Introduction of VCE Ancient History

In 2016, the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority (VCAA) will reintroduce Ancient History into the VCE History curriculum. In this paper, I will set out a brief account of how this came about and a sketch of the Ancient History curriculum. I will end with some observations on a case study for Units 3/4, Outcome 2.

Background to VCE Ancient History

In June 2013, VCAA announced the review of VCE English, History, Mathematics and Science studies. This followed the general sense of dissatisfaction felt by the education departments in most Australian states, including Victoria, with the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) proposals for the senior school Australian Curriculum. VCAA appointed Expert Reference Groups (ERG) in each area of study to ‘provide advice on the number, aims and broad scope of studies that should be offered in each learning area.’ Taking into consideration such factors as enrolment numbers in the History programs on offer, availability of resources, and trends in other constituencies, ERG recommended the introduction of Global Empires: 1440-1775 (Units 1-2), 20th Century History: 1918-2000 (Units 1-2), Australian History (Units 3-4), Revolutions: America, France, Russia & China (Units 3-4), and the reintroduction of Ancient History Units 1-4 into the VCE curriculum. The recommendations were published for consultation, after which CAA appointed committees to develop Study Designs for each component of the History syllabus. The committees comprised interested teachers from the secondary sector and academics from Victoria’s universities.

The VCAA Study Design Committee for Ancient History comprised academics from the Melbourne and Latrobe Universities, as well as teachers with an interest in Ancient History working in the State and Independent schools sectors. The draft Study Design, authored by Mr. John Whitehouse, University of Melbourne, was then released for consultation to all interested parties, as well as being sent for appraisal to independent academics in Victoria and interstate. Complete Study Designs for each of the History syllabi are available on the VCAA website.

Historical Thinking

A significant platform shared by all History curricula is the articulation of a historical focus and methodology, based on Historical Thinking. Drawing on Professor Peter Seixas’ Historical Thinking Project (HTP) at the University of British Columbia, Ontario,1 Historical Thinking emphasises asking historical questions, establishing historical significance, using sources as evidence, analysing cause and consequence, considering historical perspectives, understanding ethical dimensions of history, constructing historical arguments.

Historical Thinking explained

Leopold von Ranke, the 19th century German historian, enshrined history as an intellectual discipline with its own source-based methods of research and writing, and the development of historiography over the subsequent three centuries refined the procedural skills and tools of professional historians. Equally, the interest in history by professionals and academics has widened to overlap with a range of representations of the past, be it official national narratives, anthropology, reception studies, cultural studies, heritage or literary criticism. However, the study of history in the schools, at least at the senior levels of secondary sector, has been in decline for the past decade and longer. A gap has grown between what historians do and how they do it, and how those concepts and skills are expressed and understood in the classroom, to the point that many students have lost the realisation that historical thinking is a careful analytical

1 http://historicalthinking.ca/about-historical-thinking-project
process. The successful revival of history learning will require the learning of appropriate methodologies that will engage students to think historically and provide students with strategies that put them in charge of their own learning. The model adopted by VCAA is based on the Historical Thinking Project (HTP) at the University of British Columbia. HTP is based on six interrelated historical concepts which focus on developing historical ‘literacy’; that is the understanding of historical events and processes through active engagement with these concepts to provide the structure that shapes the practice of history. These concepts are:

1. Historical significance: establishing criteria to select the more relevant aspects of the past from the less so. This is most relevant in the 21st century as history has shifted from ‘the biography of great men’ (Thomas Carlyle) to women’s history, social history, the history of subjects previously ignored (such as ‘disability’), as well as the competing histories of a complex society (for example, official ‘national’ histories, the school/curriculum endorsed official histories, the plethora of professional historians, and even the versions of history learnt at home).

2. Use of primary source evidence: while no-one after Ranke questions the need for evidence in history, a key problem is ‘getting the facts right, establishing new knowledge, and engaging fellow citizens in collective ventures’ (Marc Bloch). The use of evidence not only substantiates an argument but also is critical in historical thinking. Engaging students requires teaching how to select, collect and evaluate sources, and how to compare primary sources with secondary sources that may offer different interpretations to the same historical questions.

3. Continuity and change: this helps make sense of the complex flows of history by identifying continuity and change as an interwoven continuous process over periods of time, rather than the trap of teaching history as episodes. That is, change is a process, and that progress and decline are shaped by motives, causes, individuals that change over time. It is the process of interpretation by which we decide what events or developments constitute a period of history.

4. Cause and consequence: why events happen and what their impacts are, prepares our understanding that change is driven by multiple causes (be they social, political, economic, cultural or individual) which result in multiple consequences and that events of history were not, and will not be, inevitable.

5. Historical perspective: it was David Lowenthal who famously proposed the past ‘a foreign country’. Understanding it requires us taking a historical perspective, through the avoidance of ‘presentism’. This can be achieved by considering historical context and using evidence to infer (not identify with) how peoples of the past felt and thought.

