
HUME'S READING OF THE CLASSICS AT NINEWELLS, 1749–51

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a re-evaluation of David Hume's intensive reading of the classics at an important moment of his literary and intellectual career. It sets out to reconstruct the extent and depth of this reading as well as the uses – scholarly, philosophical and polemical – to which Hume put the information he had gathered in the course of it. The article contends that Hume read the classics against the grain to collect data on a wide range of cultural information which he could utilise for a number of literary and philosophical projects he was engaged in during the early 1750s. This reading soon came to pervade almost all aspects of Hume's literary activities of that period and resulted in what is here described as a fragmentary history of classical antiquity. As a result Hume's reading of the classics emerges from this article as both more extensive and more significant than has so far been acknowledged.

This essay is concerned with a re-evaluation of David Hume's reading at an important moment of his literary and intellectual career.¹ In the years 1749–51, which Hume spent at his family's country estate Ninewells in the Scottish borders, he engaged in an intensive reading of the classics, a reading that involved going back to works he had encountered earlier as well as reading ones he was yet not familiar with. This (re)reading was to result in his longest and most learned essay, 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations', as well as inform a number of major and minor writings written during this period. The initial aim of this article lies in the reconstruction of the extent and depth of Hume's reading of the classics, as well as the uses – scholarly, philosophical and polemical – to which he put the information gathered in the course of it. In addition, I intend to raise questions

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about the significance of such intensive private reading and highlight some of the implications this might have for our understanding of the various writings Hume composed in this period. The present essay argues that this reading, commonly overlooked, has a much wider significance than has so far been realised and can in fact be shown to have been integral to Hume's intellectual preoccupations and literary pursuits during a crucial but neglected period of his intellectual career.

Hume's sojourn in the country from 1749 to 1751 followed two years of active duty as a secretary to Lieutenant-General James Sinclair, years Hume would later describe as 'almost the only interruptions which my studies have received during the course of my life' (Hume 1987: xxxv). Even during this period we see him envisaging a return to 'Books, Leisure, & Solitude in the Country' to pursue 'my Studies at Ninewells', as he states in letters to his friend and kinsman Henry Home (Hume to Henry Home, January and June 1747, in Hume 1954: 24–5). These letters provide us with an important clue as to the nature of his reading and the extent of the library available to him at Ninewells. Weighing the different options available to him, Hume shows himself inclined to resume his study of the classics—he specifically mentions 'my Xenophon or Polybius'—but in thinking back to previous times at Ninewells he admits that 'I felt the Solitude in the Country rather too great, especially as I was so indifferently provided of a Library to employ me' (Hume 1954: 24, 26). Hume need not have worried about excessive solitude, for less than a year after his return from a naval-military incursion against the coast of France he received another invitation from Sinclair, this time to accompany the Lieutenant-General on a diplomatic mission to the courts of Vienna and Turin. Hume accepted in spite of 'an inward reluctance to leave my books, and leisure and retreat'. In the summer of 1749 he finally returned to Scotland to set himself up at Ninewells for a two-year period of intense study and writing, which was to result in the publication of his mature works on moral philosophy and political economy: the *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, published in 1751, and the *Political Discourses*, which appeared the following year.²

In order to find out what exactly Hume was up to in his reading during this period, we need to have a closer look at his correspondence with his friends. An important clue is provided by a letter he wrote to John Clephane in April 1750:

You would perhaps ask, how I employ my time in this leisure and solitude, and what are my occupations? Pray, do you expect I should convey to you an encyclopedia, in the compass of a letter? The last thing I took my hand from was a very learned, elaborate discourse, concerning the populousness of antiquity; not altogether in opposition to *Vossius* and *Montesquieu*, who exaggerate that affair infinitely; but, starting some doubts, and scruples, and difficulties, sufficient to make us suspend our judgement on that head. (Hume to Henry Home, 9 February 1748, Hume 1932: i, 111, cf. i, 109)

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Again we find Hume referring to the 'leisure and solitude' of his life at Ninewells—perhaps an allusion to the ideal of literary pursuit in the leisurely retreat of the countryside that had received its classic expression in the letters of Hume's favourite author among the ancients, Cicero.³ Furthermore, this letter hints at a range of diverse literary activities so wide as to justify the whimsical remark that they could only be subsumed in the form of an encyclopaedia. Hume specifically mentions 'a very learned, elaborate discourse, concerning the populousness of antiquity', a piece that was still on his mind in February 1751, as a letter to his friend and critic Gilbert Elliot reveals:

