

Sic parvis componere magna: Giving students a sense of scale
Stephen C. Smith (University of Minnesota)

At one point in the musical *1776*, John Adams is urged by his wife Abigail to return to Boston from Philadelphia—if he leaves immediately, she tells him, he can be home in “just” one week. For us, the same journey in a car or a train takes six hours—two hours if we fly.

We live in an age of high-speed communication and transportation, an age when we can cross an ocean or continent—a journey that once took weeks or months—in a matter of hours. Only in the northeastern states is it usually possible to live within an hour or two by car of more than two other states, and cities everywhere go on for miles. This is the world our students are used to, and it is difficult for them to understand how the sense of scale has changed not just over the past fifty years but over the past two thousand.

How big was the Roman empire? Where—how close—were Rome’s mortal enemies, Carthage and (still earlier) Veii? How big (or small) was the Forum Romanum? To begin to see how small the ancient world is to us, and how big it must have been to the Greeks and Romans, students must be given a sense of scale. In this presentation I will demonstrate how an instructor can use a series of overlay maps (made using transparencies, a scanner, and PowerPoint) to compare, for example, Italy or Greece to the Midwest or South, Latium or Attica to a typical U.S. metropolitan area, Servian Rome to an American city or (more dramatically) a university campus, the Forum to a central quad or mall.

Many of us have been to Rome or Athens, and we know that it is difficult to gauge the physical extent of the ancient cities when you’re walking up and down hills and dodging traffic—still, it is possible to see that, by our standards, the cities were physically small. Seeing how small is a different matter—it isn’t just students who gasp when they see the Capitoline lined up with their classroom building and the Servian walls outlined on a map of their hometown.