What Do Historians Do?

Interview with Elizabeth Pollard

Elizabeth Pollard: My name is Elizabeth Pollard. I'm a Roman historian at San Diego State University. My field of study is witchcraft in the Roman world, as well as Roman history in world historical context, by which I mean interactions between the Roman Mediterranean and Indian Ocean trading networks. And one of the great things about those topics, witchcraft at Rome and Roman history in world historical context is that they actually come together in fascinating ways.

Shane Carter, ORIAS Interviewer: I'm going to deviate from even my second question and ask you to tell me a story about a witch.

Beth: Well, there are some fabulous stories about witches from the Roman world. I think my favorite witch is one from the fictional tale, Apuleius's "Metamorphoses," also known as "The Golden Ass," and there is a fabulous witch in that story, her name is Meroe, and even her name is evocative of her witchineness because Meroe is a city that was well up the Nile River towards-- by which I mean south towards Nubia, and it was this faraway place that the Romans thought of as being exotic.

And she's an innkeeper, and she works her magic on the men who stay in the inn that she keeps. And there's just these fabulous descriptions of the kinds of things that she does, she's sort of the wicked witch of Rome. And so Meroe is just this great image of everything a witch can do. She's a royal and powerful innkeeper. She draws down the power of the moon. She makes people fall in love with her. She takes out her anger on women who would distract the eye of the men that she wants to be her own.

There's even this one story of how she locks up the womb of a woman who is pregnant with one of her lover's children, so that the woman is doomed to a perpetual pregnancy, and it's just this great vivid story of what, at least fictionally, Romans feared a witch could do, and so Meroe is probably my favorite.

My favorite real witch, however-- there's two of them, two women who were accused of witchcraft. One is named Munatia Plancina, who is implicated in the death of Germanicus, one of the heir apparents in the early Roman Empire.

And when Germanicus dies, it's clear that he has died of foul play, likely magic, and there's a lot of effort to figure out, you know, who would have done this, you know, who put the magical spells in the walls, you know, who gave him some kind of potion that made it that his heart wouldn't burn on the funeral pyre?

And it's clear that this one woman, Munatia Plancina, may well have had something to do with the deed. She's great friends with a known witch, so it's thought that she might have had something to do with the actual witchcraft.

And I always-- when I had my daughter, I wanted to name her after a powerful witch, right, and I was like, "Okay, Meroe is not that cool, Canidia is creepy," and then Munatia Plancina, I'm like, "People are gonna call her mucus or like something horrible for the rest of her life," so instead, I picked the second

woman accused of magic in Rome, a woman by the name of Aemilia Lepida, who was accused of faking that she had borne a child that did not exist, and her trial was pretty fabulous in the early 1st century CE.

So I figured Amelia was a safe bet, a safe name, that would not get any criticism, and yet was, you know, great witchy ode.

ORIAS: Given the fact that you spend your time thinking about witches, how do you define history?

Beth: Well, it's a great question. I actually just taught a class called "Why History Matters," and it's the first time I ever taught this course, and I spent a lot of time thinking about what counts as history.

And so this new course, "Why History Matters," falls into the lifelong learning area of GE, and part of lifelong learning means you need to think about how your topic intersects with sociological, physiological, and psychological dimensions of your topic. And I came to the conclusion that history explores nearly every aspect of what it means to be human, it's the ultimate humanities field.

Now, for me, history is this attempt-- it's this attempt to make sense of human relationships, human relationships in the past. And by that, I mean, you know, just writ large, you know, relationships among people, relationships between people and their environment, and even environment writ large, you know, people and their physical surroundings, or people and the political community and economic structures of power that govern their lives.

I think history, in terms of what it means to be human, could be everything from earth-shattering events or, you know, seemingly minor interactions. Now, for the history that I do, it's, you know, in looking at women's use of magic and accusations of witchcraft, I'm looking at women trying to negotiate every relationship in their lives and how that is processed by the community around them.

ORIAS: So wait, like you're looking at women managing the relationships in their lives through witchcraft--?

Beth: Or through accused witchcraft. So they're either using witchcraft or they're getting accused of witchcraft because of what they're doing. So imagine a woman who wants to do that which every woman ought to do in the Roman world, namely, give her spouse legitimate children.

