TOM PALAIMA

A UT classics professor who began by studying human scripts now focuses on the human drama as well

by Avrel Seale

Tom Palaima holds a facsimile of the first Linear B clay tablet ever translated (June 18, 1952) by British decipherer Michael Ventris for his American colleague Emmett L. Bennett Jr. The tablet comes from the earliest known deposit of texts (ca. 1400 B.C.E.) from the Minoan palace of Knossos on Crete. It records the allocation of worker oxen to different communities on the island.

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Palaima was a math whiz. As a sophomore at Boston College, he was already taking graduate math courses. But he was also in an honors program that had a great books freshman seminar. By chance, the professor Palaima drew was the chair of the classics department and taught ancient history. Palaima chose to take Roman history and liked it. In his junior year, he started Greek history and an already sharp young mind began to catch fire because of a single book.

As outside reading, his teacher commended to him the first great history of Greece in English, a multivolume work by George Grote in 1846. Palaima started reading it, but all of the footnotes were in Greek. Returning to his teacher in frustration, he was told he ought to take Greek, which he did. “I met with this old Jesuit six days a week, 8-10 in the morning, 4-6 in the afternoon, the whole summer.”

Finally he realized that, while he was good at math, he didn’t feel the passion for it that he did for Greek. “If somebody said tomorrow, ‘You’re not going to look at a math book the rest of your life,’ would I really be sad? No, but I would be sad if I weren’t able to look at a Greek text again, or read a historian.”

Today, Palaima, the Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at UT, is one of six MacArthur Fellows on the University of Texas faculty. (See p. 12.) He won the “genius grant” in 1985 for his work in Aegean prehistory and early Greek language and culture. He has lectured, written, and taught extensively on ancient writing systems, the reconstruction of ancient culture, decipherment theory, and Greek language, but more recently has delved into the study and teaching of war and violence and the stories that spring from them. He also has become a regular op-ed writer for the Austin American-Statesman and a regular reviewer for the Times Higher Education Supplement. But his acclaim as a scholar has not led to a diminished emphasis on teaching. To the contrary, Palaima has won one of the Texas Exes’ highest honors for faculty members, the Jean Holloway Award for Excellence in Teaching, in 2004.

Palaima began life in the old Lithuanian area of Cleveland. “It was very much like The Deer Hunter,” he remembers. “Every area had its church, its several bars, its bakery, its butcher shop.” His family moved out to the post-war suburbs in 1956 when he was 5. His father was a postal worker; his mother, mainly a homemaker, also worked part-time in a grocery store and then a school cafeteria. “I was a typical third-generation American,” says Palaima, whose grandparents immigrated from Lithuania and Ukraine. He explains that the third generation becomes highly Americanized and takes advantage of the educational system. He was the first person in his extended family to go to college. His one brother “took a totally different path. You know how Springsteen says in ‘Born in the USA’, ‘I got in a little hometown jam, and so they put a rifle in my hands...’? He was one of those kids.”

Palaima is just as at ease quoting pop stars and folkies as he is Homer, perhaps one reason he’s a favorite with students. Today, he’s wearing a T-shirt with a vintage Stevie Ray Vaughan photo. In a side bedroom in his North Campus 1920s house, he reveals the full extent of his Bob Dylan fixation: 500 CDs, most of them bootlegged recordings of concerts, are filed neatly in a cabinet. The house has other remnants of a restless mind. In the front room is a spinet Palaima acquired four years ago when he took up the piano at age 50. In late August, we spoke in his living room, appointed by his wife, Carolyn, with Spanish artifacts and photos of their 10-year-old son...
As a boy, what did you want to do when you grew up?

Nothing. I'm serious. It startles me to think about it. My experience. Many people read my op-eds and come at me very aggressively. I've had things said that were like — I have a Belgian colleague, and we often disagree on interpretive matters. This is what I had with math, classics, economics, and history, but not with math, classics, and history, because now I know what it's like to work at a really difficult job, and also I'm more sensitive to people who don't have wealth.

As a boy, what did you want to do when you grew up?

