Location, location, location.

As human beings with physical bodies, we are obliged to live within the constraints of space and time. We are limited by what we can see, hear and reach from any given point in space; we must spend time travelling if we wish to change those options; and as a society we expend considerable efforts in determining rights to ownership or control over pieces of land. But despite the importance of these factors in our own lives, it can be all too easy to overlook them when thinking about the ancient world.

The tendency to forget about space can particularly affect our reading of textual sources, so that our imaginative reconstructions of events like the Melian dialogue or Nero’s suicide often seem to take place against a blank, or at best impressionistic, background. Indeed, ancient authors rather contribute to the problem, since they were not always very concerned themselves to bring out the spatial and temporal dimensions of their narratives. But buildings, inscriptions, statues and pots, too, are frequently studied in isolation, divorced from the spatial context in which they were originally experienced. This can mean that we miss out on a full understanding of the ancient world, because we fail to notice how physical space could shape or dictate the actions of the people we are reading about or the uses of the objects we are looking at.

This article offers some tips for thinking about space and time when working with ancient primary source material, and some examples of the insights which we can achieve if we remember to do so. Since texts are particularly susceptible to losing their spatial dimension in the reading, I will focus my discussion on a written passage. But the broader guidance offered here applies very much to physical space too. Indeed, of course, some approaches to the issue can only sensibly be applied to ‘real’ spaces such as archaeological sites or landscapes.

Questions for thinking about space and time

The main key to productive thinking about space and time in the ancient sources lies simply in going equipped with the right questions: above all those which bring out issues of access, control, freedom, limitations, motivations, disparities, inequalities and variant experiences. Some examples of these sorts of questions might go as follows:

• For a specific event or activity - where did it take place? Why there rather than anywhere else?

• For a specific space - what historical events do we know took place here? What regular general activities can we assume took place here (e.g. markets, festivals)?

• Who owns or controls access to the space we are dealing with, or any of the sub-spaces within it (e.g. individual enclosures, buildings or rooms)?

• Who can shape or has shaped the character of the space through building activities, land alterations, etc.?

• How is access to the space controlled (e.g. via physical barriers, guards, laws or social norms)?

• Who can and can’t enter or move around this space? Who wants to enter or move around this space?

• Why do people want to move into or around this space? What are their goals?

• How do people move around this space? What direction are they likely to be going in? What methods of transport do they use and why? Where will crowds gather?

• How do built structures in and around the space relate to people’s movements? Do they relate to likely patterns of movement? Do they try to impose particular patterns of movement?

• What is visible or audible from different points within the space?

• How would what a person can see or hear from a given position affect how they behave – e.g. what information is available to them, how they choose to move around the space, what they do while they are there?

• How quickly could a person move through or across this space?

• What limitations on movement are imposed by topography – e.g. the distance
between two places or the presence of natural barriers (rivers, mountains, etc.)?

- How have humans responded to those topographical limitations? Have they tried to overcome them (e.g., building bridges), or taken advantage of them (e.g., using rivers as defensive barriers)?

- How does the character of this space change with time—e.g., from day to night, from season to season, over many years? Do people use it all the time or only on certain occasions (e.g., festivals, elections)? Does it become unusable at certain times (e.g., due to the cold or dark)?

The list is not exhaustive, and not all of these questions will be relevant in every case. Many will also remain resolutely impossible to answer. But by remembering to ask them on a regular basis, and to work through their implications, we can usually achieve a deeper understanding of the events, activities, objects or places we are dealing with.

By way of demonstrating where these questions can take us, I will now work through a short passage from an ancient text, applying the most relevant questions as I go. The example used is the description of Clodius' murder from Asconius' commentary on Cicero's pro Milone, an event which is on the syllabus for the OCR A2 Unit Roman History: the use and abuse of power, Option 1: The fall of the Roman Republic 81-31 BC. But the particular text used is only exemplary. The same approach can yield new insights into almost any historical text or archaeological site.

