

Professional Development Grant Final Report

International Big History Association (IBHA) Conference
14-17 July 2016
University of Amsterdam
Amsterdam, Netherlands

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Restatement of Professional Enhancement Opportunity

My original proposal for this grant was based upon two panels I had organized for the Third Biennial International Big History conference. Big History, which is an emerging research and teaching field within the broader discipline of World History, seeks to understand the integrated history of the Cosmos, Earth, Life and Humanity using the best available empirical evidence and scholarly methods.

I have been teaching Big History at the American University in Cairo since 2008, and have been involved with the IBHA since its inception in 2010. At present I am on the Board of Advisers. I've also begun to publish in the field, with two essays in the IBHA journal, *Origins*, in 2014, and, more recently, a book chapter on the subject: "Cosmic Evolution in the Cradle of Civilization," *From Big Bang to Galactic Civilizations: A Big History Anthology, Vol. II, Education and Understanding: Big History around the World*, eds. Barry Rodrigue, Leonid Grinin, Andrey Korotayev (Delhi: Primus Books, 2016), pp. 295-317.

The panels I put together, which included scholars from the University of Pennsylvania, Dominican University of California, Calvin College, Villanova University, and the Metanexus Institute, were based around two different themes: 1) "The Big History of Religion;" and 2) "Towards An Ethnography of Big History." I chaired the first session and gave a paper in the second one entitled "The Psychoanalysis of Big History."

Brief Review

Both panels were reasonably well-attended and the papers were, on the whole, I think, rather well-received. The one on religion was especially popular and brought to the session some of the leading figures in the field.

The true recognition of my work, however, came after my panels had been accepted and after I had already submitted my proposal for a professional development grant. A month or so before the conference, the President of the IBHA, Dr. Fred Spier, who is also one of the two most prolific authorities in Big History, contacted me, and asked me to serve on two additional panels. Both were book panels featuring the latest work of the most high-profile figures in this discipline, *Big History: Between Nothing to Everything*, David Christian, Cynthia Brown and Craig Benjamin (McGraw-Hill, 2014) and *Big History and the Future of Humanity*, Fred Spier, (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). That I was asked to serve as critical analyst on these two panels in particular attests, I believe, to my overall standing among Big History scholars. In these sessions too I received some positive feedback on the quality of my interventions in these ongoing international scholarly debates. So altogether I was on four panels at this conference.¹

Summary of Findings, Outcomes, Experiences

The most important outcomes from this conference were probably fairly intangible and came in the form of learning about the research of others, making new connections with colleagues, renewing old ones, and generally informing myself about the latest publications and developments in Big History.

But also there were some new opportunities that emerged: 1) The incoming President of the IBHA, Lowell Gustafson, committed to supporting the grant application I am submitting to the Templeton Foundation under ATU's auspices; 2) I was able to attract some additional possible contributors to a book I am editing on Big History and Religion; 3) I was asked to submit an article for consideration to the journal *Evolution*, eds. Leonid E. Grinin and Andrey V. Korotayev; and 4) and invited to speak at a conference to be held at Moscow State University in October 2017.

Conclusions and Recommendations

I am appreciative of the opportunity this grant afforded me to attend this year's IBHA conference, which has deepened my connection to the organization and to the field. Some of the contacts I made at this meeting I am already in touch with regarding several upcoming projects which are now in their formative stages. I plan to publish a version of this paper, probably in the journal *Evolution*, but may work up an expanded version for another journal as well.

¹ The documentation required by the professional development guidelines can be found on the attached conference program on pp. 9, 13, 14 and 15.