I have amus'd myself lately with an Essay or Dissertation on the Populousness of Antiquity, which led me into many Disquisitions concerning both the public & domestic Life of the Ancients. Having read over almost all the Classics both Greek and Latin, since I form'd that Plan, I have extracted what serv'd most to my Purpose . . . (Hume to Henry Home, January and June 1747, in Hume 1954: 24–5)

From these two letters we can infer that Hume had been working on his essay on populousness for at least ten months, while at the same time being engaged in the composition of a number of other works mentioned in his letters. This provides us with an indication of the amount of preparatory work required by the specific task Hume had set himself. Hume claims to have 'read over almost all the Classics both Greek and Latin, since I form'd that Plan', an astonishing statement which poses a number of questions concerning the nature and significance of his reading of the classics.

The extent of Hume's reading of the classics at Ninewells in the early 1750s has repeatedly been questioned and its significance downplayed on the grounds that it would have been to a large extent a re-reading of texts Hume had already encountered in the 1740s or at an even earlier date. This interpretation is largely founded on the evidence of Hume's surviving reading notes, generally referred to as the 'early memoranda'. This set of manuscript notes bears no date and there is as yet no consensus among Hume scholars as to their exact date of composition. These notes contain a considerable amount of classical material, some of which bears directly on the question of populousness (Mossner 1948; cf. Mossner 1949: 141 note 5). On the basis of this material, Hume's biographer and the first editor of the 'early memoranda', Ernest C. Mossner, assumed that 'the reading of the classics in 1750 was, at the very least, a second reading' (Mossner 1980: 266). Mossner's argument has however been challenged on various grounds. In addition to the somewhat uncertain dating, there are two main problems attending Mossner's argument concerning the relationship between the 'early memoranda' and the 1752 essay on populousness.

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First, it is important to note that Hume's ability to read Greek texts considerably improved during the 1740s, that is, between the most likely date of composition of the 'early memoranda' and the writing of the populousness essay in the early 1750s. Hume tells us in his later autobiographical sketch that between 1742 and 1745, a time when he was living with his family at Ninewells, he 'recovered the knowledge of the Greek language, which I had too much neglected in my early youth' (Hume 1987: xxxiv). This must be a reference to his education at Edinburgh University, which Hume had entered at the age of 10 and where he had attended Greek classes during his second year (1722–23).⁴ There is reason to doubt that he attained a good reading knowledge of the language either at university or at any other point before the mid-1740s (Stewart 2000: 280–5). This is significant as it would mean that Hume attained a reading knowledge of Greek only *after* the he had compiled his early reading notes. It is this capacity to read Greek which would have enabled him to peruse important sources for his populousness essay such as Strabo's *Geographika* 'either in the original Language or even in a good Translation', as he writes in the above-quoted letter to Elliot (Hume 1932: i, 153).⁵

A second and more important problem consists in the fact that Mossner appears to have overestimated the extent to which the list of works quoted in the 'early memoranda' overlap with those cited in the *Political Discourses* (1752), including 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations'. In fact, the texts cited in the earlier document present only a fraction of the material Hume used in the *Political Discourses*, as will become evident once we have fully reconstructed the extent of Hume's reading in the early 1750s.⁶ To this end I have drawn up a list of the classical citations in Hume's 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations'. These amount to over a hundred classical works ranging over a variety of fields from philosophy to history, geography to religion and written in a number of different genres such as historical narrative, treatise, commentary, dialogue, play, public oration, epigram, and letters.⁷ This list comprises Greek as well as Latin authors, spanning all periods and most genres of ancient literature. The first thing that appears striking when we consider this list is that the majority of these works are only cited once and a few of them are merely alluded to without any reference to specific chapters or pages. This presents us with an interpretative problem, which stems from the fact that we cannot easily ascertain whether these are in fact citations from works that Hume actually read or whether they represent second-hand citations he may have culled from works of erudite scholarship. While earlier Hume scholars sometimes worked with the assumption that by and large 'a citation by Hume carries its own guarantee that he was actually reading the work named' (Mossner 1948: 496), more recent scholarship has demonstrated that this view cannot be upheld. Recent research on the reading underpinning Hume's early memoranda has revealed that what seem like excerpts from a number of works do not always stem from his own reading of these works, but sometimes