6. Understanding the ethical dimensions of historical interpretations: writing historical narratives inevitably involves making implicit or explicit ethical judgements. For those judgements to be reasoned, it is necessary they be based on understanding the historical context; a recognition of the danger of imposing contemporary standards and values on the past. In the past few decades, historical empathy has been proposed as a means to this, but there are difficulties with this exercise, namely the students’ ability to imagine, experience and interpret the world through different belief systems. Thus to get away from the old ‘imagine you are a Roman gladiator’ scenario, HTP looks at R.G. Collingwood’s historical imagination, historical contextualisation and moral judgement as the basis of engaging with this complex concept.

**Ancient History Units 1-4**

The new Ancient History curriculum provides a direct pathway from VCE Units 1/2 through to 3/4. At the core of the curriculum’s development is the importance of historical narrative and continuity, something that was missing from the ACARA model. Furthermore, key skills are framed around the core historical method addressed above, namely historical investigation; primary sources analysis; analysis of historical interpretations.
Units 1/2

Unit 1 covers Ancient Mesopotamia (c.3500-612 BC) and Unit 2 offers a choice between Old and Middle Kingdom Egypt (2920-1550 BC) and Early China (1900 BC–AD 220).

Unit 1: Ancient Mesopotamia

In this unit, students would begin with an exploration of agriculture and the domestication of animals, and their contribution to the evolution and importance of the city-state, together with its inherent political, economic and religious institutions during the Early Dynastic Period down to the end of Ur III. The rise of empire, beginning with Sargon I of Akkad, and continuing down to the fall of Nineveh at the end of the Neo-Assyrian Period will focus attention on the nature and vagaries of empire, internal and external threats. A key question would be what constitutes civilisation.

Unit 2: Ancient Egypt

The importance of the Nile river to the economic and political development of ancient Egypt would be a fundamental beginning for this unit, and would underpin the broader investigations focusing on the significance of the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, the authority of the king in the Early Dynastic Period and Old Kingdom, and the challenges to the authority of the elite during the First Intermediate Period. The reign of Menkheperre-Neferuankh, his reunification of Egypt and his administrative reforms shape area of study 2, as does the prominence of key texts such as the Prophecy of Nepet and The Story of Sinuhe in both reflecting the new political ideology and the challenges the elite faced, such as the dreaded foreigners the Hyksos.

Unit 2: Early China

The study of Ancient China begins with the appearance of early settlements in the Yellow River Valley and other regions and their evolution into the Xia state, and concludes with the Han dynasty. At the centre of this new power was the role of the king as ruler and mediator with the gods. Another important change was the influence of the philosophical movements, such as Confucianism. A particular focus of this unit will be the importance of primary sources to historical inquiry about Early China. An important development was the rise of imperialism under the Han dynasty (area of study 2). Not only did this phase of Chinese history again bring attention onto the emperor’s authority, but also the new contact with the outside world and the fraught relations that would bring to China.

Units 3/4

Units 3/4 incorporate the societies of Egypt (1550-332 BC), Greece (800-403 BC) and Rome (c.700-23 BC). The syllabus will require teachers to address the same two areas of study across the two units. That is teachers will be required to choose two of the three societies and apply the same areas of study to the societies they have selected.

Area of study 1: Living in an Ancient Society

Areas of study 1, ‘Living in an ancient society’, concentrates on the key area of life in these ancient societies; the social, political and economic features of life in these societies; the impact of war on each society; the significance of these features; and the use of an archaeological site to explore the features of the society.

Egypt (1550-332 BC)

The framework for this long period of Egyptian history would be a historical narrative covering each of the key phases: the rise of the Eighteenth Dynasty; the rule of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties and the impact of the Hittites; the turmoil of the Third Intermediate Period, with the disintegration of Upper and Lower Egypt; the Persian domination; and the re-emergence of an Egyptian authority before it fell to Rome. The study of an archaeological site, in this case, temple complex at Karnak, allows the investigation of the broader social,
political, economic and religious aspects of Egyptian society.

**Greece (800-454 BC)**

This period of Greek history largely begins with the evolution of the city-state, the colonisation phase, and the reintroduction of writing. The examination of the two dominant city-states, of Athens and Sparta, their political, social and economic and religious institutions form the basis of this study. Equally important is the Persian invasion (490/480-479 BC), the effect it had on the Greek psyche, and the seeds it lay leading to the conflicts of the latter half of the 5th century BC. The Panathenaic Way – its physical shape and the economic, political and religious institutions it affected as well as Panathenaic festival and its reflection of the political and religious ideology of Athens – constitutes the archaeological site for this study.

