

JOSEPH MANNING

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Interview by **Joe Laufer**

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On August 26th, 2022, I sat down (virtually) with Professor Joe Manning to discuss the ongoing effort to interpret Ancient Egyptian papyri as historical sources, his collaboration with climate scientists at the Yale Nile Initiative, and the relationship between the humanities and STEM at Yale and beyond.

What inspired you to study Hellenistic Egypt, and what about the field of Egyptology stood out to you?

When I was ten I decided I wanted to study Ancient Egypt. I just got hooked, as you do when you're ten. But I couldn't shake it. I got pretty serious about it as a kid, and decided that's what I was going to do. So, that was my backdoor initially into Egyptology and Egyptian languages, which is what I did my graduate work on at a very traditional program at the University of Chicago. [As a kid] I was a member of The Oriental Institute, a museum at the university, and they had a members day, which I went to with my mom. The professors all had their doors open, and I walked into the office of this kind, elderly man named George Hughes, a very famous papyrologist and Demotic Egyptian scholar. He had all these texts on his desks, these framed papyri. They were Ptolemaic period house sales. It seemed like it was modern. I had no idea that that was a part of Ancient Egyptian material. It was immediate. These were

ancient people's actual lives, actual houses being sold. That stuck with me as a kid. It appealed to me in a fundamental way for whatever reason: the economic and legal material. Instead of literature, I got attracted to documentary material pretty instantly. So, I went to college and knew what I wanted to do.

I studied language and what I wanted to do. I thought, I'm going to grad school. I'm probably going to UChicago. It will all work out. And it did. I actually went to law school for a semester, because I wasn't really sure. I remember, I was in Property, which is a normal first year law course, and in week 2 the professor said, "here's a property problem, and if anyone can answer it, you get an A for the course." And I raised my hand, and I answered it, and I nailed it. But I thought, there's not enough creativity studying the law. I love legal history. I still work on that stuff, but I need to go to grad school otherwise I'm going to keep blundering about

it. So, I worked and then started UChicago the next year in a very grim and very difficult program, which it turned out I hated. But I'm very stubborn and I made it through. I wanted to do history. I went to Cambridge for a year after my qualifying exams. We had, back in the day, 4 years of coursework and 2 sets of comprehensive exams, which were enough for most people to quit (the UChicago program had probably a 90% attrition rate). But somebody invited me over to Cambridge, and that opened my mind to doing Hellenistic history properly, because, at the time, Keith Hopkins was a professor, this amazing thinker in ancient history and economy. And there was a whole host of grad students and post-docs that are famous names now, all of whom are still my friends. That's when I thought that, with the material I'm getting trained in – the technical [skills] – you can actually do historical analysis. So I had that piece of the puzzle from Cambridge, which was by far the leader in ancient history at the time. I got lucky. And mainly, in a pub at night, after my seminar, is how I learned ancient history. It was like doing a degree. We'd sit around and talk the night away about ancient history and the economy. So, that was serendipity, and not the last time serendipity lent me a hand. But it was an amazing year, and I came back against all the wills of my professors [the next] and said, "I'm doing ancient history with this material." They hated it. But I eventually made it out of the program unhappily.

So, I put the technical training of papyrology – Greek and Egyptian material – together with all of the other Egyptian language experience with the idea of doing ancient history. I started off with a great job at Princeton Classics as a Hellenistic professor, the plum job in the field. And I made the case that what I was doing was cutting-edge Hellenistic history. Which it was. It was cutting-edge economic and legal history with the best corpus of material – or at least among the best – in the entire Hellenistic world. And there were all new ways of thinking about Egypt in the Hellenistic world. I made the case, and they bought it. They hired me in a tenure track position, and off I went. Coming from a Near Eastern language program, now I was in a hardcore Classics department. Less so now, but in the day, [Princeton] was the place to study Classics: serious, hardcore Classics. But they were trying to turn me into

a Classicist. I was doing nothing but Classical Greek. Then, they said, "you've got to start teaching Latin for us too," and I thought, "when am I going to get to do my work?" So, that was a seriously good education. I didn't sleep for 2 years, because most of my Greek, honestly, was Koine Greek. But now I was doing hardcore, intensive, 5-day-a-week Greek classes and seminars teaching Plato. At the time, younger faculty were precepting, so I was precepting in Roman history; I was precepting in ancient philosophy courses. So, I was getting another education in hardcore Classics for a couple of years [before Yale].

