

An Interview with the Authors of *Panorama: A World History*

Ross Dunn and Laura Mitchell discuss how they came to write *Panorama* and how they believe it contributes to study of the human past.

Q: Tell us about the unique approach you have taken in *Panorama*.

A: In *Panorama*, we have created a unified narrative of world history, assuming that the primary subject we are investigating is humankind as a whole, and the primary setting of the narrative is the globe. We have organized the chapters chronologically, by consecutive historical periods—never repeating a period from different regional or thematic angles. Our aim is to advance the mission of conceptualizing the human experience in ways that are more holistic and integrated. To do this, we have had to select the very broad developments that define particular historical periods and that we think readers ought to understand.

Q: Why did you choose this approach?

A: We wanted to contribute to the important work of making the history of humankind intelligible, to write a unified narrative that is clear and coherent and that gives readers a sturdy framework for thinking about the global past. We believe we can begin to understand big and rapid changes in the world today only if we have a mental scaffolding of ideas and words for thinking, talking, and writing about the world as a whole. Similarly, we can begin to grasp how the world got to be the way it is only if we have world-scale narratives that help us connect the histories of particular groups—nations, civilizations, religions, corporations—to patterns of change in human society writ large.

Q: How do you balance large historical generalizations with knowledge about particular peoples, places, and events?

A: We know from experience that if the presentation is too broad, abstract, or theoretical, students may have a hard time grasping the generalizations. But if the writing is too loaded with historical details (all of which may be significant at some level), then the big pictures of change tend to get lost in thickets of information about particular societies, individuals, conquests, wars, philosophies, artistic movements, and so on.

Like all writers of world history, we have made choices to leave out a great deal of perfectly useful and interesting knowledge. Only by doing this are we able to keep our sights on the panoramic view and on the unified narrative. We have also, however, aimed to write in concrete, descriptive language, recognizing that history is fundamentally about human beings, individually or in groups, thinking, working, fighting, and creating.

Q: How are you able to combine the telling of “large-scale” history with in-depth, “small-scale” knowledge of people and events?

A: In every chapter, we shift between larger- and smaller-scale narratives, but we aim consistently to relate developments at relatively small scales to those at much larger scales. We cannot understand the Industrial Revolution as the world event it was by studying just one English factory town, but historians might write about such a town as an example of how large-scale changes played out on a local level and affected people’s lives.

Q: Does *Panorama* have a central theme?

A: Yes, it does. This theme is the growing complexity of human society from the early era of stone toolmaking to today. Looking over the very long term of history, we see a nearly continuous though by no means inevitable trend toward greater complexity in the relations of human groups with one another and with the earthly environment. This movement from lesser to greater complexity has been manifested across the ages in several nearly continuous trends of growth, even though the rates and dimensions of change in these areas have been uneven:

- Global population (more people and more groups interacting with one another)
- Human use of the planet’s energy supply to produce food and other goods
- Human intervention to alter the natural and physical environment
- The intricacy and sophistication of technology and science
- The density and speed of systems of communication and transport



- The density of human networks of interchange, including movement of people, goods, and ideas
- The size of governments and their capacity to manage and control people
- The technical capabilities of weaponry to kill people and destroy property
- The size and elaborateness of systems of belief, including religions, ethical structures, and philosophies

Throughout the book, we pose the same question in different ways: How and why did the world move relentlessly toward greater cultural complexity, despite breaks and unevenness in that trend, for example, short-term drops in global population, periods of economic contraction, or the disappearance of particular languages and local religions?

Q: How did you decide on the topics for each chapter?

A: In aiming to write a unified narrative of history, we followed the basic principle of bringing to the fore historical developments that had (and may still have) an impact on relatively large numbers of people, that is, developments of large scale. We let these big developments generally determine the chronological frame of each chapter, and we investigate them in whatever geographical context seems appropriate for clear discussion of their importance. If most chapters focus in part on developments in a region, it is because a development of large-scale significance happened or started there in that particular period. For example, we devote a primary chapter section to developments in China under the Song dynasties of the eleventh and twelfth centuries because China in those centuries generated exuberant economic innovation and growth, a phenomenon that had effects all across the Eastern Hemisphere.

Q: What is distinctive about *Panorama's* periodization of the past?