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from summary accounts provided by works like Bayle's *Dictionnaire*.⁸ It is of course possible that Hume had abandoned this practice of citing works at second-hand by the late 1740s, but the limits imposed on him by the lack of access to major libraries in the 1749–51 period makes it unlikely that he had consulted a copy of each and every one of the works he cites or alludes to in his populousness dissertation. Since we cannot ascertain this with any certainty, it seems best to confine our observations to works that he cites more than once and pay particular attention to those of which he makes frequent use, since the likelihood of him having read these works appears greater.

The classical works Hume cited more than merely once or twice in the populousness dissertation fall into three distinct groups. First and foremost, there are the great works of biography and history. Here we find the famous narratives of the classical historians, which were so widely read and admired in the eighteenth century. It is not surprising to find that Hume draws on Plutarch's *Lives* as well as the four most famous Greek historians – Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon and Polybius – and their Roman counterparts Sallust, Caesar, Livy and Tacitus. Yet Hume makes equally good use of less well known and less acclaimed historical works such as Appian's *Roman History* and Dionyisus of Halicarnassus' *Roman Antiquities*, Herodian's *History of the Empire*, and the multi-authored *Historia Augusta*. Perhaps the most surprising find is that the most often cited work of all is Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliotheca Historica*. Hume considered Diodorus Siculus 'a good writer' and his extensive and wide-ranging compilation of information concerning the geography and history of the classical world provided Hume with a wide variety of facts and observations, especially with regard to the non-Greek and Roman world (Hume 1987: 422 note 123). This underlines the fact that for the purpose of the populousness essay Hume did not rate the classical historians according to their literary merit, but instead considered them mainly as source texts, to be employed in accordance with their reliability and the extent to which they yielded the kind of information he required in order to build up his argument.

The range of sources Hume read for the populousness dissertation, as we have seen, extends far beyond works of history and biography, and the list of citations reveals two other main categories of sources on which he drew for this dissertation. First, Hume makes extensive use of public orations, especially those of Demosthenes, Isocrates, and Cicero. This reflects the high regard he expressed for Demosthenes' orations, which he considered to be among the 'most authentic pieces of all GREEK history' (Hume 1987: 422 note 123). The reason for Hume's interest in this kind of source should become clear when we come to consider his practice of extracting information from classical texts. Second, he derives a number of facts and observations from works of ancient geography and treatises on agriculture. Here he makes extensive use of Strabo's *Geography*, a multi-volume compendium of geographic and ethnographic information about the

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ancient world. We shall later have occasion enquire how Hume obtained a copy of Strabo's work, when he read it and how he put this text to use in his writings of this period. For now it is sufficient to observe that the two most often cited works are those of Diodorus Siculus and Strabo, followed by Thucydides' *History*.⁹ On the whole, the list of classical citations in 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations' underlines the extent and variety of the reading Hume undertook in preparation for this erudite dissertation, while centring on the 'historians, orators, and philosophers' on which Hume drew as 'authorities' in support of the argument he advanced in it (Hume 1987: 414 note 100). Insofar as they contain a large number of titles and comprise a representative cross-section of classical literature, Hume's citations thus partly bear out his claim to have 'read over almost all the Classics both Greek and Latin, since I form'd [the] Plan' of writing 'an Essay or Dissertation on the Populousness of Antiquity' (Hume to Gilbert Elliot of Minto, 18 February 1751, Hume 1932: i, 152–3).¹⁰

An important question remains to be explored, namely how Hume could have read or at least consulted such a considerable number of classical texts at a time mostly spent in the rural surroundings of his family's country estate in Berwickshire. Unfortunately we do not have a contemporary catalogue of the books available to him at his Ninewells home or at the local parish library of nearby Chirnside. In his 1747 letter to Henry Home, Hume showed himself inclined to 'return to my Studies at Ninewells' while complaining about being 'so indifferently provided of a Library to employ me' (Hume 1932: i, 162). This should prompt us to consider the available evidence about Hume's personal library. In fact, Hume had been collecting books since the 1720s and his library continued to grow between 1747 and 1753 (cf. Hume 1932: i, 170). The best indication we have of the size of his personal library during the Ninewells period is his statement in a 1751 letter that he possessed '£100 worth of Books', which has been estimated to mean about four hundred books (Norton and Norton: 13f). While these certainly included some editions of the classics as well as modern philosophy, literature and history, we cannot assume that it would have provided him with the obscurer texts or those only available in expensive scholarly editions. For example, he did not possess an edition of Strabo's *Geographika*, the most extensive surviving geographical and historical survey of the classical world, and had to turn to his friend Gilbert Elliot of Minto for help:

I have not a Strabo, & know not where to get one in this Neighbourhood. He is an Author I never read. I know your Library (I mean the Advocates') is scrupulous of lending Classics; but perhaps that Difficulty may be got over. I shou'd be much oblig'd to you, if you could procure me the Loan of a Copy, either in the original Language or even in a good Translation. (Hume to Gilbert Elliot of Minto, 18 February 1751, Hume 1932: i, 153)

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This statement is significant for several reasons. First, Hume's remark that he could not get an edition of Strabo 'in the Neighbourhood' might allude to the practice of borrowing books from friends and acquaintances common among the Scottish border families.¹¹ Second, Edinburgh gentlemen, especially members of the Faculty of Advocates such as Elliot, could arrange to borrow books from the Advocates' Library, which had extensive holdings of 'Greek and Roman historians'.¹² Elliot did indeed manage to send Hume a copy of Strabo's *Geographika*.¹³ The extensive use Hume made of that work is reflected in twenty-one references to it in 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations', one more in another essay of the *Political Discourses*, a further one in an earlier essay he revised and republished in his *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects* of 1753–4, and finally two in the *Natural History of Religion*, published in 1757 (Hume 1987: 202, 350, 388–461; Hume [1757] 1993: 144, 163).¹⁴

By far the longest of all of Hume's essays, 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations' is a densely argued piece of scholarship, an 'elaborate discourse' rather than a polite essay. This piece has received only cursory treatment in recent Hume scholarship, owing at least in part to the fact that its subject matter – the comparative assessment of the demographic structure and development of ancient and early modern societies – now seems rather remote and academic.¹⁵ For Hume's contemporaries, however, the question was far from being a purely academic problem or a controversy between antiquarian scholars. Population growth or decline was generally considered to be contingent on the physical, political, economic and even cultural conditions prevailing in a state or country. This meant that the population question could function as an indicator for the comparative merit of states and even of civilisations, a yardstick by which progress could be measured.¹⁶ Hume could thus describe this question as the 'the most curious and important of all questions of erudition' (Hume 1987: 639). In so doing he followed a long line of scholars leading up to his contemporary and correspondent, the baron de Montesquieu, who had devoted eleven letters of his *Lettres Persanes* (1721) to the discussion of this problem (Montesquieu [1721] 2003: 246–269).¹⁷ Montesquieu had recently restated his case for the superior populousness of classical antiquity in his *De l'Esprit des Lois*, a groundbreaking work which Hume had carefully read and meticulously criticised shortly after its appearance in 1748.¹⁸

In Hume's letter to John Clephane quoted above, Montesquieu is singled out as one of the targets of the populousness essay, the other being the Dutch scholar Isaac Vossius, whose dissertation on the greatness of ancient Rome, published in 1685, was an influential and much-cited contribution to the populousness controversy.¹⁹ Vossius' work represents the height of seventeenth-century erudition, combining antiquarian learning and philological criticism. 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations' represents Hume's attempt to engage

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with this kind of erudite scholarship and pursue what he labels the ‘critical art’ (Hume 1987: 641). This he does with great care and detail in the second half of his essay, which is entirely given over to an ‘enquiry concerning facts’ and constitutes what has aptly been called ‘a tour de force in the criticism of sources’ (Wootton 1993b29: 288).²⁰ Its over 250 footnotes reflect the sheer breadth and depth of Hume’s classical reading and testify to his ambition to match or even surpass the erudition of his predecessors. This ambition is amply demonstrated in a lengthy footnote in which he discusses different readings and interpretations of ‘the famous passage of the elder PLINY’ on the size of ancient Rome. A rich tradition of philological comment had already accumulated around this passage, which provided Hume with an opportunity to critically engage with the most formidable among his antiquarian predecessors, such as Justus Lipsius, Isaac Vossius and Jean Hardouin (Hume 1987: 438 note 204).