You mentioned that your mind was immediately drawn to documentary source material, as opposed to traditional literary source material that a historian might look at for historical analysis. How do papyri – and so, how does studying Hellenistic Egypt – differ from studying other historical places and periods, in which you may have more literary source material? How does your engagement with papyri differ? It's fundamentally different. That's why I do what I do. And it's still controversial. Most papyrologists don't like what I do, honestly. Because you're working with documentary sources, there's little to no narrative framework. There's no Tacitus, or Polybius, or Thucydides, or even much of an Herodotus. There's no narrative, which is fun. You get to build the narrative. But in order to do that, you need comparative and theoretical frameworks. You need to problematize. If you're doing economic history, this is where economics and economic theory comes in. You have to contextualize material. If, for example, you're looking at property conveyances and leases, you need to contextualize that in terms of property theory, property rights, and property enforcement. My first historical monograph was looking at new institutional economics as a framework for understanding the documentary material. What are the institutions? How are property rights enforced? Who owns what? How is land held within family groups? And so, why this field is dynamic and why few people are doing it is that you need to work across the boundaries of social science, history, and documentary material. You don't need literary material much – to the chagrin of Classicists. Most Egyptologists and literary scholars – which is most Egyptologists – think that there's a pure

Egyptian tradition untouched by the Classical world. I don't believe that for a nano-second. It's a world that is deeply interconnected, deeply exchanging in terms of trade, ideas, and even stories. It's a rich world, once you get into it. That's how I work. The methodology requires you to work differently, but it makes it exciting.

Let the disciplinary boundaries completely dissolve. We need social sciences; we need climate research; we need archaeology; we need comparative history; we need literary material and cultural history. We should be having lively debates. It turns out: we can have a conversation that connects ancient material with modern concerns about climate and policy implications. This is what modern scholars do with competing frameworks. And that's what universities are about. Let's have conversations.

“Let the disciplinary boundaries completely dissolve.”

In your 2018 book *The Open Sea*, you also urged academics to “let the [disciplinary] boundaries dissolve”. I was originally going to ask you about the relationship between Classics and Egyptology, but I'd like to extend the question to the social and physical sciences. Do you think that there is enough collaboration between different disciplines and departments at Yale? Are departmental divisions – say, between Classics and Egyptology – supportive of collaboration or a roadblock? No, and no. There's nowhere near enough collaboration. To be honest, and you can quote

me on this, Yale, the provost, everybody is making big headlines about HQ (The Humanities Quadrangle). “Look, we love the humanities. Look at this great new building.” This is not cutting-edge. I should have an office next to a chemistry professor up on science hill. [That's how it would be] if I were designing the world. We have something to talk about. I want to know and I want to learn.

I mean look, Classics is still on Old Campus. This is not the way to structure the university. We are reinforcing 19th century disciplinary boundaries – the boundaries between language and quantitative skills. That's how the world has been divided. These are just skills. Go off and learn them. They're necessary. If you're a historian, you need languages, but quantitative skills are really useful, and I wish I had more of them. I wish I had time to study more chemistry. So no. There's nowhere near the collaboration that universities should be having. Universities are competitive places. It should be about putting ideas on the table and competing like dogs about our ideas. That's what universities should be doing, as opposed to what we tend to do, which is to cluster in groups and be really nice to each other. Go to a Classics seminar, or go to a NELC seminar, and you'll see what I mean: no challenging questions. We should be [intellectually] beating the crap out of each other. I mean, you've got to be kind. But it's about ideas and getting it right, seeking the truth: *Lux et Veritas*. Now, does Egyptology collaborate with Classics? No. These are the departments that are defined by language – Greek and Latin vs. Egyptian and Akkadian, or Arabic – and to some extent, geography. But look at the Hellenistic and Roman worlds. Ancient people didn't say, “Oh I'm sorry I can't travel to Egypt to trade grain because we don't speak Egyptian,” “I specialize in reading Greek texts,” or “I specialize in reading Latin texts.” Ok, we all need specialization. But you get locked in and a lot of scholars don't do much beyond their dissertation. They regurgitate their dissertation and they get older and they get grumpy, because they've run out of ideas. At a university! There's nothing but ideas floating around here. As a student, you're lucky. You can range around. Faculty should be doing the same thing.