I旺季 I was a janitor in a high school for several years and worked in a brakeshoe factory. So I had that kind of experience. And in many ways, I wouldn't trade it for anything because now I know what it's like to work at a really difficult job, and also I'm more sensitive to people who don't have wealth.

This alternative area of mine is war stories. I'm interested in how you capture the experience of war, how people respond to war and violence. Early on I realized what I'm interested in really is the human experience. The questions I want to ask is what made these human beings think. How was it to stand inside the Megaron at Pylos? What were you thinking? I've talked to psychiatrists and historians about this. What happens is that people get caught up in technicalities of research that they leave the fundamental questions out of the picture. I did that myself for a long time. I was studying the scribes but never thinking what it was like to be an actual Mycenaean scribe. That was the work that got me the MacArthur Fellowship — analyzing these linear texts that were all anonymous. I was a mathematics major, and if you were doing analysis and use secondary characteristics like spelling, formatting, text pragmatics, subject matter, and so forth. What I did was totally reconstruct the administrative system of this palace, how they made decisions, how they worked, if they interacted with other scribes, if there was a hierarchy of subjects they dealt with, and so forth.

I think about writing what Shane said to young Joey about a gun. It's just a tool, as good or bad as the person who uses it. But I would add that the greatest threat to our own society comes from those who would make writing meaningless as a way of tapping on our asymmetrical values or as a way of preserving a record of our own past, good or bad. Orwell saw the danger of the latter when those in power would control looking as if you had to do homily writing. But right now messages in writing are so easy to generate and spread that most of us are overwhelmed by sheer volume. How then can the rare truly great things that are written be identified?

One thing that I do know about writing, when I pick up Homer or my colleague Rollando Hinojosa-Smith's Korean Love Songs and read from them, I think of the word written as something even better than the music of Bob Dylan.

As a boy, what did you want to do when you grew up?

Nothing. It's strange. It startles me to think about it. My parents never placed any expectations on me. I was very bright and scientifically inclined in any way, shape, or form in the late 50s, because of Sputnik, you were tapped. On my GRS to go into classics. I got a 780 in math and 680 in English! But I never listened to that. I always had this pressure put on me from the homefront. I had several friends in college who did that and were very unhappy, and in two cases turned to drugs to blunder through it, which was great to blunder through it. I did that myself for a long time. That was a fascinating thing.

High point of your career?

Yeah I was a junior in a high school for several years and worked in a brakeshoe factory. So I have that kind of experience. And in many ways, I wouldn't trade it for anything because now I know what it's like to work at a really difficult job, and also I'm more sensitive to people who don't have wealth.

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burst out and start having shall grave burials and eventually develop a palatial culture of their own, but never, ever on the level of Minoans. So they’re always sort of barbarians in relation to the Minoans. But they modify Linear A, which was developed for a Minoan language. We think it was a three- vowel language. It was an open-syllabic language, like Japanese.

What does that mean?

Every syllable ends in a vowel. Think of all the Japanese words you have in your head. Nagasaki, Hirohito, Yokohama, Hiroshima. Greek has both open and closed syllables: idos. So what the Mycenaean had to do was adapt the Minoan script, which was written for an open-syllabic language, to the writing of a language that used closed syllables, as well as one that had slightly different sounds. So Linear B is an adaptation for the writing of Greek of a script that was originally designed for the writing of a Minoan language. Linear A still hasn’t been deciphered because there aren’t enough trees.

Are there perceptions about ancient Greek culture that we have that are mistaken?

I believe that cultural myths, even about other cultures, are like clichés. Clichés are clichés because they’re true. A penny saved is a penny earned. With age comes wisdom. That is true. And it doesn’t apply to all cases. You can meet old people who are still fools, and you may lose the bank account where you’ve put your pennies.