So if a woman is, you know, maybe taking some sort of herbal remedy or, you know, wearing something around her wrist, or even creating some kind of spell that she's reading and, you know, having someone write for her on a piece of papyrus, if she is doing all of those activities to give her legitimate spouse a legitimate child, no one's going to accuse her of anything.

But if a woman is trying to use some of those exact same ways of acting in order to have a child by someone who is not a legitimate person to procreate with, then she opens herself up to accusations of witchcraft.

So there are examples of ways that women might try to control their childbearing in the Roman world. And if a woman is doing that in some context, that would be seen as appropriate. If a woman is doing it in a context where she is depriving her husband of a legitimate heir, that would be seen as inappropriate and might get her accused of witchcraft.

It comes out, not just in women trying to have children but the alternate, women trying not to have children. So there are examples of ways that women might try to control their childbearing in the Roman world. And if a woman is doing that in some context, that would be seen as appropriate.

If a woman is doing it in a context where she is depriving her husband of a legitimate heir, that would be seen as inappropriate, so this, you know, this argument of, you know, what is an abortion, what is child killing versus, you know, family planning.

So even some of these very contemporary issues that we find ourselves thinking about and seeing in the world today were getting played out in the Roman world, but could garner a charge of witchcraft.

ORIAS: I feel like I almost can answer this question based on your voice and what you've said before, but what do you love about learning about this and doing this?

Beth: Oh gosh, what do I love about history? I-- that's kind of like asking, what do I love about my children? And it-- 'cause it sort of depends on the day or the week or the year, but I think, in a word, what I love about history is the challenge, I love that challenge of looking for clues.

You know, having a question, you know, a question I want to try to answer, in my case, you know, why would a woman be accused of being a witch? You know, that sort of thing. So having this question and searching for clues, you know, and trying to assemble, you know, just radically disparate evidence.

And, you know, I'll talk to you about the evidence I use, probably later, but assembling radically disparate evidence, coming up with ways to fill gaps in data, because there are a lot of gaps when you're dealing with the history of 2000 years ago, and then trying to find something new to say.

Folk have been writing about Roman history for hundreds of years and, you know, trying to find something new is this great challenge, trying to make some argument that no one has made before. So, you know, so what I love about history, I love the fact that I-- it matters, but also it's-- it matters, and it's challenging.

ORIAS: I want to know how you choose what you research and write about, and then maybe a couple of interesting questions that you feel like have directed your research.

Beth: I think I'm the worst kind of historian, or maybe I'm like every other historian, in that I choose what to research and write about based on what speaks to me at that point in my life, but I explore things that have questions that I want to answer and a challenge that I want to tackle.

And so when I was in graduate school, for instance, I recall the reason I chose women and witchcraft is that it was part of me, I sometimes describe it as my feminist epiphany. You know, I was in grad school and-- at University of Pennsylvania, and I was studying a very, you know, good Roman topic here, the military, the Roman military on the boundaries of empire, you know, just an incredibly traditional Roman history topic.

But I read this book called "Women in Antiquity," "Women in Antiquity" by Gillian Clark, and it was just earth-shattering for me. That was like 1996, I think, when I read this book, and I was like-- somehow, I don't know how I never thought of it before, but I'm like, "What, there were women in ancient Rome, you know, women who had children and, you know, menstruated and, you know, cared about their bodies and, you know, wanted to have a life, wanted to have control over their lives?"

And it was just this, you know, powerful moment for me where I realized that there were women in antiquity and I wanted to study them. I don't know-- I don't know how best to describe it, it was just-- it was insane.

So I shifted from this one topic that I had gone to grad school to write about and study, namely, the role of the military in Christianizing the boundaries of empire, and I started to study women, women and their religious expression.

And, you know, so much had been done on Christian women, Jewish women, traditional Greco-Roman pagan women, I wanted to dig into a topic that let me struggle with women of all of these different backgrounds, and magic is that topic, it's-- magic and witchcraft accusation cut into Christian women's lives, Jewish women-- women's lives, Greco-Roman pagan women's lives, because it was-- it's a strategy of acting that allows women to claim some sort of agency, either in their childbearing or their personal relationships or, you know, anything else a woman might want to get done or deal with in antiquity.