A: As a unified narrative, *Panorama* proposes a plan for dividing the past into specific chunks of time, with the beginnings and endings of those chunks determined by the important historical developments that occurred within them. Our periodization plan is a single chronology, or timeline moving from the remote to the recent past. One way that *Panorama's* periodization differs from the majority of world history books is its greater attention to very early human history, that is, to the long paleolithic era that preceded the coming of agriculture. The whole paleolithic era (old stone age), which started perhaps 2.5 million years ago, constitutes about 99.6 percent of the history of humankind and its near biological ancestors. Attention to early history encourages readers to think about how and why humans made radical changes in the way they lived—taking up farming, building cities, creating mechanized industries, populating the world

with billions—when they got along without doing these things for hundreds of thousands of years.

Q: You refer to your narrative as “unified”; can you elaborate?

A: One element of our approach to a unified narrative is to conceive of Africa, Asia, and Europe together as a single land mass, a sort of “supercontinent” within which humans interacted, or at least had the physical possibility of interacting, since paleolithic times. As discussed in our Introduction, we refer to this supercontinent as Afroeurasia. For periods of world history up to 1500 C.E., we conceive of the world as divided into four primary geographical regions: Afroeurasia (where the great majority of human beings have always lived—about 86 percent today), the Americas (North and South together), Australia, and Oceania (the Island Pacific). Within these regions, human groups interacted with one another, though with greater or lesser intensity and from different chronological starting points. On the other hand, people did not interact, at least not in any sustained way, between one of these regions and another because wide expanses of ocean and to some extent contrasting climatic conditions prevented or discouraged it. For periods up to 1500 C.E., therefore, we explore developments in these regions in different chapters or sections of chapters, even though we also introduce points of historical comparison between one region and another. Starting in the late fifteenth century, the four regions began to throw out lines of communication to one another, though not all at once. The Great World Convergence, as we call it, began when sea captains established regular transport routes between Afroeurasia and the Americas. For periods after 1500, we treat the entire world as a single zone within which human interrelations became increasingly complex and large-scale developments occurred. From that chronological point to the present, all the chapters are global in scope.

Q: How does *Panorama* cover the significance of individuals—both men and women—in the course of human history?

A: *Panorama* endeavors to take full account of the historical fact that men and women share the planet. Even though much of the narrative is not explicitly gender specific, it aims to be “gender sensitive.” This has meant repeatedly asking ourselves as we move from topic to topic how both men and women, whether aristocrats, city workers, peasants, or forager-hunters, acted as agents of change.

In every chapter of this book, the cast of characters is necessarily very large. We aim, however, to remind readers of the importance of individuals as agents of change by introducing a chapter feature titled “Individuals Matter.” It presents a biographical sketch of an individual whose life in some way illuminates the period the chapter addresses. In most cases, this individual is a person of public

importance, for example, Empress Wu of the Chinese Tang dynasty, or Diego Rivera, the twentieth-century Mexican artist. In a few chapters, however, the individual is an “ordinary” woman or man whose life or deeds illustrate some aspect of the period—for example, Ötzi, the ascribed name of a neolithic traveler in the Alps, or Olga Lisikova, a Russian combat pilot in World War II.

Q: Does *Panorama* incorporate primary sources?

A: Yes. A feature titled “Weighing the Evidence” appears in every chapter—and in the accompanying Connect History program—offering students an opportunity to critically examine a piece of historical evidence relating to the chapter content. The selection is usually a written document (for example, a nineteenth-century Moroccan diplomat’s description of France), though in a few chapters a visual artifact (for example, an image of a giant stone head from ancient Mexico) is included. In some chapters, we present two pieces of evidence to compare with each other. “Weighing the Evidence” includes questions that prompt readers to analyze, interpret, and discuss the selection. This feature reminds readers that the *Panorama* narrative rests on the work of thousands of professional historians and other scholars who have examined, authenticated, and interpreted written documents, works of art, fossilized bones, and numerous other kinds of primary evidence.

Q: Is there a theme to your chapter-opening vignettes?

A: Yes. A key element of the trend toward greater complexity in world history has been the development of systems of communication that have allowed humans to move from one place to another and to create networks for exchanging ideas and things in increasingly complicated ways and at faster and faster speeds. To highlight this aspect of human complexity, we open each chapter with a brief story or vignette that has to do with some kind of communication, transport, or movement pertinent to the historical period under study. The subjects of these stories range widely from camel caravans to the profession of telephone operator.

Q: Is *Panorama* available as an e-book?

A: Even better—it is available as a SmartBook, which means not only that students can read it online, but they can quiz themselves after every section. The SmartBook then adapts to their response, highlighting areas in the narrative that they need to study more.

Q: Are any other digital resources available?

A: Absolutely. The Connect History program offers activities with *Panorama’s* maps, primary sources, key concepts and terms, as well as auto-gradable test items and essay questions.