Ancient Athens. Man, those Athenians are democracy all the way. They have citizens in the legislative council, they’re choosing kings. What else could they do? There’s a couple of things. The first thing is that the Greeks were really true about our knowledge of ancient Greeks. The Greeks at one stage were extremely important. And at different stages, we made of them what we wanted to. For example, Grote’s great History of Greece was written in a very particular way. He was really, really, really believed in diminishing the power of the king and promoting the power of the parliament. And so what’s the best model? Ancient Athens. Man, that’s democracy all the way. They have citizens in the legislative council, they’re chosen by lot, they take everything in front of the assembly, and so forth. So that’s a truth. But earlier histories were promoting kingship, and instead of Athens being the ideal. On a basic level, people have a fair good grasp of this. But we don’t want to see negatives that don’t reinforce our own prejudices. There is a myth for modern Americans: the Golden Age of Athens, the great beauty of the temples that were built, the whole cultural program of Athens. The great tragedies: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, the great philosophers: Socrates and Plato; the great historians: Thucydides, Herodotus coming to Athens to lecture. So it’s true that it was a great golden age. But what was it based on?

Well, you’re led to believe that the hub of some kind of fascist thought if you point out that it was based on brutal imperialism. Secretary of State Dulles, right after World War II, gave a speech at Princeton in 1949. He said: “American civilization has the models for what Americans were supposed to do after the war. There’s an article in the foreign service journal explaining to American diplomats the secrets of diplomacy that one can find in Thucydides. “You have to read Thucydides to understand the Cold War.” So our whole Cold War philosophy was shaped by the fact that most of these people had elite educations, they had read Thucydides at Groton and Exeter, and they believed in it. The Communist bloc was the Spartan states and their allies, and the Americans and NATO were the Athenian language, like Japanese.

But they didn’t take it further and do the self-examination: what are we doing here by leaving our footprint? What are we doing by perpetuating colonialism? What are we doing by rejecting Ho Chi Minh? Even Republican senators were saying that we have to recognize that he is the George Washington of Vietnam. But no, we’re going to support the French, and when the French are gone, we’re going to support them, and then we’re going to support Thiou, and the whole thing transforms.

But this is exactly what the Athenians were doing, and this is what Thucydides tells us happens. You have these great superpowers colliding, and then everybody gets sucked in. And then the superpowers get sucked in to their own vacuum process, because a civil war breaks out here, and pretty soon they have troops on the ground, and pretty soon they’re colliding with each other when perhaps they had an armistice.

You even have cases where the Athenians are supporting the oligarchs, and the Spartans are supporting the democrats. So these lessons about who we are get missed because we want to use the Greeks to support an idea of who we are, instead of asking, who are we? What are we doing here? Is it right or wrong? What are we, in the same way that the Athenians, in the same way that the Spartans, in the same way that the Athenians, in the same way that the Spartans, in the same way that the Athenians, in the same way that the Spartans, in the same way that the Athenians, in the same way that are serious mistakes — let’s say necessities of American foreign policy — that created a negative view of the United States? Well, you’ve got to be insane not to think that, but you say that about the current situation, you’re considering apart. But the lessons are there. They’re there in Thucydides. I bring these things up not to push a political agenda, but as an intelligent fact about the need to look at this culture to see what you want to see. And part of it is the seduction of power.

When I teach an ancient Greek history course, I do bring in history books, and not just to push any agenda. I go to signposts of where I am on issues, and I talk to students about this issue. They say what they resent is not so much braggadocio, but what they resent is modern analogs: they appreciate that. Or even saying, “My beliefs on this are this. What are yours?” What they resent is what they call professors “hijacking a course.” When you come in and rail against something that’s going on, and also professors who use their power. The power relationship is power. McNamara’s sense of power. I know where to find it, and I know how to use it.” Thucydides saw this, other ancient historians saw it. But the word “power” again, you say, what are we representing as our morality? I’m glad I don’t have to make those decisions of course. But if you’re going to assess those as historical lessons, you want to say to yourself, “What are the factors involved here, and how should we respond next time?”

These illustrations of our selective perception of history almost lead one to say, well, maybe we’re better off not trying to use history as a template for current events.

No, I’m a firm believer that you have to use history, to the same extent that you have to use other human beings to understand yourself. A Freudian therapist will ask you a lot of questions about yourself, but always in relation to other human beings.

I teach a seminar on war and violence, on war stories. One student came to me and said, “This seminar is not about what I wanted it to be. I wanted to get into a history seminar. There’s just not enough history here. What are the hard facts? Why are we talking about the issues? Why are we reading works of fiction?” First, I pointed out to him how we were going to be looking at journalistic accounts, oral histories, true histories throughout, but we were also going to be looking at poetry, letters home, memoirs, movies, documentary and nontoxic. I asked him what his notion of history was. His notion, because of the TAAS test approach, was that there were facts, and you learn those facts, and then you move on.

