a blank column to the far left.

More than four, a tiny handful: a mere 87 scholars who published five items in that single year. They constitute less than two ten-thousandths of one per cent of listed ancient historians; these may fairly be called "leaders", with whom my own count begins, before the count goes on to still fewer.

Figure II

Rate of scholarly production in 2016 (*Année philologique*)



What may at first seem most striking about my figures for this research community is its total size. This, I would explain by the interest natural to our species. We want to know and understand those nearest us, and then those somewhat removed, elders and ancestors as individuals or as a ghostly population in the past, since that past is still seen as one's own, one's very self, where one is at home, so to speak. What anthropologists

<sup>2</sup> Edited by Pedro Pablo Fuentes González, *Année philologique* 87 (Turnhout 2018), see the 85-page Index of modern names, where I count about 45,900, and would suppose that 2016 was a blank year for at least 1% of the research community. Thus, the research community total would top 50,000.

discover in preliterate societies is no different from what we are all more or less familiar with, if we reflect on what we mean by a cultural and narrative “heritage”. That one same Western Antiquity was cradle equally to dozens of ethnicities and to their scattered descent, from Turkey to Ireland and across the oceans east and west.

Subgroups are similarly to be explained by devotion to their heritage and identity. Such subgroups are the religious, or ideological, composed of members of the three monotheisms, within and by which research energies are generated, focused, and eagerly published. All three subgroups are served by many particular periodicals and address very large audiences. In the study of Judaism, most naturally, many well-known scholars bridge the centuries both before and after “Classical” Antiquity, for example, Shaye Cohen or Jacob Neusner; in Christianity, Peter Brown. As to Islam, it has been brought into the flow of “Late” Antiquity by Fergus Millar looking forward in time, or Glen Bowersock, and by Dimitri Gutas looking back into the roots of Greco-Arabic thought and science. All these named scholars are among the very most productive, though Neusner’s hundreds of monographs tower above the rest.

Most recently, Scheidel (2019, 2, Table 1) in using Google Scholar proposes to “exclude those [scholars] with a primary affiliation in Religious Studies”. Yet he includes both Susanna Elm, mostly known for Christian-history studies, and Hagith Sivan, much of whose work focuses on ancient Judaism. Perhaps his suggestion arose from the likelihood of ideological bias in citing an apparently relevant work, or in choosing not to cite it. It was a decidedly top scholar who in a friendly letter years ago introduced me to the German term *Totschweigen*, “Death sentence by silence”, which he could complain of, while another friend choosing to entitle one of his books *Jesus the Magician* (Morton Smith), must surely have expected its partial suppression.

Citation may be ideologically exclusive, serving a sub-sub-group. A two-volume work meant to be authoritative by Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, has recently defined the very word “religion” in a way that nicely fits Anglo-Catholicism, but only that one faith alone. Non-Christians had no religion at all; neither did those who thought they were Christians, like Donatists, if triumphant rivals judged them heretical.<sup>3</sup> And for our present times I should mention the risk of skewing citation scores, whether works should be favored for mention or disfavored, out

<sup>3</sup> MacMullen (2017): 121 and notes 28f., referring to Éric Rebillard and to Beard, North, and Price (1998): 1.42f., 49, 216 — Beard being (WS 2019, 9) “foremost globally among women in Ancient History studies”; and in the understanding of the word “religion”, concurrence by Éric Rebillard (himself, in NP Table 9, a select list of 30 top scholars globally).

of gender or ethnicity bias (WS 2019, 5–8, at some length on the presence of women among professional scholars).

Neusner's unique scholarly productivity invites a further comment: that the editing of short texts on which he most often worked presents the scholar with a supply of ready targets, needing no discovery or originality, however much learning; and the same may be said of other prodigiously productive scholars applying their technical skills: the prosopographer Friedrich Münzer long ago (d. 1942, #87 in NP, Table 10), with few books but innumerable entries in the *Realencyclopädie*, and famous for many reasons, not least his impact on Ronald Syme's work; or Louis Robert (d. 1985), author of very few monographs but, in Greek epigraphy, uniquely authoritative in a hundred articles; more recently, active in Latin and Greek epigraphy, Werner Eck and Angelos Chaniotis. The last-named, with a score of 22 items (!) in 2016, is counted by Scheidel, but not Eck in Germany. Scheidel's count is limited to North America.

