

Interdisciplinary Faculty Spotlight: Interview with Professor Lauren Ristvet

Interviewed by Reggie Kramer

So, you're teaching CLST 311, Disasters in the Ancient Mediterranean World, with Prof. Cam Grey. As an archaeologist and a professor in the Anthropology Department, how did you get involved with this class?

LAUREN RISVET — Cam and I talked about teaching this class together a few years ago. My early research was on human responses to environmental catastrophes with a focus on climate change in the Early Bronze Age in Northern Mesopotamia. When Cam told me that he was pursuing a master's degree in environmental science and was interested in environmental history, it seemed like a great point of connection and we thought we could do something fun.

Could you tell us a little bit about your current research?

My current archaeological project is in Azerbaijan at the site of Oglanqala in an autonomous republic called Nakhchivan. It's a large fortress site atop a hill overlooking an irrigated plain that was mostly occupied episodically between 1000 BCE and 100 CE. My research considers empires and frontier dynamics, with a focus on Urartu (ca. 800-600 BCE), the Achaemenid and Seleucid Empires (ca. 550-330 and 330-200 BCE, at least here) and Parthia/Rome (ca. 200 BCE-200 CE). This area was consistently along a border throughout this millennium so I investigate violence and trade particularly, since these were the main vectors of empire.

What made you decide or want to become an archaeologist?

I took a great class—Civilization and Collapse—so close to our disasters class as an undergraduate with Professor Harvey Weiss at Yale. And then Harvey invited me to come dig with him in Syria and I was hooked.

Your area of interest is Mesopotamia. Did you have any prior experience with Greek or Roman history, culture, or archaeology?

Yes. My first job was actually as an assistant professor of ancient near eastern and Mediterranean history at Georgia State University, where I and someone teaching Latin were the only people dealing with the ancient world at all. So I taught Greek and Roman history. I also excavated for three seasons in Greece and my research in Mesopotamia and the Caucasus includes the Hellenistic and Roman periods. My recent book has a chapter on negotiating tradition in Seleucid Babylonia, and I'm really interested in this period and place.

How do you think the 'softer' side of Classics, the textual analysis and the translation, can inform archaeology? And vice-versa?

I think they both provide a useful context for the other. My own work has been greatly enhanced by the rich textual sources available in Mesopotamia, and my recent book *Ritual, Performance and Politics in the Ancient Near East* specifically engaged with texts from ca. 2400 BCE, ca. 1750 BCE, and ca. 300-100 BCE. They helped me to understand emic views of ritual, memory, tradition, and history and changed the questions I asked of archaeological data like burials or settlement systems. Archaeology often provides useful material that can change the questions historians and text people ask as well. So, for example, information from surveys can provide broad perspectives on population change or demographic reconstruction.

Both Classics and Anthropology are very broad fields, and I imagine there is significant overlap. Could you talk a little bit about the relationship between the two fields of study?



Lauren Ristvet

Archaeologists at Penn are housed in many departments, particularly Anthropology, Classics, Art History and [Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations]. One division is often spatial and temporal; anthropology has archaeologists who work everywhere in the world, except the ancient Mediterranean. But this isn't always true everywhere. Michael Dietler is an archaeologist who runs a cool project in France (looking at the Hinterland of Massalia during the pre-Roman and Roman periods) and he's in an anthropology department. In the past, anthropologists were more likely to consider theory explicitly, but I don't think that's true anymore at all. Another division sometimes has to do with the presence or absence of writing, but I certainly use quite a lot of texts in my own work.

And is there much cooperation between the two departments at Penn?

On a personal level, especially among the archaeologists, we meet all the time. I also occasionally attend the Classics colloquium. We also supervise a lot of graduate students together.

What has your experience been like teaching a Classics course, full of Classics students?

It's been really fun! I love close reading and this has given me a chance to do that.

Q: Is there a difference between Classics courses and students and Anthropology courses and students?

I think most of my courses often have both, especially archaeologically-minded Classics students.

Q: And, lastly, do you see yourself engaging with Classics as a field or with the Classical Studies Department in the future?

Certainly! On the graduate level I work with students in the Ancient History and Art and Archaeology of the Mediterranean World programs, and on the undergraduate level I hope to keep teaching with classicists whose interests overlap with mine, like Cam Grey and Julia Wilker.