**Clodius' Murder: Context and Sources**

The chief subject of our passage is P. Clodius Pulcher, a prominent but contentious populist politician some ten years younger than the famous M. Tullius Cicero, and one of his bitterest rivals. Clodius was the chief architect of Cicero's exile from Rome in 58 BC, and had gone out of his way to get Cicero's property confiscated or demolished during his absence from the city. Cicero, of course, never forgave him. Meanwhile, in the following years, Clodius emerged as one of the instigators of a growing culture of politicised gang violence on the streets of Rome.

was T. Annius Milo, a close associate of Cicero's who had been instrumental in securing his recall from exile in 57 BC. In late 53 BC, Milo was running for election as one of the two consuls for the following year, and enjoyed Cicero's full support in the attempt. But Clodius was also up for election to the more junior office of praetor, and was desperate to ensure that he did not end up serving under his hated rival, Milo. The result was violent disruption of the electoral process, so serious that as 52 BC began, neither the consuls nor the praetors for that year had yet been successfully elected.

It was at this point that Clodius and Milo, both accompanied by large gangs, encountered one another on the Appian Way. A fight broke out, ending in Clodius' death. The senate then appointed Pompey sole consul for the year as an emergency measure, while Milo was taken to court for murder. Cicero attempted to defend him, but failed, and Milo was exiled to Massilia (modern Marseilles). Despite this, Cicero afterwards published his speech in Milo's defence, the pro Milone. Since Cicero was not aiming to give an objective account of what had happened, this speech offers no narrative summary of the event, and instead homes in on those details which Cicero hoped would persuade the jury to acquit Milo. But a later writer, Asconius, does offer a detailed description of the encounter between Clodius and Milo, from start to finish.

Asconius wrote commentaries on a number of Cicero's speeches in the AD 50s, apparently to help his sons to study and understand them. For each, he provides some introductory notes about the case (the Argumentum), and it is here in his commentary on the pro Milone that he explains how Clodius met his end. To put this explanation together, Asconius probably worked not only from Cicero's speech, but also from other sources, including the case for the prosecution.

Since he was writing a century after the murder, and had no personal connections with the people involved, we can be reasonably confident that Asconius aimed to compile as straightforward a summary of the events as he could, so that his sons could then understand how Cicero had presented Milo's case to best advantage in court. This makes his description of Clodius' murder the fullest, and probably the most trustworthy, which now survives.

**Asconius, Commentary on Cicero's Pro Milone 31-32**

31 On January 18th, Milo set out for Laranium, from where town he came and where he was at the time dictator [the standard rule for the chief magistrate in that town], in order to choose a flamen [priest] the following day. He ran into Clodius, who was returning from Aricia, around the ninth hour [roughly 5.30] a little beyond Bovillae, near to the place where the shrine of Bona Dea is located. Clodius had been addressing the town councilors at Aricia. Clodius was riding a horse, around 50 unnumbered slaves equipped with swords were following him, as was the custom at that time with people making a trip. There were with Clodius also three of his companions, one of whom was a Roman knight, Caius Caecus Scaius, and the other two well-known men of the people, Publius Pompeius and Caius Clodius.

Milo was being driven in a carriage with his wife Priscia, the daughter of Lucius Cornelius Sulla the dictator, and with his close friend Marcus Fulvia. 32 They were followed by a huge crowd of slaves, amongst which there were also gladiators, two of whom were the famous Eudamus and Borius. These men, travelling slowly at the end of the column, began a brawl with the slaves of Clodius. When Clodius looked back angrily at this disturbance, Borius pierced his shoulder with a spear. Then, once the fighting had broken out, several of Milo's men charged in. The wounded Clodius was carried to the nearest tavern, in Bovillae.

Milo learnt that Clodius had been wounded, and, realising that with Clodius alive the future would be even more dangerous for him, but with Clodius dead he would have considerable peace of mind even if there were penalties to be paid, he ordered him to be hauled out of the tavern. The leader of Milo's slaves was Marcus Saeutius. And thus the concealed Clodius was dragged out and mauled with many wounds. Clodius' dead body was left on the road, because his slaves had either been killed or, seriously wounded, were hiding. Sextus Teclides, a senator, who by chance was making his return to the city from the countryside, picked it up and ordered it to be carried to Rome in his own litter. He himself then went back to where he had started from.