Do departmental divisions manifest themselves in scholarship? The work you do, by necessity, involves such a significant synthesis of different languages and cultures. Do you find it difficult producing and reading scholarship that's divided along departmental boundaries? Yes. That's what I'm doing now in my book on climate and history. I'm looking at Maya [civilization], or looking at East Asia in the medieval period, and I'm learning history on the fly a little bit. I'm trying to understand different climate proxies and how they work. Can you do that on your own now? Absolutely not. Some historians work by themselves and that's how they're used to working. They don't like working the way we are working. But you cannot work across these boundaries by yourself. Even if all you care about is sitting in your office reading everything, you cannot integrate this kind of material by yourself. You're going to miss [something]. You're going to be dated before you publish. You've got to form teams. That's where my Stanford experience helped. My model for everything back in the day was Xerox PARC. In the 70s, they had flexible teams of geniuses identifying a problem and figuring out what you need to solve the problem, who needs to be around the table. Ok, you need an ice-core geochemist; you need a lake core sediment person, and so on. You sit around and [intellectually] beat the crap out of each other, because my ontology and what I think matters is different from an ice-core geochemist's. If you sit in on an economic course, [you'll find] a different ontology than an ancient history [course]. That's a cool part of universities. We have different ontologies, but we shouldn't make that obscure with language and fancy cultural theories. No, we should make explicit what our ontology is so that we can understand and talk about how we can use material and how we can integrate ancient historical material. That's what we're doing in our project, and it's hard. We don't always agree, but we like each other enough and we like the project, so we want to get it right.

[That might mean] you're one of thirty authors, sometimes more. Sometimes it means you've written a paragraph of a paper, maybe. But you're part of it. That's different from writing a historical monograph or an article on your own. I'm still writing monographs, but other things too. It requires changing the way we think

about how Classicists, ancient historians, and Egyptologists work. What matters in the work? Is it your own ego, or is it about ideas? It's the latter. It's about ideas and engagement, showing why ancient history matters to the university. If I was a dean and saw how ancient historians tend to work at most institutions, I would say "we don't need this department." It's kind of a museum, an antiquarian discipline. It's not contributing to much, and yet it could and it should. That's me getting high on a soapbox.

I wanted to ask about the specific type of collaboration that you're doing with the Yale Nile Initiative. You discussed on the Climate History Podcast with Georgetown University how scientists in their methodologies differ from ancient historians. Working alongside scientists and other academics who do not study history, what are some methodologies that you have integrated into your studies? Has working collaboratively changed the way you interface with ancient history? The issue is causality. A lot of climatologists and paleoclimatologists are really engaged with modern concerns. What's the long term history of climate change? They don't usually focus on the Holocene – the past 10 thousand years – because it's not interesting in terms of climate. The changes are less important theoretically compared to the high levels of CO₂, for example, in the Eocene, which is what a lot of climatologists are studying, because that's the analogue for what is happening now, in some ways. For one, there's a small group of paleoclimatologists who care about human civilization the past 10 thousand years. It's not sexy in climatology. But, also – they're like papyrologists – if you're spending all of your days getting permission to drill ice cores in eastern Greenland and spending two months on the ice cap and coming back and analyzing the ice, you're going to want to make that work matter historically. You can be monomaniacal that ice cores are the be all end all about saying significant things about movers of human history. Now, historians do care more about complexity, and this is the challenge. This is where all the debate and pushback towards our work from ancient historians comes from. We have to be careful with our language. We're not saying, here's the collapse of the Roman Republic, you know, Mount Okmok. But it's impossible not to think that that scale

of an eruption had no impact on the Roman Republic, or on Egypt, or on China, for that matter. It must have had an impact. Then the question is: how much of an impact? How do you integrate climate data into a complex historical story in which there are a lot of moving parts?

