

Leading Matters Los Angeles
January 24, 2009
Session Notes

Beyond Glory and Grandeur: Why Athens and Rome Matter More Than Ever

Josiah Ober, Mitsotakis Professor in the School of Humanities and Sciences, and professor of political science and of classics

Richard Saller, Warren Anderson Dean of the School of Humanities and Sciences, and professor of classics and of history

An analogy from the ancient world can be drawn from history and applied to today's world structure. Ancient Greece and Rome present obvious conceptual models through which we can look at today's world.

Josiah Ober

One important reason to pay attention to the ancient world is to analyze the effectiveness of liberal democracies as a government type. How and why does a democratic community perform well, and when does it perform better than an authoritarian regime? Democracies, when organized right, can outperform their authoritarian counterparts.

In ancient Greece, there was a dense ecology of 100 city-states that were similar in culture, natural resources, disease pool, etc. The city-states saw sustained economic growth from 700 to 300 B.C. Democratic Athens outperformed all of its city-state rivals from 500 to 325 B.C. Democracy correlates with success in Athens.

One example of the benefit of democracy is the Athenian law on tyranny, in 337. The law was the product of aggregated knowledge about how to deal with potential tyrants. Building on common knowledge, the law aligned the action of citizens in the face of tyrannical threats. There were more public records of the new rule.

Richard P. Saller

Are ancient Rome and the United States comparable enough to make predictions? Is the question whether the United States follows ancient Rome formed in the right way?

There are profound differences in social and economic issues between the United States and ancient Rome. For one, the life span is different—the life expectancy is greater in the United States. The economy has shifted from agriculture to knowledge, and the access to higher education has expanded.

The definition of well-being has shifted from the amount of land owned to the degree of knowledge. Land is a zero-sum game, while knowledge can be a win-win proposition for all members of society.

The ancient Romans allowed more people to become citizens than the Athenians did. Citizenship was exclusive in Athens, while in Rome all people were allowed to be

Roman citizens. The Romans had an inclusive attitude: Even former slaves could be citizens.

An advantage of Rome's unique inclusiveness is that it had unmatched advantages in troop numbers because of conscription.

The differences between the United States and ancient Rome are salient. I'm wary of drawing parallels between the fate of Rome and the United States. The United States must include the entire population in higher education.