Clodius' corpse was brought back before the first hour of the night [roughly 5pm], and a very large crowd of the lowest plebs and slaves, with great solemnity, took up their positions around the corpse in the atrium of his house. Moreover Fulvia, the wife of Clodius, increased their anger at the deed by showing his wounds with effusive lamentations.
Space and time in the text

The first and most obvious question to raise about this passage is the one at the beginning of my list, above: why did the encounter between Clodius and Milo take place on the Appian Way, rather than anywhere else? Asconius gives reasons for the presence of both on the road: that Clodius had been addressing the town councillors at Aricia, while Milo was on his way to install a priest at Lanuvium. But we can get a better understanding of their confrontation by pushing the question a little further and considering the reasons for those activities in turn: especially given the temporal context in the middle of a hotly-contested election campaign.

The populations of Aricia and Lanuvium both enjoyed full Roman citizenship, so to Clodius and Milo they represented pools of potential electoral support. For Clodius, the Arician town councillors belonged to the wealthy elite whose votes carried the most weight at the assembly which elected both praetors and consuls. Their patronage networks could also pull in the greatest numbers of lower-class voters. Meanwhile, Milo’s origins in Lanuvium and his role as the town’s chief magistrate would have put him in an excellent position to command local affections. This was the perfect time for both men to renew these relationships.

Noticing these factors reminds us how important the link with its suburbium was to life in Rome. Indeed, Clodius and Milo are not the only Roman politicians moving around this space. Asconius also reports the presence of the senator Sextus Teidius, whom he tells us was returning to Rome from the countryside. We have shifted onto related questions here: Why do people want to move into or around this space? What are their goals?

For Clodius and Milo, the answer is winning electoral support, but Teidius’s journey seems to be a matter of regular routine. We can assume that, like most of Rome’s political elite, he had agricultural estates outside the city which were the source of his wealth, and thus in turn supported his political career. This means that the spatial context of Clodius’ murder relates directly to its political context. Political careers in Rome rested on the towns and estates of the suburbium.

We should next ask how our main actors are moving around this space, and what direction they are travelling in. The map of Rome’s surroundings shows the three towns mentioned by Asconius: Lanuvium, Aricia and Bovillae. Reading his text with this in mind, we can trace the journeys of each party very precisely. While Milo is journeying outwards towards Lanuvium, Clodius is heading back to Rome from Aricia, so they are travelling along the road in opposite directions. Meanwhile, Asconius locates their encounter ‘a little beyond Bovillae’. Romans usually applied spatial descriptors like this from the point of view of the city: compare for example Gallia Cisalpina, on this side of the Alps, and Gallia Transalpina, across the Alps. So Clodius and Milo met just to the south-east of Bovillae.

The mode of travel is on horseback for Clodius, in a carriage for Milo, and by litter for Teidius. Presumably Clodius and Milo’s friends and companions are travelling in the same manner alongside them, but both are also accompanied by slaves and / or gladiators, at least some of whom are ‘travelling slowly’, so probably on foot. Again, there are political dimensions to the movement of all these individuals. The elite use prestigious and expensive modes of transport which differentiate them from their hangers-on, while the size of each crowd would serve not only for protection (as Asconius says) but also to demonstrate the extent of political influence and power which each man enjoyed. So we have two long columns of people, moving along the road as much for the sake of display as to reach a destination, and probably spread out over quite a distance given the different speeds at which they were travelling.

This had a direct impact on the way events unfolded, and here, we might bring in another question: what is visible or audible from different points within the space, and how would this affect how people behaved? Judging from Asconius’ account, the heads of both columns had already passed one another without incident before the fight broke out. It was the strangers at the back who began to brawl. Asconius says that Clodius ‘looked back angrily’ at the disturbance, suggesting that he could hear it once it started, but had not seen it breaking out: in other words, that it did so without his knowledge. Presumably Milo, travelling in a carriage, would have been equally ignorant of what was going on in the train of followers behind him. Indeed, the vehicle named in Asconius’ Latin text, a four-wheeled ruita, was often covered, leaving only small openings for the passengers to look out of.

