Instructor: Alain Bresson. Office: Wieboldt 405. Office Hours: Wednesday 10 am – 12 pm and on appointment; abresson@uchicago.edu
TR 02:00 pm - 03:20 pm CL 021

Goal of this class

This class examines the determinants of economic growth in the ancient world. It covers various cultural areas (especially Mesopotamia, Greece, Rome and China) from ca. 3000 BCE to c. 500 CE. By contrast with the modern world, ancient cultures have long been supposed to be doomed to stagnation and routine. The goal of this class is to revisit the old paradigm with a fresh methodology, which combines a rigorous economic approach and a special attention to specific cultural achievements. We will assess the factors that indeed weighed against positive growth, but we will also discover that far from being immobile the cultures of the ancient world constantly invented new forms of social and economic organization. This was indeed a world where periods of positive growth were followed by periods of brutal decline. But if envisaged on the longue durée, this was a period of decisive achievements, which provided the basis for the future accomplishments of the Early Modern and Modern world.

For each class, there is one or several readings that are required (the title has an *). You will find also “bonus” readings, if you want to go deeper into the topic (but these readings are not required).

SCHEDULE AND READINGS

———W1———

1. The First Great transformation, Growth and Ancient Economic History

Tu. Sept. 26. 1.1. Introduction

Why referring to a “first great transformation”? And where does the concept come from?
The goal of this class is to give a first introduction to the questions that we will ask, and to the tools we will use. It will also allow us the discover the challenges we will face. A general panorama of the history of the “West” and of the “East” will be provided.
For the first class, there is no required reading, but you may want to have a look to the graph of Angus Addison, and read the paper by Karl Polanyi, if you have the time.
Bonus
Angus Maddison. Graph of GDP growth.
Th. Sept. 28. 1.2. A Case Study: Ancient Greece
If indeed economic growth was possible in the ancient world, do we have examples of rapid economic growth? The case of ancient Greece, as analyzed by Josiah Ober, provides a good starting point. A special attention will be devoted to two points: 1) How can we estimate growth in ancient societies? 2) What are the determinants of growth? For this class, this is not so much the case of ancient Greece that will require our attention but the methodological questions that are raised to study ancient economic history.


2. The Determinants of growth

Tu. Oct. 3
2.1. The economic approaches to growth
We will examine the various economic approaches to growth. A special attention will be devoted to the AK model and to the Schumpeterian approach.
For each determinant of growth, during the class we will try and “translate” the factor into the terms that were those of the ancient world: for example, if we talk about Labor, what would it mean for the ancient world? We will also discuss the question of the applicability of modern economic concepts to non-capitalist societies.


Bonus:

**Th. Oct. 5 2.2. The determinants of growth**

B. Snowdon’s article includes an interview of a famous economist. It is somewhat long, but you will focus on pp. 73–86 and 93–120. The method will be the same as in the previous class: we will first single out the determinants of growth that are mentioned in the article and we will try and translate them in terms of ancient realities. We will also compare the AK model and the institutional and neo-institutional approach.


Bonus:

———W3———

**3. Environment and Population**

**Tu. Oct. 10 3.1. First Quiz**

The role of environment: dry farming or irrigation?

The development of irrigation in the fourth millennium in large fluvial basins, the Tiger, Euphrates, Nile, Indus, and Yangtze valleys, was fundamental for the development of the first city-states and Empires. We will focus here on two test-cases: Mesopotamia and China (for China, this is for the post 1000 CE periods; but the point here is to focus on methodology; for earlier periods, see McNeill 2012 in Bonus)


Bonus


Population dynamics: the big picture. Were populations capable or quick phases of expansion, or not? What were the parameters for natality and mortality? And, on the economic side, what about the question of the Malthusian trap for the ancient world? Is it an illusion or a reality?


Bonus


———W4———

4. Organizing the Workforce


Tribute and taxes in kind or work (corvée) were a major feature of the world of the Eastern Mediterranean (Mesopotamia and Egypt). But forms of private property, individual initiative and salaried workforce can already be observed in the second millennium BCE. How could the two forms of labor organization be combined?

