

Maturation of a Historian: Conversation with Walter Kaegi

Interview conducted by Michael Goodyear, Hansong Li and Kevin Otradovec

*Walter Kaegi is a scholar of Byzantine and late Roman history. At the University of Chicago he is Professor of History and the College, and a Voting Member of the Oriental Institute. He is the co-founder of the Byzantine Studies Conference, editor of the journal *Byzantinische Forschungen* and past president of the US National Committee for Byzantine Studies. In a conversation on January 26th 2016, Professor Kaegi shared his insights and stories with the *Chicago Journal of History*.*

Chicago Journal of History (CJH: HL): To begin the conversation, we are curious about how you first came into Byzantine history. Has the focus of your academic work shifted over time? And why did you go in those directions?

Walter Kaegi, Professor (WK): First of all it was back in elementary school when I decided that I wanted to be a historian, though it was in the senior year of high school that I decided to go into Byzantine history, to study more or less some of the centuries that I work on now, say 4th and 5th century to especially about 11th. In those days I was also influenced by some of the historians who are completely out of interest today, such as Edward Gibbon and Arnold J. Toynbee. But at the time I bought all of the volumes—in hardback—of Toynbee's *A Study of History* and later on a couple of supplements. I bought them and those books gave me some inspiration. And later I broadened in use and study of Arabic, and studied more aspects of the Middle East and Levant than originally planned. So I guess you could say that is how I came to studying history. Again once I had some minor interest in U.S. history but I moved away from that to those broader questions.

CJH (MG): Among the many books and articles you've written and published on Byzantine history, which one of them is of special importance to you?

WK: Perhaps the one on Heraclius.

CJH (MG): Is there a particular reason for that?

WK: Because I ended up bringing in a lot of types of historical sources at every crucial point in time.

CJH (MG): To broaden the topic a little more: how do you see your historical scholarship fit into and have effects on the world today?

WK: Well, I try to avoid imposing policy questions in what I do, but I am someone who is interested in the contemporary world. I've been involved in extensive travel, and that's not

only a part of my travel for researches; I'm fortunate to have been able to travel to a fair number of—to put it broadly—risky places: Iraq in 1988, for example. I was in Damascus under Hafez al-Assad, the father of the current president of Syria Bashar Hafez al-Assad, and had to witness and had thoughts on the civil war. My last risky travel was in 2013, visiting the last part of the Roman Empire that I had never visited, eastern Libya, and western Libya, which I had not seen since 1968 at the end of monarchy. I was fortunate enough because I'm also a member of the Oriental Institute, so I was able to use their good offices, and received a rare Fulbright fellowship to get to Iraq in the summer of 1988, where I was given extensive travel rights to be in various places that were otherwise difficult to visit.

But way back as an undergraduate, I had been involved in international relations clubs. I had had a good friend, Akira Iriye, who was later chair of the University of Chicago's history department, and then went to Harvard, who studied Japanese-American war and American foreign policy in the Pacific. So I had strong interest in foreign policy, but I normally stay out of that. I guess I could also say that I am a person born in what U.S. historians call the "Silent Generation"—those who matured after the end of McCarthyism. Since I grew up, only rarely have I ever signed petitions or things of that kind. And I certainly was involved in journalism. Writer Hunter S. Thompson was on my newspaper in elementary and junior high school, and actually he was an influence for my interest in U.S. history, way back.

I came from the Ohio valley, so I have been aware of mentalities of southern Indiana and Kentucky, that's something else. I enjoy visiting U.S. historical sites, but I don't quite do any researching about them.

Last summer in 2015 I taught in Taiwan, and I'm aware of the latest events in Taiwan: now with the deep freeze, where a lot of people died because of it and the crops were badly damaged, that was interesting. I know only a limited amount about the Pacific Rim.

CJH (HL): Between Byzantine times and today, have you seen any continuities—for example how key places play similar roles—in North Africa and the Middle East?

WK: Yes, certainly in visiting, I was privileged to have seen, in Asiatic and Anatolian Turkey, technological changes occurring with agriculture. Many of these sites I was able to visit, such as Kurdistan, in a more peaceful time there, and in North Africa as well. Going back to high school I was very interested in Algerian revolution against France and wrote in the local newspaper about that. And my wife was a Peace Corps volunteer in Tunisia, so that broadened my interest in a certain way. I would

say that in visiting Algeria, which has all kinds of security problems especially in eastern Algeria near the Tunisian border, I see a lot of continuity of problems. Let's take a place that's almost on news every day, the border between Algeria and Tunisia, Kasserine—that's completely out of control, and it was important in WWII for the U.S. and Germany; I certainly had the good fortune to have a Fulbright that enabled me to do a little teaching in Algeria and see things there.