So I-- maybe it was just, you know, the topic that struck me as my, you know, 20-something self, going through the same sorts of things, you know, figuring out, you know, what's the strategy for acting to get what it is I want? And so it just spoke to me at that point in my life.

And so, how do I choose what I want to research about? It's something that I care about because history is a lonely task, it's-- and it's challenging, and so I feel like you need to choose something that matters, matters deeply, to investigate in order to keep at it and to continue to rise to that challenge.

ORIAS: What do you mean it's a lonely task?

Beth: Well, you know, a lot of what you do is on your own. I mean, you share your ideas in a corporate environment, right? You know, you write about them, you present them at conferences, you talk to others about them.

But when it comes down to the doing of history, at least what I do, it is, you know, sometimes sitting in an archive looking at ancient texts, you know, long ago fiction or, you know, historical descriptions of interactions that took place.

You know, it's you in the written word, or it's you with the archaeological evidence that's been published by someone you're trying to, you know, piece through it and understand how it helps to make sense of the written word that you're reading, or it's, you know, you with a book struggling through some anthropological description of how witchcraft accusation plays out in the contemporary community.

And, you know, when it comes down to writing, it's you with that blank flashing cursor on the screen, you know, figuring out how all these puzzle pieces fit together. You know, what history is, you know, it's this attempt to make meaning of past human relationships.

You know, that-- that's the end point of types in history where you get to have relationship with others through your written word or your spoken word and share your ideas with others, but to get to that point, there's a lot of you, you know, with the past, you know, digging through it.

And I suppose it's populated with, you know, people who lived thousands of years ago, but see, now I'm thinking maybe it's not a lonely task 'cause here I am with all of these long ago dead people, trying to make their voices come alive and their experience matter, but it's on the individual, you know, the one living person, you know, me, the writer, that-- the historian trying to make sense of it, to give those voices expression.

ORIAS: What was helpful to me about you saying that was historians say like written texts are important, and primary documents are important. And of course, from a standpoint of using them as evidence to make a case for something or to make an argument, that makes perfect sense.

But what I'm hearing when you describe it as a somewhat lonely task and you are sitting in this space by yourself and the only other voices are the remnants of people's voices from, in your case, thousands of years ago, I think that the written word has more emotional resonance in that context than it does for a student reading it in a textbook.

And I wonder if part of the-- if part of the reason that it's hard sometimes for historians to convey to their students the importance, not just of reading these documents but also of writing, is that the written text, for certain parts of the world and certain types of history, is for long periods of time, the company that you're keeping when you're doing this work.

Beth: It's funny you should say that it's not just the written word that matters, but it's the written and, you know, for what I do, the written and the practiced word. So I work a lot with spellbooks, so one of the pieces of evidence that I use for what I do are spellbooks written, you know, as far back as, you know, 100 CE, one-- you know, 400 Common Era.

And I recall sitting in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, you know, many years ago, flipping through this 1600-year-old magical handbook, you know, it's a codex, you know, this bound codex, mini folio codex with spells written in it in Greek, in, you know, several different hands.

And, you know, as I flipped through this thing and was studying the different spells, and I was trying to look for, you know, spells that had the idea that a man had to use it versus spells that might have been written for a woman to use the spell.

So I was scrutinizing the language very closely, going at it with my very-- you know, my classically trained linguistic analysis, you know, is this-- what tense is this verb in, you know, what number, you know, are there any signs of gender going on in this language?

And I'm reading it and then I see this smudge on the margin, and then I turn the page and you get this smell wafting off of it and I'm reading a spell that has all of these ingredients that are supposed to be used, you know.

And, you know, maybe it's, you know, blood of a turkey, you know, of some sort of bird, it's not a turkey, it's about blood of some sort of random bird, the-- you know, some sort of spice that's supposed to be used.

You can smell the smell coming off this book that almost nobody ever opens, you can see these smudges in the margins, and all I could think of is like, this is like a cookbook. You know, somebody propped this thing up in the side of a workshop and they did this stuff. And all of a sudden, you know, there I am

sitting in the Bibliothèque Nationale, me and about, you know, ten other people on a stormy Wednesday afternoon.