*Jursa, M. 2015. “Labor in Babylonia in the first millennium BC.” In Steinkeller and Hudson 2015: 345–396. [on Canvas]*


Th. Oct. 19 4.2. Slavery and contract in the economies of the ancient Classical world

In Greece and in Rome, on the one hand contract and paid retribution were the norm, on the other slavery experienced an unprecedented boom. Again, how is it possible to combine the two forms of exploitation of
the workforce? Why was there such a development of slavery? And was the ancient Classical world based on slave labor?


5. Technology and Technological Innovation

Tu. Oct. 24 5.1. Immobility or slow progress?

The ancient world is often presented as a world of stagnation and routine. Can we trace technological improvements in the ancient world? Is a contrast between an absolute routine in agriculture and some slow but real technological progress in craftsmanship valid?


Th. Oct. 26 5.2 First paper due

The case of energy and mechanization in the Greek and Roman world

Between the ancient Classical world (Greece and Rome) and Early Modern and Modern Europe there would have been an absolute contrast. The Classical world is supposed to have been unable to mechanize its “industry” and introduce new forms of energy. Western Europe managed to create complex machines and to master new sources of energy, the steam engine being the symbol of this transformation. The class will put to the test the idea of an absolute contrast between the two worlds.


Bonus

6. The Role of the State


Property rights are currently believed to be a fundamental factor of growth. A test case is here provided by the Archaic Greek World. Measuring goods and policing interactions between human beings (whether it was mercantile or non-mercantile) was the primary role of the state. The world of Mesopotamia in the second and first millennium provides the second test case for an analysis of the role of the state.


Th. Nov. 2  6.2. Tax policies

The state could not live without levying taxes. But forms of taxation (in kind, in labor or in money) varied a lot from one world to the other. Here are envisaged in a comparative perspective the cases of the ancient Near East and of early Imperial Rome.


———W7———

7. Finance and Credit

Tu. Nov. 7  7.1. The question of debt in ancient Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome

Debt was the “plague of ancient societies.” The consequence of unpaid debts was ultimately the reduction into bond labor or even slavery of the debtor. The states could intervene to limit interest rates. Were these interventions sufficient to prevent the ravage of debt?

Th. Nov. 9 7.2. Credit and interest rates: the case of Rome

The other side of debt is of course credit. What was the role of credit in Greece and Rome? Was it only devoted to compensate for the incapacity to provide for its own subsistence? Or could it have other purposes? Does the notion of investment make sense in the ancient world? We will devote here a special attention to the case of Rome.


— W8 ——

8. Money and the state

Tu. Nov. 14 8.1. From Hacksilber to Coinage: the Egypt, the Levant and Mesopotamia vs. the Greek world

The two worlds did not use the same metal as money. But both of them “invented” coinage almost in the same period and completely independently from one another. What there an impact of coined money? Or in fact was there little difference between weighed metal and coinage?


Th. Nov. 16 8.2. The Han tradition vs. the Roman tradition

The contrast could not be clearer between the world of the Eastern Mediterranean, where silver became the standard money (although not the only means of payment) as early as the second millennium BCE and China, where bronze was the standard metal. What are the reasons of this difference?

9. Long distance trade and the international division of labor

Tu. Nov. 21 Second Quiz
9.1. Long distance trade in Asia and the West

It has been famously argued that long distance trade played a major role in the European “industrial revolution.” What was the role of long distance trade in ancient societies? Three case studies will be envisaged, with that of the merchant colony of Kanesh in Anatolia in the early second millennium BCE, that of the Silk Road for China, and that of the Greek Mediterranean. The ancient Classical world experienced an exceptional “connectivity” thanks to navigation in the Mediterranean Sea. What were the consequences for the populations of Greece and Rome in terms of consumption habits? Can we speak of an international division of labor in the ancient Greek world?