Now, for Byzantium I traveled extensively in the Balkans and have seen changes there. I think right now, people cannot understand Russia when they don't take Byzantium and orthodoxy seriously, for example, Crimea, and so forth. But I don't write about policy in the Black Sea region. I think that, in any case, I don't write about history simply oblivious to the past; I don't think that, however, the past can solve North African problems—and there *are* problems—or those in Anatolia and in areas in the east. But travel is something very important, I think, for a historian: long ago, Herodotus would travel, and it is even more so in recent eras.

CJH (KO): So I'm really curious, in your opinion do you think that there is a certain trait that characterizes a good historian, based on your experience?

WK: Well there are so many different kinds of historians. Of course remember that history comes from the Greek root "investigate, to research," not to tell a story—which is totally misleading. Sometimes the English language can lead to distortion. So since there are so many different historians, I've

known many who work on many different things. Obviously today we have an explosion of publications on history, so that no one can keep up with everything. So when you say historians, I think it is important, when possible, not simply to use the net, but to be able to talk face-to-face whether at the table or in the classroom and certainly I have benefitted also as a historian from questions in the classroom, I mean especially in smaller classrooms. That is: a huge lecture class is going to create very different challenges than something in a smaller context. Contact with undergraduate students has enriched me; it has helped develop me, not just the students. Now I myself enjoy at times sitting with a coffee or tea and writing amidst other people doing other things. Then at other times I cannot work alone, but I certainly have used Regenstein since it was created. I remember, imperfectly, what it was like here before we had a Regenstein.

CJH (MG): So the multiple libraries across campus?

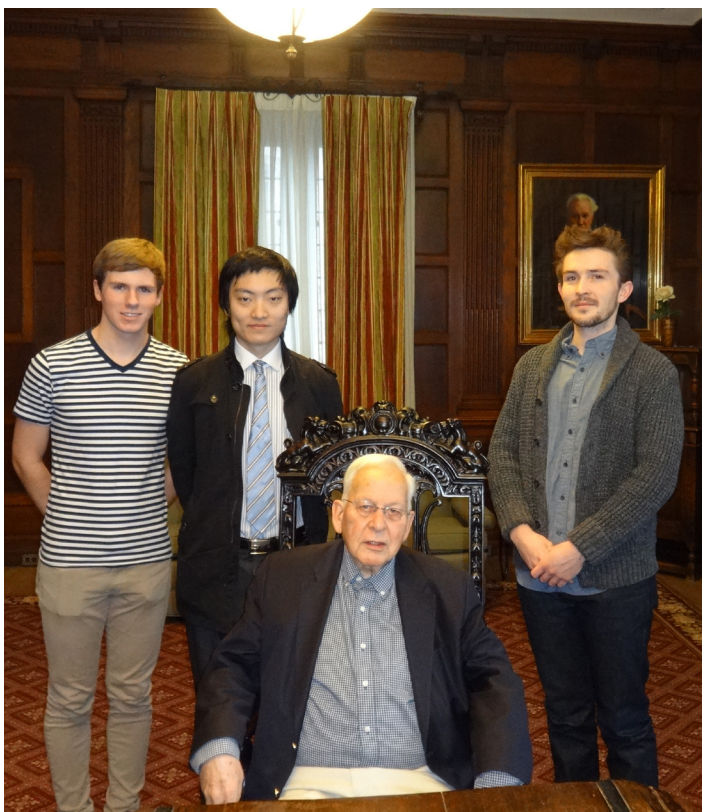
WK: Well not only that, but you can't imagine here, the Harper Reading room, that way back then it was dark and ill-lit at night, and so my impression was except for reserve, a lot of people, especially students, grabbed the books and went home. Wherever that was—see, first of all they didn't even have something like a Harper Café or other things, so it was not very pleasant to stay around.

CJH (KO): Right.