When one compares the top part of rankings, Pilkington against Scheidel (WS 2011, Table 1), and if one counts only persons currently employed in a US institution of higher learning (as in NP, last page, Table 1), Google Scholar as a database can be seen as importing its own preferences. For example, in Scheidel (WS 2011, Table 1), Roger Bagnall had stood first, whereas in Pilkington's Table 11, this name drops to sixth place; John Matthews rises from seventeenth in Scheidel of 2011, to seventh in Pilkington; and so on. But Scheidel (WS 2019, 2), while later accepting Pilkington's choice of database, judges the resulting differences to be only "minor".

What lies behind much of my criticisms even of Pilkington's choice of databases (better than Scheidel's choice pre-2019, as he concedes) which Pilkington found in "Google Scholar's citation Index processed through the Publish or Perish Software", is its deliberate limitations. Measurement of rank is sought "only in English language journals" (as later in WS 2019, 2, an "Anglo-only survey"). Yet no more than the 6% or so of the 980 periodicals pillaged by *Année philologique* are Anglophone (and additionally but also ignored by Scheidel, most European journals, such as *Historia* or *Epigraphica*, welcome English items along with other languages, beyond that of their own).

In discerning impact, moreover, the fact of scholars' work being received outside their homeland should surely be given weight, as for instance the UK's Mary Beard in Pilkington (NP, Table 10, ranked #31). She figures in none of Scheidel's lists, only an honorable mention in his concluding paragraph (WS 2019, 9); or Paul Zanker likewise, credited for his English-translated monographs. But almost all of Zanker's scores of books were first published in Italian or German. Only for that reason,

perhaps, he does not appear among the select seven “leading ancient historians” nominated by Scheidel (WS 2013, Table 1, p. 6), along with Arnaldo Momigliano, Moses Finley, Peter Brown, Ronald Syme, Theodor Mommsen, A. H. M. Jones, and Michael Rostovtzeff. Paul Veyne’s works have been much translated into English; his name appears in one of Pilkington’s Tables (#1 in the list of 101 in NP, eighth page), which look out world-wide, among deceased as well as the active; but not in Scheidel, through his decision to count only North Americans. Similarly omitted, Henk Versnel, Christof Marksches, and others. Scheidel’s inclusion of Rostovtzeff in one count (WS 2013, using “Web of Knowledge” on a STEM model) but exclusion from the other (WS 2019, 2–3, in his Table 2) seems to miss the quality of the Russian scholar, devoted to archeology quite as much as Zanker, who is counted in NP, second page, and Tables 9 and 11.

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There is perhaps no need to multiply illustrations of the unsatisfactory nature of Pilkington’s and especially Scheidel’s findings. Both analysts seem to have lost their declared focus, that is, some good reason for measuring citations in the first place. Instead, exclusions and dubitations have taken over; usefulness has been lost among refinements in ranking and “annualization” to measure average output per annum across time. To return instead to the underlying justification for any measuring of rank, that is, in a word, “impact”, in any community, it is, at least by implication, to be sought among the most respected members of the research community, the most approved for their methods and conclusions. What they say and how they think is, almost by definition, an example to all. So Scheidel and Pilkington agree, calling them “luminaries”, “elite”, “the top”.

Certainly that is true. But it is equally certain that leaders, for instance Scheidel’s top 15, or any others as they have been defined, shape their own work by reading the work of many others. They will most certainly have sought their material in a wider census than the crippled ones of the rankings. Their practice can be checked by a glance at their footnotes. They will refer to a book in French, let us say, and a further glance may show the profit there that will be ignored by strictly Anglophone scholars.<sup>4</sup> It thus defies good sense to exclude the work of scholars of this wider community — the more international, the better.