These critical remarks illustrate Hume’s conviction that the existing antiquarian literature on the populousness question was deeply flawed for the main reason that the claims ancient authors had made with regard to population figures had all too often been taken at face-value by modern antiquaries and historians. Classical historians, however, could not and should not be trusted with regard to the sometimes extravagant population figures they gave for the cities and states of the Mediterranean world.²¹ This is what Hume has to say about those ancient historians on whose works he drew most heavily for his populousness essay:

In general, there is more candour and sincerity in ancient historians, but less exactness and care, than in the moderns. [...] DIODORUS SICULUS is a good writer, but it is with pain I see his narration contradict, in so many particulars, the two most authentic pieces of all GREEK history, to wit, XENOPHON’S expedition, and DEMOSTHENES’S orations. PLUTARCH and APPIAN seem scarce ever to have read CICERO’S epistles. (Hume 1987: 422 note 123)

In other words, the classical authors had not known one another’s works nearly as well as Hume could claim to have come to know them. Implicit in this statement is a notorious assertion first formulated by William Wotton, one of the most eloquent spokesmen of the moderns in the ‘battle of the books’.²² According to Wotton the advances in philological scholarship together with the availability of printed editions of the classics had enabled modern scholars to arrive at a degree of knowledge concerning the classical texts superior even to that of their ancient authors. Modern scholars could thus come to know more about the classical world than ‘any of the Ancients Themselves ever had, or indeed could have’ (William Wotton, (1694) *Reflections upon Ancient and Modern Learning*, cited in Levine 1987: 159).²³ Hume’s critique of the classical historians and his cautious adoption of a ‘modern’ attitude towards the ancient texts could not fail to have profound implications for the way he read and used these texts.

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While reading the classics with the populousness essay in mind Hume had 'extracted what serv'd most to my Purpose', as he wrote in his 1751 letter to Elliot. This statement, taken together with the systematic way in which he appears to have ploughed through works like Strabo's *Geographika* or Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliotheca historia*, suggests a specific manner of reading the classics, which I believe can be reconstructed as follows.²⁴ While reading – or at the very least skimming through – a substantial number of classical texts, either in the original language or in a reliable translation, Hume would have scanned these texts for all sorts of facts and arguments that could conceivably be used for building up a coherent argument of his own. In the process, he would have taken what must have been extensive reading notes in the form of extracts from the texts, possibly similar to those that make up the 'early memoranda', though probably considerably more extensive given the breadth and depth of his use of classical sources in the populousness essay.²⁵ Drawing on such notes he would have been able to 'collect all the lights afforded us by scattered passages in ancient authors', which in turn would have provided him with a secure foundation on which rest his densely argued case against the superior populousness of antiquity (Hume 1987: 437).

In his letter to Elliot, Hume stated that the research for his populousness dissertation led him 'into many Disquisitions concerning both the public & domestic Life of the Ancients'. Hume's populousness essay does indeed contain numerous digressions on the political conditions and cultural practices prevalent in classical Greece and Rome, most notably an in-depth discussion of ancient slavery. The broad range of subjects Hume dealt with in this essay testifies to his conviction that demographic development was not solely determined by social and political circumstances, but was moreover contingent on a wide variety of factors including political convictions, religious beliefs, moral codes, social customs and sexual mores. These were reflected in common practices and shared attitudes which characterised ancient societies yet were more often hinted at than directly expressed in the classical texts. Such allusions and casual asides could reveal a lot about the underlying cultural assumptions and moral values that ancient authors and orators shared with their contemporary audience.²⁶ Hume's sensitivity as a reader in picking up on these undertones is clearly exhibited in the populousness essay. He paid particular attention to facts that were only implied or even deliberately omitted in ancient texts and had thus eluded previous commentators on the populousness question. From his detailed argument we can thus infer that Hume read the classics against the grain, in order to extract from them meanings which their authors may not even have intended to convey.