WK: And not near. I was told by the old-timers what it once was like way back on 60th Street. There was a strip along there. Of course I've seen these old library cards where students once lived at 63rd and 64th Street. But of course the campus has changed a lot. I myself, by the way, although I wanted to become a historian, the alternative was to become something totally different, a landscape architect. And so I've always been interested somewhat in gardening and I have a house with two big oak trees in the back and things like that. But I didn't go that way. But I admire this type of art, and that's a kind of relief from historical work to be able to do something different, whether gardening or other things. Now since they've planted things on the Midway, it's totally different now. I mean we have a large number of rabbits, which you did not see long ago — there was no cover. And the squirrels were always there, though not the rabbits. Then of course the raccoons and so forth. But anyway, that's just for relief. Some other person is simply going over where the lake is. But as a historian I am not interested in historical fiction. There are enough historical events, whether contemporary or older that are much more interesting to me.

CJH (MG): No work by Harry Turtledove or those sort of fiction works?

WK: Well, yes. I've met him. Historical fiction just never interested me as much as something like historical reality. Now we all know that historical reality is somewhat constructed and



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that we're only getting bits and pieces. I enjoy history, but I came into it from reading more on my own, since there was not someone around. I certainly had some excellent teachers at different times in my life. Historical study has changed a lot. Well, you can't imagine what it was like before. Once one used typewriters. You would assume that people always had good ways for Word processing, but it wasn't that way a little while ago. I have been privileged to know various colleagues when I first came here, such as the late Eric Cochrane, he was a Renaissance or Late Renaissance, Florentine historian, and was my initial host. He was a very great teacher of undergraduates as well as graduate students and he tragically died early—aged 58—I believe it was. He was concentrated on Florence, and his wife just died. One benefits from colleagues, but one can't spend all of one's time in conversations with them or you won't get any of your own writing or research done. And I certainly had not contemplated going the direction I did when I was in high school or undergraduate. In one sense I knew some of the period, but I had no idea that I would end up going as much into some materials as I did and I've become more interested in visual, if you want to say art historical and archaeological, even though I am not and have never been a field archaeologist. I am a great patron of museums of various kinds to look at physical, visual evidence. And now that's become much more accessible than it once was. You can imagine these old-fashioned slides and lantern slides and so forth. But I've studied coins as well and I only use them to a slight degree but they bring a dimension from the past that may give pretty accurate dating while on the other hand that's not solving a lot of problems, because inscriptions can be very misleading—such as in propaganda and so forth.

CJH (MG): What are the major changes that you've seen here at the University of Chicago, in your tenure here?

WK: Well, I guess the number of undergraduates has changed. But, on a simplistic level, something obvious that changed: I'm someone who never smoked, but when I was an undergraduate (this was not here), but during a 3 hour final exam, some students would smoke a CARTON during the exam. Cigarettes were cheap. But here when I first came, normally, students were smoking—let's take this building, Social Sciences 106, 107 and so forth, those were all full of smoke. My offices always had an ashtray, and so forth. So that on a very superficial level has been a big change—for students, faculty and staff, that became a gradual change—but only in the mid-80s.

CJH (MG): So it didn't happen immediately after the surgeon general's warning?

WK: Oh no. The surgeon general's did nothing immediately, except for, a few people who read it carefully. But here, that's an obvious change. So, by the middle of the 1980s, there had been no written policy not to smoke in the hallways—then gradually policies changed for professors' offices and administrator's offices. Regenstein had, at first, smoking everywhere. Then



Readers return books to attendants at William Rainey Harper Memorial Library.

University of Chicago Photographic Archive, [apf2-03111], Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

they split—if you can imagine it—into different reading levels, half of it would be smoke, and half would be non-smoke. Of course, this was true on the airplanes too. But that, on a very superficial level, is a change. And obviously, the numbers of students changed. A much larger number of Asian students, there were always some Asian students, but that changed greatly here between when I started and now. And again, those are just some superficial changes.

CJH (MG): Of course.

WK: I have been privileged to teach various exceptional students over a long period of time. Including, Tony Grafton, who's at Princeton. And there are others.

CJH (MG): If you could take a civilization core course that was not your own, which would you choose?

WK: I'm not sure. I might take something from East Asia, or about China. I'm not sure what that course is called?

CJH (MG): East Asian Sequence?

WK: Yes.

CJH (MG): Is there any particular reason?

WK: I've always had an interest of course. More recently I actually visited China. It has many different dimensions. Anyway, you asked, that's the one I'd take—and I'm not speaking of any particular instructor.

CJH (MG): No of course, I'm sure a few have taught the sequence over your time here.

WK: Yes, and I obviously wouldn't say Middle East, because I'm close to it, but I don't teach it.