<sup>4</sup> A recent instance of such a loss in MacMullen (2019): 14f. (Françoise Dunand’s works).

And both citation scholars know better! “Ancient history is a global field”, Pilkington declares in his opening page. Even while teaching in English, “scholars regularly move between departments in the UK, US, Netherlands, Germany, Australia and New Zealand” (to be added, Canada); and as Scheidel had pointed out (WS 2008, 4; 2019, 9) about half of US ancient historians “received their final degree outside the US”, though ordinarily in England. Pilkington takes account of the fact, too, that “graduate students regularly learn two modern languages just to deal with the scholarship in their field”; and he adds that “translations of original editions further demonstrate a scholar’s degree of penetration into academic debates globally”, as was illustrated above. Thus restriction to English is a problem acknowledged, but not compensated for.

The profusion of print, styled “indigestible” earlier, has become ever more daunting, all the more so in any attempt to widen one’s reading beyond the top scholars of one’s own language and academic neighborhood. To make a good choice for imitation or inspiration, no one should make a count, as I have done for myself, of the names of scholars publishing five, six, and more items in a given year; for there is almost no correspondence between them, and the total population in all the lists of Scheidel and Pilkington.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the best trick in the search for the best, is in the footnotes of prolific authors where the reader can hope to see what names were judged valuable enough to cite (quite as interesting a selection as can be found in most recent handbooks, companions, and encyclopedias). But take note (above) of *Totschweigen*.

And there is a clue in the object sought: “impact”. Sometimes it is expressly recognized. Many of such publications fit into one or another of two categories: negative and positive. The negative attempts to displace a received view of some factoid or idea, to be gradually forgotten in favor of a novel one. The job may well be extended into a decade or more of further discussion. Pompeii offers a good illustration in the interpretation of its most famous paintings, which give their name to an entire beautiful dwelling: the Villa of Mysteries. They show the rites celebrating a bride’s wedding-day and night. The better reading of the panels is Paul Veyne’s, challenging a century of scholars set on seeing here an initiation into

<sup>5</sup> Among those especially active publishers of 2016, listed in WS and NP are C. Ando, M. Beard, A. Chaniotis, and C. P. Jones — four out of more than 200, so no more than 2%. These 2% do not include P. Brown, P. Zanker, R. Bagnall, Averil Cameron, M. Crawford, E. Gruen, W. V. Harris, F. Millar, and Greg Woolf, who are indeed named by WS and NP, but none of whom published as many as five items in 2016.



pagan secrets — a delightful vision of clandestine orgies.<sup>6</sup> Veyne would displace it, offering a better sense of the purpose served by the room's location within the home, so decorated, and an appeal to far more natural, relevant evidence across a wide range of the arts.

As to positive impact, again looking at Pompeii: a recent scholar, Lisa Nevett, makes use in her work of “a tool for studying social relationships in Roman households ... In a landmark paper first published in 1988, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill was one of the first to recognize that ancient houses could be viewed as occupied spaces rather than simply as architectural complexes.”<sup>7</sup> Wallace-Hadrill indeed appears quite high in the big list of Pilkington (NP Table 10, #28 out of 101) and as a productive scholar in *Année philologique*, averaging above one publication per year for 35 years. However, only once does his output (six in 2012) rise above my baseline for the topmost scholars, publishing at least five items in one year. From Nevett's comment, my take-away is that scholars even more productive than Wallace-Hadrill do not necessarily have the most interesting ideas, thus to enjoy an impact on others. As someone said long ago, not everything that counts can be counted.

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<sup>6</sup> Veyne (2016). Cited as “the most notable” alternative to the traditional views in Wikipedia, “Villa of the Mysteries — Veyne”. But as I discovered some years ago, the tour guides on the spot are unshakably traditionalist.

<sup>7</sup> Wallace-Hadrill (1988), cited by Lisa C. Nevett (2010): 90.

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