Thus while the population question provided the guiding principle and overruling criterion for Hume's reading and research, the very process of that research would lead him to collect data on a wide range of cultural information and thus in effect build up a database which he could utilise for other literary and

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philosophical projects he was engaged in during this period. The breadth of Hume's reading meant that the classical sources gathered in the process of it could be used for a number of philosophical and polemical purposes, extending far beyond the populoussness discourse for which the reading was originally undertaken. This is probably best exemplified in the case of the companion pieces to the populoussness essay in the *Political Discourses* of 1752, in particular a short essay on Greek and Roman as well as British political practices entitled 'Of Some Remarkable Customs'. While living at Ninewells, Hume also composed his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, published in 1751, to which he appended a short piece entitled 'A Dialogue' containing a comparative assessment of ancient and modern manners and mores.²⁷ Both this piece and the essay on political customs are obviously indebted to the some of the same sources as the populoussness essay, in particular the orations of Demosthenes. This observation could be extended to a number of further works Hume composed during this period.²⁸

Following his move to Edinburgh from Ninewells in the summer of 1751, Hume was elected keeper of the Advocates' Library and began composing his *History of England*. Considering Hume's populoussness essay in the light of his better-known historical work, Hume's nineteenth-century biographer John Hill Burton regretted that Hume never wrote a history of classical antiquity.²⁹ This poses the question why he did not choose a topic from classical antiquity as a subject of a historical work.³⁰ After all Hume was by now familiar with the works of the classical historians and could have drawn on the mass of information he must have compiled for the purposes of the populoussness essay. Furthermore, as the keeper of Advocates' Library from 1752 to 1757, Hume would have had unrestricted access to its extensive holdings in Greek and Roman history. For an answer to this hypothetical question we must once again turn to Hume's correspondence of the 1750s, which reflects his growing conviction that writing a political history of classical antiquity would necessarily mean following the course of the narratives constructed by the classical historians, if only because there were no surviving 'Letters or State Papers' against which their versions of the events could be checked.³¹ In an important sense the history of antiquity could thus only be re-written along already familiar lines. English history on the other hand had as yet never been properly written, as Hume began to realise once he had embarked on writing the history of the early Stuarts.³²

Yet we need to keep in mind that during the eighteenth century 'history' began to assume another meaning, one that was expressed in the term 'philosophical history' and could take the form of a cultural history. By enquiring into the 'public & domestic Life of the Ancients' and providing several account of their customs and manners, Hume did write this kind of history in its widest possible sense. Taken together, the works he composed during the early 1750s could thus be regarded as the fragments of a coherent whole, a comprehensive survey of

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classical civilisations encompassing politics, society and culture as well as moral and religious beliefs. Hume's narrative *History of England*, published between 1754 and 1761, is thus preceded by a fragmentary cultural or 'philosophical' history of ancient civilisations for which he drew extensively on his reading of the classics at Ninewells. This reading, first undertaken for the purpose of the populousness essay, had soon come to pervade almost all aspects of Hume's literary activities in the early 1750s. Here I have sought to demonstrate that Hume's reading of the classics was both more extensive and more significant than has hitherto been assumed and could have a number of important implications for our understanding of his literary and intellectual career during the early 1750s. Only once we have fully reconstructed as well as reappraised Hume's reading of the classics can we begin to unravel the process by which he transformed himself from moral philosopher into philosophical historian.³³ Only then will we be in a position to fully understand James Boswell's comment on Hume, conveyed in a letter to a friend after his first meeting with the philosopher: 'Mr Hume . . . has apply'd himself with great attention to the study of the ancients, and is likewise a great historian'.³⁴

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NOTES

¹ Earlier versions of the present paper have been delivered on three occasions and I have profited from the valuable feedback and criticism I have received from the participants of a workshop held at the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, a conference on 'Material Cultures and the Creation of Knowledge'

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organised by the same University's Centre for the History of the Book and a colloquium on 'The Scottish Enlightenment and the Classics' held at the University of St Andrews. I am grateful to Nicholas Phillipson and James Harris for their helpful comments on this paper.