The issue of who started the fight was of course crucial to the court case. In his defence speech, Cicero gave a quite different version of events from Asconius. He claimed that armed men suddenly attacked Milo from raised
ground near an ‘Alban villa’ belonging to Clodius; that is, one set somewhere in the Alban hills above Aricia (Cic. Mil. 29 and 51). This would constitute a pre-mediated assault instigated by Clodius, but it hardly rallies with the spatial information provided by Asconius. If the fighting had broken out near to Clodius’ villa, surely the obvious place for his supporters to take him once he had been injured was his own property? But both Asconius and Cicero agree that he was taken instead to a tavern in Bovillae. Thinking about space here reveals Cicero’s account of events to be implausible.

We should ask questions instead of the tavern in Bovillae: for example, who owned or controlled it, and/or controlled access to it? This time the first question is unanswerable, although we can speculate about the possibilities. Did it belong to a supporter of Clodius, making it a known ‘safe space’ to which to remove him, or was it violently co-opted for the purpose? Certainly, for a while Clodius’ party controlled access to it, so that Milo was only able to secure his death by ordering an assault on the premises. Again, thinking about space here reveals issues which mattered a great deal in the court case. Even if the initial fight had broken out spontaneously, Clodius’ death was brought about by a deliberate act of siege.

Clodius’ body, abandoned in the road, was then collected by the passing senator, Sextus Teildius. Presumably Teildius was motivated by a sense of duty to have his fellow-senator’s murdered body transported back to the capital, where the fall-out could be dealt with. It is noticeable, though, that at the same time he changed his own plans, and returned to the countryside. Returning to the question of the goals behind people’s movements, we might well suspect that he knew Clodius’ death would mean trouble in Rome, and wanted to stay out of it.

Asconius also provides temporal information about the day’s events. He uses the Roman system of dividing the period between sunrise and sunset (no matter how long) into 12 hours, for which I have provided bracketed modern equivalents in the passage above. In doing so, I allowed for the fact that at this time the Roman calendar was misaligned with the solar year, so that the date known as January 18th equates to what we would now call December 19th: i.e. very nearly the winter solstice.

According to Asconius, the fight broke out soon after 2pm, and Clodius’ body reached Rome before about 6pm. We can reconstruct a more detailed sequence of events by asking what topographical limitations affected the participants. The main one is the distance between Bovillae and Rome, about 14 miles, which was covered by a litter (littera); that is, a couch carried by slaves. At walking speed, this journey should have taken three and a half hours: almost the whole length of time between the moment when Asconius says the fight broke out and the arrival of the body in the city.

Armed with this information, we are forced to reach one of three conclusions: a) Teildius’ litter-bearers were able to move considerably faster than four miles an hour, b) the whole fight – including Clodius’ escape to and removal from the tavern – took only a few minutes, or c) something is afoot with Asconius’ account. Certainly, this is another place where it differs from Cicero’s, who places the outbreak of the fight at the eleventh hour (i.e. 4pm; Cic. Mil. 23).

Given the stakes resting on the court case, it is likely that both sides spread distorted versions of events, leaving neither Asconius nor us in a position to recover the truth. But we might never have noticed the inconsistency if we had not stopped to ask questions about space and time.

Terminus

Clodius’ journey through space and time continued after his death: first to the personal domain of his own atrium, and then onwards to the public political arena of the Forum where his wounds were displayed and his body cremated in the senate house, thus bringing down the very epicentre of the Roman establishment as it burnt. He has done enough on the way, though, to demonstrate what thinking about these issues can add to our understanding of a text – or of a site.

Of course, not all authors tried as hard as Asconius to offer an accurate account of factual events. Ancient historians took an essentially literary approach to their work, and were happy to emphasise or even invent spatial dimensions in their narrative for effect: consider for example the attention given to Caesar’s crossing of the Rubicon for its status as the spatial expression of a political act. But this kind of symbolic spatiality rewards analysis too, in thinking about the extra resonances conveyed to the reader. Indeed, real physical sites are regularly designed with symbolic capital in mind: hence the commanding position of Athena’s temple on the Acropolis at Athens. Anything shaped by human beings can be read in space and temporal terms: and this includes both texts and landscapes.

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Further Resources

Asconius, Commentary on Cicero’s Pro Milone. Available online at: http://www.csun.edu/~hcfll004/asconius.htm