But the word history means examination. It means exploration, inquiry. There’s a notion that history is somehow the word of God, or a dogma. This doesn’t mean I’m a relativist, but means I’m a sensible human being. History is just another form of story-making with different standards of how to present information and different responsibilities for getting close to the truth of what happened.

What caused you to make this transition from ancient Greece to study war and violence as an area in and of itself?

One of the things that got me onto it was teaching The Iliad. Teaching it in a mythology course, I realized I was doing a wrong thing in cram the students’ heads with the plot structure. Who kills whom in what battle? Where does Hector meet Andromache? Where does Achilles confront Pyrrhus? The students filled in that with so much facts and only the dimmest appreciation of the power of The Iliad. I read The Iliad in high school in translation, and it bored me to tears — killing after killing. What even knows who killing is at that age? That’s why we send 18-year-olds off to war, by the way. The Greeks did the same thing. You can’t even conceive of your own death. When you’re 18, you’re pumping. You’re fed this stuff, off you go.

In college, I begrudgingly turned to The Iliad in Greek. I read the first 15 lines, and it was the most beautiful thing I’ve ever read in my life. The most immediate, direct, powerful, gorgeous. There’s no substitute for it. Bob Dylan says, “Words like burning coal pouring off the page.” That’s what The Iliad was.
My wife says I'm a pessimist. And I think that's the best way to be. There's no other way to be when you've been in the war business all your life. I was paired with an editor of The Alcalde. I play five different versions of a song around the figure of Delia. In Dylan's version, she's a gambling girl out West. All these folk artists use the same character and tell different stories. It's exactly what's going on in the tradition that gave rise to The Odyssey. Here's a theme, here's a cast of characters, you've got to fight in the famous war, or you've got to fight in the war. The different folk artists tap in and transmogrify, change things around.

You've spent a fair amount of time thinking about war and violence. What conclusions have you come to about human nature? [Laughter] My wife says I'm a pessimist. And I think that's the best way to be. There's no other way to be when you've been in the war business all your life. I was paired with an editor of History Today. We were asked the question why wars begin. It dawned on me that the real question is why wars never end. They never end, yet somehow we get along. I think the planet almost every year in recorded history. And we have certain illusions that there are times of peace. There's this widespread notion that our history has been a period of prevailing peace. Well, that was true of continental Europe, but at the same time, all the colonial powers were involved in fratricidal colonial wars — the Boer War, and around the globe. So my generation is fortunate because the world animal — keep in mind, I'm not a pacifist — but I also believe that it's absolutely incumbent upon societies that control large amounts of military power to pay great attention to whether they have the right to attack us. What if they had the capacity to launch a missile and hit New York? Would they be able to say, “Oh, you're a threatening nation that was threatening us”?

What kind of precedent does that set? Iran and Syria certainly feel threatened by American attempts, to use arms, but you have to be very cautious about how you use them, and not only for the precedent it sets, but because we're seeing again the impact that being in this kind of war environment has on our soldiers. There's no ability anymore to discriminate between civilian and enemy. The report that at least one innocent civilian Iraqi is killed by an American soldier every two days is a conservative statistic being produced by the military itself. It's very hard for people who have control of power, especially when they're being criticized. What if Bush had not attacked Afghanistan and Iraq? I always do the conflationary history, try to sympathize, maybe even with a leader that I'm not in tune with. What would his policies be? Would he have gotten re-elected? Look at LBJ. “I'm not going to be the first president to end a war, especially after Kennedy started it. I'm not going to not fulfill Kennedy's mandate.”