- ² See Hume to Henry Home, 9 February 1748, Hume (1932) i, 111, cf. i, 109.
- ³ This concept is epitomised in Cicero's *Letters to Atticus* of which Hume possessed an edition, cf. Norton and Norton (1996) 82. For Hume's reading and use of Cicero see Jones (1982) 29–41.
- ⁴ For the curriculum at Edinburgh University in the 1720s, see Stewart (2005) 16–25.
- ⁵ We need to keep in mind that 'a good Translation' does not necessarily mean an English translation, since in eighteenth-century editions the original Greek text is often interfaced with a translation into Latin, rather than into a modern language.
- ⁶ This has led M. A. Stewart to conclude: 'What we have in the memoranda is less the actual research for any particular project than preparatory research' (Stewart 2000: 287–8).
- ⁷ It is instructive to compare this with the list of classical texts Adam Smith purchased from Robert and Andrew Foulis in 1759 for use in the education of the young Duke of Buccleuch (Smith 1987: 57 note 2). While the bulk of these were works of Greek and Latin literature, the list features the works of a few classical historians such as Thucydides, Sallust, Caesar and Tacitus. For Smith's use of the Classics see Vivenza (2001). A comparable full-scale study of Hume's engagement with the Classics is much to be desired.
- ⁸ The results of recent enquiries into these matters are summed up and judiciously evaluated in Stewart (2000) 276–88.
- ⁹ 'Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations' features 33 citations of Diodorus Siculus' *Bibliotheca Historia*, 19 of Strabo's *Geographika* and 13 of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*. It is thus the Greek historians and geographers of whom Hume makes most extensive use, though these are closely followed by Roman writers on history, biography, natural history and agriculture.
- ¹⁰ A statement to a similar effect can be found in a journal entry of January 1756, in which the youthful Edward Gibbon records the reading he undertook as part of his self-education during his exile at Lausanne: 'I determined to read over the Latin authors in order and read this year, Virgil, Sallust, Livy, Velleius, Paterculus, Valerius Maximus, Tacitus, Suetonius, Quintus Curtius, Justin, Florus, Plautus, Terence, and Lucretius' (Gibbon 1862: 48 note 8). Cf. the following passage in Gibbon's *Memoirs*: 'After finishing [Cicero], I formed a more extensive plan of reviewing the Latin classics, under the four divisions of, 1. historians, 2. poets, 3. orators, and 4. philosophers, in a chronological series, from the days of Plautus and Sallust to the decline of the language and empire of Rome: and this plan, in the last twenty-seven months of my residence at Lausanne (January 1756–April 1758), I *nearly* accomplished. Nor was this review, however rapid, either hasty or superficial' (Gibbon 1862: 48, the italics are Gibbon's).
- ¹¹ With regard to this point I have profited from discussions with M. A. Stewart and Mark Towsey.
- ¹² The holdings of the Advocates' Library went far beyond the legal and jurisprudential texts to be expected in such a library. Cf. Catalogue of the Advocates' Library, 1742.
- ¹³ As there is a gap in the Advocates' borrowing records from 1724–54, we cannot establish with any certainty whether the copy of Strabo's *Geographika* sent to Hume by Elliot did in fact come from the Advocates' or possibly from Elliot's own (family) library. Dr. Brian Hillyard and Helen Vincent of the National Library of Scotland have kindly made their expertise in these matters available to me.

