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History Professor Receives Mellon New Directions Fellowship

Anthony Barbieri-Low always wanted to be an Egyptologist, and now, with a $238,700 New Directions Fellowship from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the UC Santa Barbara history professor will get his chance to immerse himself in Egyptian archaeology and hieroglyphics.

"I feel very lucky," said Barbieri-Low, who specializes in the social, legal, economic, and material-culture history of early imperial China. "It's a big award for this department and this school." The New Directions Fellowship is also the first to be awarded to a UC Santa Barbara scholar.

A highly competitive fellowship and one of the largest in the humanities, the Mellon New Directions Fellowship is awarded to mid-career scholars in the humanities, enabling them to pursue their interests outside of their specializations, with the appropriate advanced training. The fellowship is awarded to only about a dozen scholars every year.

For Barbieri-Low, this means a year of intensive study at UCLA, working with authorities in both archaeology and Middle Egyptian, the language behind the hieroglyphic writing that many of us have seen on objects in museums.

"You can't actually speak it out loud today, like a modern language, because there's so much missing," he said. The vowels are not written down, Barbieri-Low explained,

so all the symbols indicate consonants, leading people to reconstruct what the words actually sounded like with vowels.

In addition, the first year will be spent learning the archaeology of ancient Egypt, to provide the kind of context needed to understand Egyptian society of around 1200 B.C.E.

Learning the language will be essential to his three years of study, because the second and third years will be spent reading ancient Egyptian texts, and doing a comparative study with Chinese civilization of around 200 B.C.E., the time of the rise of the Chinese empire.

"That kind of comparative work is not frequently performed by historians of ancient societies, mostly because of the language barrier," Barbieri-Low said. As a scholar with expertise in the Chinese language, he will be among the rare few who will be able to understand both Chinese and Egyptian texts.

Part of his research will revolve around the development of bureaucracy. Both China and Egypt have civilizations that evolved around great rivers that flooded frequently, he said, and this necessitated complex systems of calculation as well as water and labor management. The argument once was that because Egyptian civilization was older than Chinese civilization by millennia, Chinese civilization was derived from Egypt's. "They don't say that anymore," he said. The debunking of that notion was one of the results of Mao Tse-Tung's promotion of archaeology as a state enterprise in China after 1949.

And yet, the two societies do have many aspects in common, which make them a suitable pair for comparative research. And though there is some evidence of contact between the two civilizations –– such as silk artifacts found in Egypt –– none of that contact was direct.

Barbieri-Low's other area of study will focus on the role of scribes, a fairly important position in both societies.

"Many of the rulers in the earliest civilizations couldn't read or write, but they needed those who could." Writing amounted to an ability to control men, resources, and knowledge, he explained.

With his studies, Barbieri-Low also hopes to design a new course at UC Santa Barbara based on comparative ancient writing systems, including Mesopotamian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and Chinese oracle-bone script.

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