Ancient historians tend to still work on political history. It's about kings and politics and Athenian democracy and empire. It's about politics. Well, not completely. There's the environment; there's agricultural production; there's grain shortage and distribution; there's military mobilization and the impact of war and other factors. That's why I think we have to reexamine the whole of ancient history from the ground up, from the beginning. We need a complex [narrative] of human society in the Greek world and the Roman world and Egypt: how humans interact with their environment, how grain distribution and climate works. What about disease outbreaks? What about climate at different scales? Everything's on the table.

We're working on what's called coupled natural human system dynamics. That's one term for it. The human world and the natural world are coupled together with feedback, positive and negative. That's a good way of thinking about it. This is an evolving and interesting field. We have to look at individual humans. Most historians typically don't like this work because they wonder about human agency. And that's true. Human beings are complex. If we're talking about human societies with hierarchies, now we're talking even more complexity. The ancient world, even before civilization, is complex. These are complex societies we're talking about, that require whatever environment they're living in, however big the environmental catchment is. It's necessary, because before the 1800s it was a world of agrarian production with some variability, even without climate change. If you're growing bread wheat, for example, which the Classical world was – Athens was importing a lot of it from the Black Sea region – even with no climate variability wheat crops fail 20% of the time. They do so naturally. So that's built into the risk of ancient farming. Wheat will fail, so what do you do? You have to spread out the risk. You have to have grain distribution networks, grain storage. There are all

sorts of issues that ancient civilizations were solving. That tends to get left out of the story of ancient history, because the sources are mainly archaeological. There is not a lot of written material, though there is some. It's not a standard part of the story, and yet, it's the most important aspect of any ancient society: food and water distribution. It's simple stuff but without it you might as well be hunter-gatherers.

“Everything’s *on the table.”*

We need a different way of doing history. We need to get away from political history. These things are still important, but in a wider context there are more important things about lived human experience: trying to understand change over time better than we are doing, getting at dynamic human history as opposed to static, descriptive human history, which is almost the whole of Egyptology and Classics. It's static, descriptive.

You mentioned earlier that there are periods of history that are interesting for a historian, but might not appear “sexy” for a climatologist or a paleoclimatologist. How does a historian – or a humanist, more generally – approach collaboration with social and physical scientists? What does a humanist bring to the table? In our own work, for example, you could be a papyrologist, a Greek or Egyptian language papyrologist, and you care about publishing texts, which is important. That's what you do. Well, we come along and say, well, you know what matters more than that, even, is a time series over centuries of historical information that you can statistically analyze against the ice core record, and see the connection between qualitative historical sources and what we think is telling us something about the East African monsoon. That is valuable for a climatologist because they can't reconstruct the East African monsoon from climate data. But we have some qualitative information that is telling us something about the monsoon activity because it's the Nile Flood. So, it's indirect, but it's there. Or take the Babylonian astronomical diaries, which are giving weather

observations in the Euphrates river heights and commodities prices over six centuries. So, if you're a climatologist you have no access to that material, but we have weather observations in the Babylonian record which we can tie to specific eruptions. That's an important linkage. Those are human observations of weather, for example, that are dated to a day, which not even climatologists can get: daily weather observations from 400 BC. That's hugely important.

“[...] *I want to give back, and I feel an obligation to give back to my students, but also to the public.*”

Now, if you're a climatologist, you might not care about human beings. But, because humans are living in the world, it's relevant towards understanding even policy implications, which join climate scientists and historians and lots of others too. Because we all care about humanity – and, by the way, animals – if you can present the world with 3000 years of human climate interactions, as opposed to the last 100 years, [that's important]. It also matters for climate modeling, which has gotten way better. Climate deniers have looked at the [past] climate models and say, “look at the climate models, they are really inaccurate.” The climate model iterations coming out this year are amazing, because they are way more precise. And one of the reasons they are more precise is that they're putting in the full Holocene, the last 10,000 years of volcanic record, whereas the last climate models had [only] the last 5 eruptions starting with Krakatoa in 1883. Now, we have hundreds of eruptions over thousands of years [integrated into]

the climate models. We now know that volcanic eruptions are the most important driver of short term climate variability on the planet. That's established. Alright, that's plugged into the climate models. Now they're more accurate. Is there a better example of why ancient history matters? We're actually providing a better window onto the interaction of human beings and the earth climate system. Full stop. End of paragraph.