*Vaissière, É. de la. 2015. “Trans-Asian Trade or the Silk Road Deconstructed.” In Neal and Williamson 2015: 101–124. [on Canvas]

**Bonus**


Th. Nov. 23 9.2. Thanksgiving Break

Conclusion: Growth and Decline

Tu. Nov. 28 Second paper due

The classic case of the “rise and fall of the Roman Empire,” if analyzed in an economic perspective, is the ideal test case for examining the factors of growth in the ancient world. After a period of positive growth, a process of continuous negative growth led to the complete collapse of the Empire. A comparison with more resilient China proves to be useful to make sense of the whole process of growth of the Classical world.

Course Requirements

Course Requirements

1. Two quizzes

The two Term Papers count for 20% (10% each) of the Final Grade. They will be administered at the beginning of the class:

Tuesday Oct. 10
Tuesday Nov. 21

2. Two Term Papers

The two Term Papers count for 50% (25% each) of the Final Grade. Each paper should be ca. 1500–1800 words long and should make full use of the set readings as well as the material provided in lectures. A hard copy of each paper must be submitted at the start of the class for which it is due.

A good paper develops an original argument with a clear logic and if applicable is based on direct evidence. You should make full use of the readings assigned for classes. Credit will be given for additional bibliography that is consulted and systematically employed (see the bibliography below for suggestions). For the literature, referred to in footnotes (not in endnotes) by “Name + date” (“Brock 1994”), quote precisely the author, book or journal and pages of the documents, using the following format in the bibliography at the end of the paper:


NB: The bibliography is not included in the calculation of the number of words of the paper.

Make sure that you are clear about the University’s policy and regulations on plagiarism and academic dishonesty, posted at: http://studentmanual.uchicago.edu/Policies

No extensions will be granted, save in extreme and extenuating circumstances. Papers submitted after class will drop one grade and continue to drop a further grade each day thereafter.

1. First Paper, due at the start of the class on Th. Oct 26. You will choose one of the two topics and you will argue your case on the bases of two different societies [Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome, China]

• What was the role of environment in the specific forms of development of ancient societies?

• Corvée, bond labor and slavery: growth booster or brake on economic growth?
2. Second Paper, due at the start of the class on **Tu. Nov. 28**, you will choose *one* of the three topics and you will argue your case on the bases of *two* different societies [Egypt, Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome, China]

- What was the role of the State in the process of economic growth (positive or negative) in the ancient economy?
- What was the role of money and credit in the process of economic growth (positive or negative) in the ancient economy?
- What was the role of long distance trade in the process of economic growth (positive or negative) in the ancient economy?

**NOTE ON GRADING POLICY**
The benchmark grade for a solid, competent paper or presentation is B+. A and A- are reserved for assignments that display original thinking and insights. B and B- indicate solid performances that contain some errors (including editing lapses and poor English). C and D grades generally indicate a lack of effort.

**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**
If you require any accommodations for this course, please provide your instructor with a copy of your Accommodation Determination Letter (provided to you by the Student Disability Services office) as soon as possible so that you may discuss how your accommodations may be implemented in this course. The University of Chicago is committed to ensuring the full participation of all students in its programs. If you have a documented disability (or think you may have a disability) and, as a result, need a reasonable accommodation to participate in class, complete course requirements, or benefit from the University's programs or services, you are encouraged to contact Student Disability Services as soon as possible. To receive reasonable accommodation, you must be appropriately registered with Student Disability Services. Please contact the office, located at 5501 S. Ellis Avenue.
Tel: 773-702-6000
TTY 773-795-1186
e-mail: disabilities@uchicago.edu
website: disabilities.uchicago.edu

**3. Class Participation**

Class Participation counts for **30% of the Final Grade** and is based on (i) attendance at classes; (ii) level of advance preparation for class discussions; (iii) degree of engagement and participation in class discussions. **Non-attendance at classes, unless approved in advance by the instructor, will result in lowered grades for class participation. More than 5 unexcused absences from class will result in an overall Fail in the course.**

Please always bring to the class the documents for the day, either in paper format or in electronic format on your laptop or other electronic device.
Bibliography:

**Historical framework**


**General Economics**


**General bibliography**


Muhs, B. P. 2016. The Ancient Egyptian economy, 3000-30 BCE. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press. [on line at the Reg]