And here I am with this text, and I'm there with the practitioner from 1600 years ago, and, you know, imagining them with this, yeah, this codex, trying to enact these words and do it in a way that was going to help someone, you know, make someone love them, or, you know, have a child to keep your spouse, or, you know, bring a vision of a god to help you deal with some sort of horrible thing you're going through and, you know, it's just powerful, so that power of the written word.

And I think that would apply for any number of, you know, texts across history, you know, the written word that makes things happen, and, you know, the more we can bring that alive in the history that we write, the more I think it does connect with students.

ORIAS: When you're writing something, do you think about yourself in community with those people who wrote thousands of years ago?

Beth: Oh my gosh, that's a great question! I, you know, I do, I think maybe I over identify with these women from long ago, but I do actually think about, you know, what-- I mean, I think you have to because there are so many blanks to be filled in.

But I do, I do think about what these women's-- what these women's lives would have been like, you know, what would drive a woman to, you know, to want to have a child when she can-- I mean, some of-- when you're studying magic and antiquity, you're reading about all of these, you know, problems that people have, essentially, and how they're trying to deal with their problems.

And you can't help but think of the human story behind who would want to have an amulet to stop a never-ending flow of blood, who would want to create, you know, some sort of remedy for a wandering womb, you know, some woman accused of hysteria who wants to stop their, you know, hysteria or, you know, is it the man who doesn't want to deal with this unmanageable woman, or is it the woman who, you know, is just, you know, feeling, you know, out of control of her life and her surroundings?

And so trying to imagine the reasons that, you know, a spell might be used or that someone might have been accused of using magic for some illegitimate purpose, you do find yourself, or I do find myself in the community of those who lived 1600 years ago and struggled with problems that in some ways are shockingly contemporary.

ORIAS: Do you think there are non-historical questions about the past?

Beth: If history is that challenge of finding evidence from the past and telling a story that matters in the present, almost any topic can spur meaningful historical inquiry. But I think my caveat for that is that all-- if all you're doing is rooting around in the past for justification of something you want to say in the present, then that's not history, that's more self-justification.

So I think in some ways it's about motive, you know, if you're letting-- if you're digging around in the past to allow the past to speak for itself and to try to find, you know, patterns that can matter in the present day, yeah, that's one thing.

But if you're going to the past with an agenda and you're searching for examples that are going to prove or, you know, somehow support that agenda that you want to set forth, I don't think that's good historical inquiry.

However, that's not to say that looking in the past to try to find meaning about something that's happening in the present is illegitimate, in fact, I think that's-- as I mentioned before, I think that's part of what history does. I think the difference between the two is a predetermined agenda of what you want to find.

And so I think looking at the past around a topic to see what's there and see how people from long ago struggled with similar questions, you know, tried to deal with similar problems, but looking for an answer in the past is what I would say is off base.

ORIAS: So I know, given the time period that you work in, you must also draw on archaeology, but I'm curious about drawing on information that comes from other disciplines.

Beth: So ancient history is, in and of itself, an interdisciplinary field. So, for instance, to do what I do, you know, the classics as a field of study is significant, you have to know the language, you have to know the Greek and know the Latin, and be able to dig into the kinds of words that are being used in a magical spell, or, you know, in a fiction text that's describing the practice of magic or in a historical text that is describing a trial.

So being able to examine closely those words, the text, you know, what's in there, what's not in there, grammatical structures, yeah, that's central to working in antiquity. You're right, archaeology is central to trying to study the sorts of things I do, so that actual material evidence of magical practice.

So it's kind of tricky when one says archaeology because it's not really about, you know, the careful excavation of these items, you know, it's more about studying the stuff that has come out of the ground, you know, whether it's lead tablets that have curses etched on them and, you know, trying to study them for, you know, who's doing this, you know, can I make any gender determination here? Does that allow me to talk about my women and what they might be doing?

There's also figurines that are deposited-- you know, they get excavated, that have been deposited in a way that suggests that they might have been used in some sort of ritually significant fashion. So archaeological evidence often plays a big role in trying to understand magic.

And then I think I also mentioned anthropology is another field that comes into play, because, you know, magic practice, you know, both the doing of magic and the accusing of others of doing it, it's a community issue, and we can't talk to people from 2000 years ago to find out exactly what they thought about magic and witchcraft.

