Faculty Interview with Julia Wilker
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Conversations

Julia Wilker
Assistant Professor of Classical Studies

Discentes: Where are you from?
Julia Wilker: I was born in Germany. I received my education there and my PhD. I was teaching in Berlin before I joined Penn in 2011.
D: That’s a big change! Is there any particular reason why?
JW: There are a variety of reasons to come to Penn. I prefer
the academic system here and the general liberal arts curriculum. When I was a student, the first degree you obtained was the MA; this has changed over time and now an undergraduate degree has been introduced. However, the major difference is still that you have to declare your major at the time of your application.

**D:** How are you finding Penn? What’s it like teaching ANCH 027 versus seminars?

**JW:** Well, the Rome lecture is different from small seminars. Both involve a different way of teaching, but they are both challenging and rewarding. In a seminar, you have time to discuss certain things in much greater detail. In the big lecture, the focus is more on structuring the material to accommodate different interests. There are students who are taking the class to satisfy a college requirement and those who are more classics-oriented.

**D:** What other courses have you taught?

**JW:** Besides Intro to Ancient Rome, I teach a 100-level class on Ancient Mediterranean Empires. It deals with different types of empires, and questions like how Persia and Hellenistic kingdoms influenced Rome as an empire. We use a comparative approach, examining the differences and similarities. Do they learn from each other? Do they draw on each other’s experiences? In the class, we try to define imperial rule and how it affects people. In my seminar on the Hellenistic and Roman Near East, the focus is on the Near East in Hellenistic and Roman rule and the mixing of Hellenistic and Roman culture with the local one. I also teach a 300-level class on Ancient Macedonia which spans from the 6th century BCE to the Roman period.

**D:** What topic are you passionate about?

**JW:** I’m interested in Hellenistic and Roman Judea—what happens when cultures interact, how this interaction influences the life of the people there, and how they perceive
the world. These people are in between cultures and have combined identities, but simultaneously do not belong entirely. It’s these identities that I’m most interested in.

D: Does this phenomenon interest you in a modern context?

JW: It’s interesting to see the spread of Western culture and how that influences others. It leads to many questions, but it’s not the same as in antiquity.

D: What projects are you currently working on?

JW: I’m working on the role of women in the Jewish dynasties in the Hellenistic and Roman period, particularly how Jewish dynasties presented themselves. In the Hellenistic period, royal women in general gained more power and influence, which is also true for the Jewish dynasties, but their presentation of themselves is different. In the official propaganda, royal women are omitted. I am also interested in interstate relations of 4th century Classical Greece, particularly centering around the questions of what did the Greeks mean when they talked about concepts such as peace, autonomy, and freedom, and how are these concepts translated into the language of treaties. This period is seen as one of demise and decline, but if you look at it from a different angle, it is also a period of innovation and new ways of thinking and transformation.

D: Is there anything about you that you would like to share? Or advice you would like to give undergraduates?

JW: Everybody should take classics courses, especially at the undergraduate level! Besides the content and the ways it engages you to think about our very own culture, similarities and differences, what classics teaches you is the ability to think critically, to engage critically with the text, to think about how history happens. It is challenging because of the material we have; you can’t produce new evidence; you have to look at the same texts over and over again and engage with what scholars have done already over the past hundred years.
It’s awesome that we keep finding new aspects and thoughts. In general, I think what is interesting about classics is how it is very familiar—as the origin of Western culture—but also very foreign to our own. It’s part of our culture, yet very different.

D: How do you find the Penn department contributing to this?

JW: I find the department at Penn is mirroring that very well. We have a broad variety of interests and so many people working on so many different things, but we all talk to each other about our interests, and this communication brings together so many different angles and perspectives that all contribute to a larger picture.