I want to talk more about how ancient history informs our current understanding of climate change. You mentioned how ancient history can improve our statistical climate models. There was a quote from your most recent book that stuck out to me: “we hope in the end that we can get a better history out of [our research], but also a better understanding of what's happening to the earth right now.” How can ancient history and these stories from Hellenistic Egypt inform the relationship between us, as individuals, and the earth? Do you think that you, as a climate history researcher, have a responsibility to speak on the modern climate crisis? Towards the second question, absolutely yes. That's why I'm writing my book, a big trade book for a general audience. We all need to do our part. Being incredibly fortunate enough to be a professor at Yale, I want to give back, and I feel an obligation to give back to my students, but also to the public. I will give what I know and what my thoughts are. And I feel obligated to do that.

[Towards the first question], it helps us with belief. Whatever your religious beliefs are, or whether you have none, studying [ancient history] opens up a really powerful way of understanding our place on earth and in the universe. It's pretty humbling. You have to walk lightly on the earth, take care of it, and live sustainably. Animals are important. You have to consume carefully. Earth sustains you as a force, and you're just part of it. There's nothing more beautiful than that. There's a famous papal encyclical that came out a couple years ago about this, and the Catholic Church opinion is also that the earth is sacred. If you think that or believe that, it requires us to live a certain way as individuals, but more importantly as societies. That's the tricky part, because we can change our individual behavior, but [change] globally is the challenge. Many ancient peoples – and

medieval too – thought this way, because they had too. People were required to live in the environment. They couldn't go to Whole Foods and buy salmon without knowing where the salmon even comes from. Is it sustainably caught? Is it farmed? Most consumers know nothing. Also, as a human, enough of the stupidity. The science matters. Climate science has advanced unbelievably rapidly in the past decade. The science is creative. They're coming up with climate proxies, natural measures in the earth that can tell us something about temperature, like corals in the Eastern Pacific, that might tell us something about the behavior of the monsoon. To dismiss the science is unforgivable; it's stupid. People are going to dismiss it for silly reasons, for corrupt politics, which is present everywhere in the world. And worldwide our politics is still in the bronze age. That's on us as people, to get out and mobilize. And like the ancient world, we have to adapt. We're going to have to respond politically and socially. We're going to have to respond to migration on a much larger scale than we've seen before, live differently, live more sustainably. It means convincing the next generation to live with less, so that maybe their kids will see the results of changing the system. That's a tough sell, but that's what we're going to have to do.

You mentioned previously that the work which you do can be sensationalized and taken out of context. In a lecture that you gave for the Peabody Museum, you showed a News18 article titled, “How an Alaskan Volcano Erupting Half the World Away Led to the Fall of the Roman Republic.” Discussions about the ancient world, especially those involving many different disciplines and scholars, can become complex. Like you said, some papers can even have upwards of 30 authors. They can also, however, become oversimplified. How do you represent the complexity and interdisciplinarity of ancient history, while still crafting an appealing and accessible narrative? Language, writing, and communication. Even the New York Times sliced one of our papers to shreds. You know, “Cleopatra killed by eruption,” and so on. It gets really oversimplified. And that's a problem with climate history. If it gets oversimplified in serious journalism, then any kind of critic can say, “you see, this is all bullshit.” It's dangerous. Even if we try to communicate well, it

still happens. So, it's on us to find good language and retain the complexity while conveying the message to the public. That's what I'm trying to do now. But it's hard. We need new language, for starters, which is not simple. We need new ways of presenting the material, new visuals. This is climate communication, and a lot of climatologists and climate communications specialists are really good at [presenting] visuals. We need that all to convey our message, that this is not old-fashioned determinism; it's not that a particular kind of climate change caused a human response. It's more complicated than that; there's an interaction of good and bad that creates winners and losers. What we can do as historians is communicate really carefully what we're doing and why we think it matters. We can get out there and give lectures to the public to get the word out, write trade books for a large audience, and take some risks doing that. I feel personally obligated to stick my neck out and take some risks in doing this kind of work. It's hard. It's challenging. But I say: bring the challenge on. ♦