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- ¹⁴ Hume even drew on his reading of Strabo for an elaborate joke in a letter to a friend. Hume to Mrs. Dysart of Eccles, 19 March 1751, Hume (1932) i, 159–60.
- ¹⁵ See however the following discussions of Hume’s populousness essay: Robertson (1983) 164–5; Amoh (2003); Pocock (2003) 382–7.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Hume’s remarks at the outset of the populousness essay: ‘In general, we may observe, that the question, with regard to the comparative populousness of ages or kingdoms, implies important consequences, and commonly determines concerning the preference of their whole police, their manners, and the constitution of their government’ (Hume 1987: 381) The reason Hume gives for this is that since ‘wise, just, and mild’ governments are usually the most conducive for population growth, a high rate of population does in turn provide a clear indication of good government and wise institutions, cf. p. 382. For the intellectual background of the controversy see Tomaselli (1988) and Spadafora (1990) 340.
- ¹⁷ Cf. Montesquieu [1748] (1989) bk 23, 427–56. Hume explicitly refers to both works in his populousness essay, cf. Hume 1987: 380, 460. Montesquieu’s treatment of the population question is discussed in Tomaselli (1988) 9–15.
- ¹⁸ See Hume to Montesquieu, 10 April 1749, Hume (1932) i, 133–8. Cf. Chamley (1975) and Sher (1994).
- ¹⁹ Hume to John Clephane, 18 April 1750, Hume (1987) i, 140. Vossius *De antiquae Romae magnitudine*, published as the first/opening piece of his *Variarum observationum liber*, published in 1685. Vossius had estimated the population of ancient Rome at 14 million. His work was immediately reviewed by Pierre Bayle. Bayle’s review was later reprinted in the *Œvres diverses de Mr. Pierre Bayle* (Hague, 1737). Cf. Spengler (1942) 37. Hume probably possessed and certainly quoted from this particular edition of Bayle’s writings. See Norton and Norton (1996) 74. We might infer from this that Hume may have learnt about Vossius claims concerning population (figures) via Bayle’s critique of *De antiquae Romae magnitudine*.
- ²⁰ Wootton is virtually alone in recognising the scholarly nature of Hume’s populousness essay, but see Robertson (1983) 289.
- ²¹ ‘The facts, delivered by ancient authors, are either so uncertain or so imperfect as to afford us nothing positive in this matter’. A matter Hume attributed to the fact that unlike modern historians they were not obliged to go to great length to avoid ‘contradictions and incongruities’ since the absence of printed books made it difficult to check their text against those of other writers. Another reason Hume gives for (assigns to) this was that ‘all kinds of numbers are uncertain in ancient manuscripts, and have been subject to much greater corruptions than any other part of the text’ (Hume 1987: 421).
- ²² For Wootton’s role in this British counterpart of the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*, see Levine (1991) chapter 1.
- ²³ Hume’s library featured a copy of the first edition of the *Reflections*, cf. Norton and Norton (1996) 137.
- ²⁴ Hume’s reading of Strabo is well documented, cf. Hume (1932) i, 153, 157–9. ‘Of the Populousness of Ancient Nations’ contains more than thirty references to Diodorus Siculus, cf. Hume (1987) 403–64.
- ²⁵ Since no record or even the slightest trace of such material appears to have survived, the very existence of such extended reading notes is of course a hypothesis, albeit one that is suggested by the very nature of Hume’s research for the populousness essay and supported by his remark to Elliot that he ‘extracted what serv’d most to my Purpose’.
- ²⁶ This explains why Hume put great stress on the value of orations as sources, in particular those of Demosthenes which, as we have seen, he considered to be among the ‘most authentic pieces’ of all Greek history.

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- ²⁷ Cf. 'Of some Remarkable Customs', in Hume (1987) 366–376; and 'A Dialogue' in Hume [1751] (1998) 185–99.
- ²⁸ This includes works that were probably composed during, but appeared well after the Ninewells period, such as the *Natural History of Religion*, published in 1757.
- ²⁹ 'In the perusal of this [populousness] essay one is inclined to regret that Hume afterwards made a portion of modern Europe the object of his historical labours, instead of taking up some department of the history of classical antiquity'. Burton (1846) i, 363.
- ³⁰ This hypothetical question does not seem to have been posed by Hume scholars, probably because there is no direct evidence to suggest that Hume ever projected or planned such an undertaking. See however Pocock (2003) 372–87 for Hume's account of Roman history contained in several of his political essays.
- ³¹ 'The ancient Greek History has several Recommendations, particularly the good Authors from which it must be drawn: But this same Circumstance becomes an Objection, when more narrowly considered: For what can you do in most places with these Authors, but transcribe & translate them? No Letters or State Papers from which you could [sic] correct their Errors, or authenticate their Narration, or supply their Defects' (Hume to William Robertson, 7 April 1759, Hume 1954: 48).
- ³² 'The more I advance in my undertaking, the more am I convinced that the History of England has never yet been written, not for style, which is notorious to all the world, but also for matter; such is the ignorance and partiality of all our historians' (Hume to James Oswald of Dunnikier, 28 June 1753, Hume 1932: i, 179, cf. 170). On this see also Phillipson (1989) chapter 5.
- ³³ I have developed this argument further in my Ph.D thesis, which is concerned with Hume's development as a philosophical historian both prior to and during the composition of the *History of England*.
- ³⁴ This remark, made by James Boswell after his first meeting with Hume in the summer of 1758, is quoted in Mossner (1943) 171. It is noteworthy that Hume's renown as an erudite scholar is here mentioned alongside, and even prior to, his reputation as a historian, which was by then already well established following the publications of the two volumes of his *History of Great Britain* (1754 and 1756). This suggests that even by the late 1750s Hume's earlier interest in the study of classical civilizations had not been fully eclipsed by his current preoccupation with modern British history.