You know, we can try to glean it from fiction or from historical texts, but it's very useful to look at how anthropologists have investigated communities that have concepts of witchcraft or of magic accusation to see how those issues work out.

There's always the problem, of course, of saying, you know, can you compare some, you know, group from, you know, an island in the middle of the South Pacific, or, you know, some group of people from Africa at some particular point in time observed by an anthropologist in the 20th century, you know, can you compare that to Rome of the, you know, 1st century CE?

So that's always a struggle, but anthropological thinking, at least, at least gives people who do what I do, scholars who do what I do, some questions to ask, you know.

You know, so if ritual process is really important to anthropologists and they explain how ritual process shows how communities move through life stages, that gives me a question as an ancient historian to say, okay, is there anything about life stages happening here in this particular spell or, you know, in this particular context?

Or if magic helps-- or a witchcraft accusation helps for internal community struggles to be diffused, it's worthwhile to look and say, okay, is the accusation in this particular 1st century Roman context diffusing some central community struggle?

Or, you know, if women are negotiating complex power relationships through accusing others of witchcraft or claiming that they themselves are witches, it gives me a chance to look at the antiquity-- the records from antiquity and say, "Hmm, might this thing be happening here?"

So anthropology gives this-- although it's on, you know, different peoples from different times and in different cultures, it does give a set of questions to pose to the text from the ancient world, the material evidence from the ancient world.

ORIAS: Have you ever had a student tell you that learning history changed their life?

Beth: I think I have an example of a student who in some ways said not just that learning history changed his life, but that it saved his life. At San Diego State, we get a lot of students who are heading into the military, you know, so a lot of ROTC students, and I also have in my class a lot of veterans after their time of service in the military.

And about 12 years ago, I got an email from a student. I actually looked back in my email, I still had it. I got an email from a student who had been in my Roman history class in 2005, and I've dug it-- I dug it out, and I want to read you a little bit of it.

He wrote, "I was one of your students in 2005. You taught me more than I could have ever guessed about the Roman Empire. Since that class, I have found myself devouring any and all reputable books about Roman history. Honestly, you sparked a genuine interest in the subject for me and for that, I thank you."

Yeah, that's the standard sort of thing that you might hear from the student, but then he went on, and I-- I'm gonna paraphrase now because it was a really long email. He goes on to describe his experience as a young infantry second lieutenant in the Marine Corps who was deployed to Iraq right after graduation, so, you know, right after he finished my class.

And he describes his time fighting in Al Anbar province from 2005 to 2007, so he was there in Iraq in some of the roughest period of American intervention in Iraq in the last two decades.

And he described his platoon and the number of men in his platoon that he lost, and what it was like to try to motivate them and help them see there's a bigger story to what they're experiencing, and there's a longer history to the experience of people in warfare.

And he wrote in his note to me something I didn't expect, he wrote to me that he told his troops, you know, these young grunts who never went to, you know, college, he was telling them stories about the Roman military that he had learned in my class.

And he was, you know, recounting to them, you know, stories from Tacitus and from Josephus and, you know, all of this detailed information about, you know, the primary sources for warfare in the Roman world and the scholars who have written it-- about it ever since.

And then he went on to say, you know, he's coming out, he-- that he was coming out of Iraq, and he wanted my advice. His troops had actually asked him to write to his history professor to ask for advice on a tattoo that they could all get that had some sort of Roman component to mark their time together because there's stories that he had told his platoon, from Roman history class, had helped him to get through it.

And I-- yeah, I'm sure I'm telling this story badly, but it was genuinely moving for me to hear from a student who had taken what he learned in my class and shared it with others who never went to college in a way that brought meaning in something that was a grueling life or death situation that I could never fathom.

And, you know, whatever you think of US involvement in Iraq or, you know, American involvement in Southwest Asia more broadly, it was just humbling to realize that this young man had taken something he learned in the history classroom and used it in the direst of situations, not just for his own, you know, sanity and benefit, but for the benefit of others.

And so that was just incredibly moving, to hear that, and it was just a-- one of those real-life situations where you think, "Wow, you know, this young man has, you know, just taken the classroom and taken it into a place I just never could have imagined."

It's not like he was like the best student ever or, you know, one that I even realized that the course had made an impact on him. I think that's probably the most-- the standout one.

ORIAS: Yeah, that is definitely a standout.