**Rome (c.700-146 BC)**

The study of Rome would involve the examination of the development and expansion of Rome from a village, into a city, into a world empire, from its early periods down to the Third Punic War and the destruction of Carthage (146 BC). Investigating the economic, political and social structures of Roman society will also involve examining Rome’s legal structures, such as the Twelve Tables, and internal struggles, marked by the Struggle of the Orders. Roman expansionism into Italy and then into the eastern and western Mediterranean, brought great wealth to Rome, but war also brought great social and economic change, as occurred after the invasion of Hannibal. Ostia Antica, the harbour of Rome at the mouth of the Tiber River serves as the archaeological site, providing a picture of life in a working city.

**Area of study 2: People in Power, Societies in Crisis**

Area of study 2, ‘People in power, societies in crisis’, investigates how crises changed ancient societies; the contribution of individuals to such crises; and the way we might judge the historical significance of these crises and the individuals who participated in them. Thus while area of study 1 was based on a broad historical narrative and context of each society, this area of study concentrates on a specific crisis and the role of key individuals in that situation, in conjunction with exploring the causes and consequences of the crisis. All three individuals mentioned in the key knowledge for area of study 2 will need to be covered for each of the chosen societies.

**Egypt – The Armana Period (1391-1292 BC)**

The context of this crisis is the challenge posed by Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten) to the cult of Amen-Ra in supporting the deity Aten, and the subsequent reassertion of power by the priests of Amun. The key figures are Amenhotep III, Amenhotep IV (Akhenaten), and Nefertiti.

**Greece – The Peloponnesian War (460-403 BC)**

The Peloponnesian War, its long and short term causes, key battles such as the Sicilian expedition, and the consequences of the war form the core of this study. This is supported by the study of Pericles, Alcibiades and Lysander, in particular, how they contributed to the outbreak and/or outcome of the war.

**Rome – The Fall of the Republic (133-23 BC)**

This study would begin with the aftermath of the 2nd Carthaginian war and its impact on Italian society and its then impact on Rome. The political machinations as politician after politician, from Tiberius Gracchus down to Augustus, manoeuvred for a position of power would form the core narrative. Its culmination came with the civil war between Octavian (Augustus) and Mark Antony leading to the fall of the republic and the creation of the principate. The key individuals are Julius Caesar, the infamous Cleopatra VII and Octavian/Augustus.

**A Brief Case Study: Preliminary Observations**

The end of the Roman Republic is an excellent area of study to reflect briefly on how one might approach this area of study. I should note that
VCAA will be publishing Advice to Teachers on all the Units.

Teachers will be able to build on area of study 1 to show what was different about the period covered by ‘The fall of the republic (133-23 BC)’. They can cover the changes wrought on the Roman economy and society by the upheaval of the Second Punic war, leading to the displacement of peoples and the evolution of an urban poor, or the dissembling of the cursus honorum as the various warlords sought to fulfil personal ambitions.

The list of politicians who contributed to the demise of the republic is long, and teachers will need to be selective in what to concentrate on or emphasise. Besides creating a narrative for this tumultuous period, and addressing significant motives and significant events surrounding each of these men, it may be beneficial to identify trends common to these men to show patterns of behaviour, whether it be individual interests or broader social issues. Thus while the Gracchi utilised the tribunate office to initiate change, who else used tribunician powers and to what end?

The Study Design sets out the focus needed for each of the three individuals, namely Julius Caesar, Cleopatra VII and Augustus. Because it is ‘key knowledge’, every one of the individuals is assessable and therefore must be studied in preparation for possible assessment.

An important aim is to discuss each of these individuals and their historical context, while not becoming overwhelmed by the wealth of information, or becoming too superficial. The key factors would be the role each of them had contributing to the fall of the republic and the shape it took under Octavian/Augustus.

Augustus could be broken up into importance of family connections; early political career – manipulation of Cicero and the Senate and his war on Caesar’s assassins; political alliances – Antony, the Triumvirate; the use of propaganda as a political tool; the political and military significance of the settlements of 27 BC and 23 BC.

Selecting a representative mix of primary and secondary sources, albeit difficult because of the wealth of literature (for example, Augustus) or the mystique and mythology surrounding the individual (for example, Cleopatra), is paramount, as it will fulfil key skills, namely source analysis and historiography. The Res Gestae Divi Augusti provides valuable material which is presented in a straightforward register, but it is a document filled with overt and implied messages. In contrast Cassius Dio’s account of Augustus, for example the scenes in the Senate of the first settlement, provides colour and drama, and admiration for the Augustan regime. Both texts need to be treated with due care. Equally, library shelves buckle under the weight of modern Augustan scholarship, and picking representative interpretations of his role in the fall of the republic is not easy. One could begin with Ronald Syme, Roman revolution (1939), and move to more recent writings, such as Cambridge Ancient History, Vol 10 (1996) or Karl Galinsky, Augustus: Introduction to a Life of an Emperor (2012). Besides providing a narrative, secondary sources help train students to appreciate the work of historians, evaluate interpretations, and become skilled in selecting material to use as evidence in their own writing.

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