When most people think of alternatives to war, they think of embargoes, diplomacy. Are there other alternatives that you've encountered that you consider effective? No, but I have a good friend who's involved in high-level efforts kind of thing. But the weapons, in other words, ways of disabling the Agnew armies that are almost inevitable: leering troops — being able to spray slippery plastic on roadways so that trucks and tanks and artillery can't move on them. Short of that, war is a fairly simple thing. You have one group of men — and now women — who have weapons, and you get another group of men and women who have weapons, and they kill each other. The escalation in weaponry has now made it almost unimaginable. It's certainly taken all the glamour out of war. There is a place for the use of arms, but you have to be very cautious about how you use them, and not only for the precedent it sets, but because we're seeing again the impact that being in this kind of war environment has on our soldiers. There's no ability anymore to discriminate between civilian and enemy. The report that at least one innocent civilian Iraqi is killed by an American soldier every two days is a conservative statistic being produced by the military itself. It's very hard for people who have control of power, especially when they're being criticized. What if Bush had not attacked Afghanistan and Iraq? I always do the conflationary history, try to sympathize, maybe even with a leader that I'm not in tune with. What would his policies be? Would he have gotten re-elected? Look at LBJ. “I'm not going to be the first president to end a war, especially after Kennedy started it. I'm not going to not fulfill Kennedy's mandate.”

How did the MacArthur Fellowships get started? Catherine T and John D MacArthur were not great philanthropists while they were alive. But he hated the idea that his millions of dollars would get gobbled up by the federal government. He asked his friend John Rockefeller, “What if one of these foundations would be a good way to use the money? So he set up a board with people like Jonas Salk and Anne Frank. One of them was if you are doing interesting things, give 'em money. Now it's become institutionalized, and people worry about gender balance and social issues, but then, it was just, find someone who's doing something new.

What has being a MacArthur Fellow allowed you to do? I was in New York, teaching at Fordham University, a Jesuit College with no appreciable graduate program. And given my economic background, I was living in some pretty awful places. I lived in Hell's Kitchen back when it was a drug and prostitution zone. My place literally was above the Lincoln Tunnel. The MacArthur Foundation could not locate me before the announcement because I was out camping. So the first time I knew about it was when I read it in the Austin American-Statesman. I happened to be there visiting someone. The year before, I had approached the classics department here about a job, and they said, “Absolutely no, we're not interested.” When the MacArthur announcement hit, the chairman of the department was on a plane and read it in USA Today. When the plane stopped in Denver, he got off and called the department and said, “Get ahold of Palma.” So oddly enough I had an awareness that you don’t always get rewards for your virtue. If you get something like this, well, other people could have gotten it, too. You were the one that was fortunate. It wasn’t an inevitability. But it happened, and I think I’m responsible for it. It’s interesting that I also felt that I had an obligation to do something with it that transcended me, so at the time I thought that setting up this research center would be a good use of the funds. It was obviously a sea change with what I could do with my interest. I spent from 1985 to 90 setting up the Program for Aegean Scripts and Prehistory.

Why did you want to do that? The Linear B script was deciphered in 1952, and all the people who worked in that field were retiring. Sometimes papers were getting lost. So I thought, 1) Wouldn’t it be nice to set up a photographic archive of all the inscriptions? and 2) Wouldn’t it be nice to set up a research center that would try to keep track of these papers? I think whoever recommended me had the confidence that if I got the money I would do something really useful.

Another big part of the experience is getting to know the other fellows through conferences. There’s a wonderful sense from all the other fellows that you want to know what you are doing, and you want to know what they’re doing. True intellectual conversation is rare.

What's next for you? One of the strengths of having moved around in different areas — teaching ancient history, teaching Greek language, teaching war and violence studies, being an op-ed writer now — I use it as a calling card in certain situations. I have a sense that as long as I'm doing something good, that’s good. Whereas other people are so preoccupied with one area. “If I'm not getting this done, the world’s going to fall apart!” It's not. In the grand scheme of things, if you just look at any one thing, it’s inconsequential. The most important thing is just to keep on doing things, doing something good, and I feel that I’ve fallen behind on this area or that area because I have a tendency to do too much. But if I’m speaking to second graders about Greek gods or speaking at Oxford, I do use it as a calling card in certain situations. I have a good teacher who gives talks to you who talk to a good teacher who says, “Wow, I really had a good class today,” what they mean is not that I went in and theoretically wowed them, but somebody sparked something, and [snap] I was thinking about new ideas.