

Professional historians have been remarkably united in supporting calls to remove these statues. These were not monuments put up in the immediate aftermath of the war but some half a century later, just as laws were being bolstered that systematically discriminated against and dehumanised black people. The valourisation of Confederate leaders was part of a deliberate and concerted effort to enshrine for ever (or so they hoped) the self-serving myth of the 'Lost Cause'. Sometimes public funds were appropriated for these monuments, approved by an all-white electorate. They were a marking of territory. Placed in town squares and in front of public buildings, they were deliberately intended to symbolise white domination. Speakers at the unveiling ceremonies said so. Black people knew so. And the benign approval of white Northerners was part of the story, too. Confederate generals even appeared in Northern states. By elevating Confederates to plinths, white Americans whitewashed both the history of slavery and the ongoing reality of racial injustice.

The removal of this often mass-produced Lost Cause statuary would not, as the president thinks, obliterate history. On the contrary, it would remove a monumental obstacle to the proper understanding of American history. The white Southerners who put up those statues intended them to stand the test of time, but no generation has the right to impose its version of the past on the future. The mob in revolutionary New York knew this, as do Americans now. Only a society with no historical consciousness – and which therefore assumes the prevailing power structure to be permanent and inalienable – would leave its statues in place forever. 🌐



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**HISTORICAL SCIENCE**

# Your discipline needs you

*A pioneering project digitising a vast swathe of history could revolutionise scientific analysis of competing theories – but needs more specialist hands to help*

**BY LAURA SPINNEY & PETER TURCHIN**

**C**alling experts from across the humanities: you are invited to collaborate in a scientific project revisiting some of the big questions about the past. What caused the rise and fall of sophisticated societies such as the Maya or the Roman empire? What role did agriculture play in shaping their fortunes? Or military prowess? Or religion?

Plenty of theories speak to such questions, but there is currently no satisfactory way of choosing between them. A basic axiom of the scientific method is that a theory must make a testable prediction, but the body of available historical and archaeological information is now so large that testing a prediction against all of it is beyond the capacities of the human brain.

The temptation to cherry-pick the evidence that supports a pet theory is strong, with the result that every theory has its champions, and no theory ever dies. In addition, research into the past has splintered into specialist subdisciplines that have less and less contact with each other. The insights emerging from these knowledge 'silos' are invaluable, but a counterweight is needed: an overarching, multidisciplinary approach that weaves them into a coherent tapestry, enabling us to ask – and hopefully, answer – those big questions.

This data overload can be addressed, in part, by computers. Not only can computers stock large amounts of data, they also allow predictions to be tested

against them. Theories purporting to explain the same historical phenomena can thus be pitted against each other, until a winner emerges that explains the evidence better than its rivals.

One such computer-based project is Seshat – named for the ancient Egyptian goddess of knowledge – a databank of global historical information covering 10,000-odd years from the introduction of agriculture to the year 1900. Though only six years old, it is also an example of a successful collaboration between scientists and historians.

A database is nothing without data, and those data have to be collected, entered into a computer and verified. Verification, in this context, means that

**Armed with the new Seshat databank, researchers are in a position to chart the evolution of social complexity and to probe the factors shaping that evolution**

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any expert disagreements or uncertainty are recorded, as are the information's sources. In future, computers will do all this automatically, but for now Seshat relies on human effort. Students at academic institutions all over the world input the data, and historians oversee every stage of the process.

To date, Seshat comprises more than 200,000 data points or 'records'. Soon it will be big enough to support what its founders call "horse races" between theories, but it has already produced some exciting results. For example, it has generated a rigorously tested definition of social complexity that applies to societies from different periods and on different continents, allowing hundreds of them to be compared at one time. The definition is based on around 50 variables – whether a society had a legal code, an alphabet, a hierarchical army organisation, and so on. Thus armed, researchers are now in a position to chart the evolution of social complexity and to probe the factors shaping that evolution.

Experts in the history of agriculture are cross-referencing the peaks and troughs of social complexity against what's known about past climate change and farming innovation. Religious scholars are evaluating historical societies for their belief in moralising supernatural beings – the so-called 'big gods' whose invention, according to one theory, enforced cooperative behaviour and led to the emergence of ever larger and more complex societies.

But there are still whole areas

of the humanities into which Seshat has yet to tap – and that's where you, reader, can get involved: simply visit [seshatdatabank.info](http://seshatdatabank.info) to find out more.

Take art history, which has much to tell us about social equality (and inequality). The ancient Egyptians' colossal depictions of the pharaohs and a life-sized, street-level statue of a Norwegian king in modern Oslo represent very different ideas about the relative status of elites and the proletariat. Similarly, literary critics who have been trained to deconstruct stories could provide insights into how earlier societies were viewed by those who chronicled them.

The beauty of this holistic approach is that nothing goes to waste. Clearly there is debate and disagreement, and these are only set to increase as the academic contributions to Seshat become more diverse, but the system has been designed – rather like Wikipedia – to accommodate controversy. In one sense it is better than Wikipedia: each record is accompanied by its own controversy from the start, rather than being subjected to constant updates as dissenters add their views. Nevertheless,

Seshat and Wikipedia have one thing in common: both improve with age. The nature of big data is such that the more data there are, the more strongly the signal emerges from the noise. The signal, in this case, is a deeper understanding of our own past. 🌐



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