Classics Scholar Roger Bagnall Honored With Mellon Award

Roger Bagnall, Columbia professor of classics and history, received a Distinguished Achievement Award from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation last month. The award, worth up to $1.5 million, is given to scholars who have made significant contributions to the humanities. A respected historian of the Greco-Roman world, Bagnall was cited by the foundation for having “played a central role in putting his subject at the forefront of classical studies while also being an exemplary academic citizen.”

The Record sat down with Bagnall for an interview at the end of December just days before he was to leave for an archaeological dig in Egypt for three months. – Peter Koesel

The Record: Congratulations on the award. Did you have a hint it was coming? Or did they just call you up?

Bagnall: It just came out of the blue. Well, they didn’t call me actually. I was just saying to call the President’s office. And when I spoke with him, he said, “Congratulations.” And I was thinking, “For what?” And he said, “For receiving this wonderful award from the Mellon Foundation.” And I said “What?” He had gotten a letter from the Foundation. My letter actually came five days after his! So I finally had something to prove that this wasn’t a practical joke or something. Anyway, it was quite staggering. There is no application process for this thing.

The Record: This is an award that acknowledges your work, but the money goes to Columbia.

Bagnall: Exactly. You can’t buy a new house, or a Rolls Royce, or whatever. It comes to the University, but I have control over the spending of it—obviously though, only within University rules. So whatever I do has to get signed by somebody.

The Record: Can you share your plans on how it should be spent?

Bagnall: I have a number of projects that involve the relationship between archaeology and texts. And the first is an excavation in Egypt and a conservation and study program in Turkey. The excavation in Egypt, at a site called Amheida, is in the Dakhleh Oasis, begins this winter. A large dig house has been built about a half-hour drive from the site, where students, faculty and staff will live. The infrastructure is in place, but we couldn’t take students out the last two years with everything that was happening. So this year, we will.

Bagnall spoke in his office about his funding priorities shortly before leaving for Egypt on a dig.

The Record: What’s significant about this Egyptian site?

Bagnall: It’s got a number of attractions. One of them is that it’s probably the largest undis- turbed urban settlement of ancient Egypt from the Hellenistic-Roman period. It doesn’t have any modern town on top of it. It has never been excavated. It offers us the opportunity to see Turkey on the Aegean coast. They emptied out the basement and found that the walls had been covered with Roman plaster. On the plaster were graffiti—it was this absolutely incredible discovery. I scrounged up a bit of money to get a conservator over to take a look. And now it’s got a roof over it, it has sheeting over the graffiti, bandages over the wall. It’s going to be ten years to consolidate this stuff and clean it and work on the texts. But there are texts and drawings—absolutely incredible stuff. I’m going to run a training program for conservators to learn how to work on this kind of wall drawings. So we’ll have student conser- vator trainees from the archi- tecture school and from similar programs elsewhere come and spend eight weeks there getting some initial theoretical training, followed by a practical project.

The Record: Are there any other projects you want funded that are personal favorites of yours?

Bagnall: Well, yes. One—it’s very much an obsession with me—is summer training pro- grams in papyrology. There were several of these in the ’60s, back when I was a student. I got my papyrological training in one in the summer of 1968. It was a six-week intensive immersion in papyrology, with students drawn from different universities, and it was a fabulous experience. If we had not had those programs in the ’60s, we probably would not have had any people in the field in this country in the ’70s, ’80s, and ’90s.

The series died after 1971, I think, there was just no more money. So it has been a lifelong ambition of mine to revive the series, and this has now hap- pened. The first program was held at Yale last summer. We have ten institutions, each com- mitted to putting on one of them over decade. I’m hoping to raise the endowment to make it a per- petual series once the ten years are over. Columbia is going to host the one in 2006.

The Record: How did you become so passionate about the subject of ancient history?

Bagnall: It goes back to when I was seven, and I had just had a very severe hearing loss. I lost about thirty percent of my hear- ing when I was six from having a very bad ear infection during a long flight from Hawaii to Cali- fornia on a Navy transport plane, which was poorly pressurized.

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Papyrus Website Unites Ancient and Modern Technologies

When the Mellon Foundation announced that Roger Bagnall was the recipient of one of its 2003 Distinguished Achievement Awards, it cited not only his achievements as a classics and history professor but also noted that he is a “vigorous promoter of the uses of technology.” A perfect example of Bagnall’s digital savvy is the Advanced Papyrological Information System (APIS), a website (www.columbia.edu/departments/classics/ papiswebsites/digitapix) that he launched that links the papyri collections of six institutions with Columbia as the lead partner.

It comprises descriptions of papyri (writing materials made from the pith of the papyrus plant in ancient times), many with digitized images and English translations, and links to databases with the texts themselves in their origi- nal languages. The idea was Bagnall’s brainchild; he first suggested it at a papyrological conference in 1992, where, he says, his idea was met with much “rolling of eyes.” Never- theless, when he returned to the National Endowment of the Humanities, it is now up and running.

Bagnall wants to use some Mellon funding to expand APIS to include European institutions. “It’s ready for the next big step,” he says. “The money can make a real difference in unifying a number of pro- jects that would bring other digi- tal museums to the screen.”

Bagnall has also spent a lot of time thinking not just about the fragility of papyri but how ephemeral digital data can be, as software and computer plat- forms evolve.

“The point is foremost in the minds of everybody who runs digital programs and digital websites,” Bagnall says, “because we’ve lived through enough technolog- ical change to know about the obsolescence of media and to recognize that it poses a threat. Every institution that creates digital materials has to have some means of inventorying them and have people who are constantly keeping them up to date. I am relatively optimistic about that because there are a lot of very smart people worrying about this.” – P.K.

Columbia has an extensive collection of papyri, now housed in the rare book and manuscript room at the Butler Library.