Lecture Title:

"Otherworldly Utopias?
Pliny on Sri Lanka vs.
Tacitus on Germany"

Lecturer:

Dr. Kelly Shannon-Henderson

Date:

Friday, March 24, 2022

Time:

5:00 p.m.
Eastern Standard Time

Place:

Conaton Board Room

ROBERT J. MURRAY

LECTURE

SERIES

"Otherworldly Utopias?
Pliny on Sri Lanka vs.
Tacitus on Germany"

Dr. Kelly Shannon-Henderson

Friday, March 24, 2023

Xavier University
Cincinnati, Ohio

Robert J. Murray
Lecture Series

The lecture series is named in honor of Robert J. Murray, professor of classics (1960-1997), for his many contributions to Xavier University and the Classics and Philosophy Honors Bachelor of Arts program.

The Classics and Philosophy Honors program was established in 1948 by Father William Hetherington, S.J. in an effort to preserve the classical Jesuit liberal arts tradition. Classics and Philosophy Honors students pursue the study of Latin, Greek and philosophy in addition to the rest of Xavier's core curriculum over four years.

This lecture series carries on the spirit of humanities education represented by these programs.

Professor Robert J. Murray
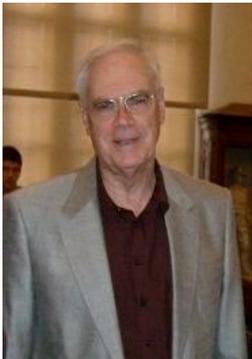
Professor Murray, a member of one of the first honors classes, directed the program frequently until his retirement. His devotion to students and to the classical liberal arts has been a cornerstone of the program for 37 years.

Dr. Kelly Shannon-Henderson

Kelly Shannon-Henderson is Associate Professor in the Department of Classics at the University of Cincinnati. She holds a bachelor's degree in Classics from the University of Virginia and a DPhil in Greek and Latin Languages and Literature from the University of Oxford. Before coming to Cincinnati in the fall of 2021, she taught in the Department of Modern Languages and Classics at the University of Alabama for seven years. She has also researched or taught at Universität Erfurt and the University of Virginia. She is the author of *Religion and Memory in Tacitus'* Annals (Oxford University Press, 2019), winner of the Goodwin Award of Merit from the Society for Classical Studies; a commentary on Phlegon of Tralles' *On Marvels* (Brill) for the continuation of Felix Jacoby's *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*; and various articles on aspects of Greek and Roman historiography, religion, and paradoxography.

"Otherworldly Utopias? Pliny on Sri Lanka vs. Tacitus on Germany"

Pliny's description of the island of Taprobane (modern Sri Lanka, *Historia Naturalis* 6.81-91) and Tacitus' *Germania* may seem unlikely bedfellows; but these texts, written within decades of each other, have important observations to make about luxury and political freedom at the edges of the earth. I will compare the accounts of these two societies, with a view to showing what the deployment of paradoxographical motifs and moralizing discourse in ancient geographical writing can tell us about Roman ideas about geography and imperialism.

It is a commonplace in many Roman ethnographic works that peoples at the edges of the earth are often blessedly free of two forms of oppression: the societal degradation caused by material wealth, and the lack of political freedom associated with life in Imperial Rome. Pliny's Taprobane and Tacitus' Germania are both interesting for the ways they seem to problematize this commonplace. The furthest reaches of Tacitus' Germania are actually characterized by a decreasing degree of political freedom; by contrast, the people of Taprobane enjoy an elected monarchy renowned for its justice, and have a power to remove unjust rulers that would seem to be the envy of any Julio-Claudian senator (*HN* 6.89-91). Yet Pliny also notes the proliferation of luxury products on Taprobane that make it a source of corruption for Rome (*HN* 6.88-89). Furthermore, both Pliny's Taprobane and Tacitus' Germania are places where the normal laws of nature do not always apply. Taken together with the issues raised related to freedom and luxury, the intrusion of these paradoxographical motifs calls into question whether utopian societies can or do really exist.