Decline and Decline-Narratives in the Greek and Roman World

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Prospectus

When did the Greek poleis start to decline? How did the Roman Empire fall? These historical issues have been much studied in academic circles, and are also of great interest to the general public. This is the case not only in Europe, but also in Japan, a country far distant from the theatre of the decline and fall of the Greek poleis and ancient empires.

Since the latter half of the twentieth century, however, the models for the decline of the Greek and Roman worlds have been harshly criticized. Turning to documentary sources, historians have vigorously argued for the vitality of the Greek poleis in the Hellenistic and Imperial periods, while the historians of Late Antiquity, often focusing on religion and mentality, have redressed the issue of the decline of the Roman Empire by introducing the concept of long-term transformation. Further, regarding the latter, a new wave of declinists are striking back, stressing the significant impact of political events such as the ‘Germanic Migration’. Thus, we are still a long way from reaching any reasonable conclusion.

The aim of this conference is not to increase the complexity of decline-narratives, but to provide a meta-analysis of decline-narratives, ancient and modern. The conference will be divided into three parts. In the first part, we will address the issue of how modern and contemporary historians have discussed the decline of the Greek and Roman worlds, paying special attention to their methodology, and the political and social background of the decline-narratives. Returning to antiquity, the second part will deal with the ancient construction of decline-narratives; the main topics will include why and how the Greeks and Romans described their contemporary worlds as in decline, and what roles were played in each decline by the outsiders.

The third part of the conference will be concerned with comparative history. Through comparison of the decline-narratives of the Chinese empires and the Roman Empire, or discussion of how the archaeological models describe the ends of the most successful imperial projects in the ancient Mediterranean and the Ancient Near East, we will attempt to construct a trans-cultural history of decline-narratives in ancient empires. We will also compare the discourse of Republican and Imperial Rome in order to investigate the shape of decline-narratives.