



St. John's College, Oxford

Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition 2024/25

The St. John's College Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition ran for the fifteenth time during the academic year 2024/5. The numbers and geographical spread remained strong with 149 participants (up on last year's 100), well spread between different essay questions, and we have, as usual, enjoyed this year's entries. The competition was, as previously, open to all students currently studying in Year 12 (Lower Sixth) or equivalent anywhere in the UK, whether or not they were currently studying a Classical or Ancient subject.

There were 11 prizes and commendations awarded, to participants from ten different schools in Greater London, Kent, Surrey, Hampshire, West Midlands and Merseyside. The top prize went to the Ancient History category winner (selective state school in Surrey). As in previous years, we have been offering a separate prize for the best essay by a student who did not previously take any classical subject at school, which went to one of Ancient History category commended entries (non-selective state school in Haringey).

This year, the essays were marked by Dr Emma Greensmith (Fellow in Classics), Dr Georgy Kantor (Fellow in Ancient History), Dr Matt Hosty (Lecturer in Classical Languages), Mr Peter Thompson (Lecturer in Classical Archaeology) and Dr Marion Durand (Associate Lecturer in Ancient Philosophy).

There were 87 participants, including from the college's Inspire programme for non-selective state schools in our target outreach regions, for the Classics and Ancient History Subject Exploration Day on 23 April. For the first time, it was run as a full-day programme with longer academic talks. The participants attended an introductory talk about Classics at Oxford and in St John's, a range of academic talks united by the theme of 'Monarchy' in the ancient world (real, divine and metaphorical), tours of the college with current Classics students, and a Q&A session with tutors and current students, where we had many excellent questions asked about the content of the course as taught at Oxford and the admissions process. As usual, the day was crowned by the tea and cake in our Garden Quad.

We offer below feedback on the essays under each category, but it would be worth prefacing this with some general comments on the problem of the use of generative AI, which we have encountered at scale for the first time this year. While we do not appear to have any essays which have been wholly outsourced to generative AI, a number of submissions at the weaker end of the range seem to have asked generative AI for ideas of examples to use and / or on the structure of the essay. The result of this was to have exactly similar batches of not always altogether appropriate examples, e.g. Thucydides' Melian Dialogue, Plato's Republic and Thrasymachus (mostly with insufficient attention

to Thrasymachus being a sophist, and so trying to make the weaker argument into the stronger), and Sophocles' Antigone in the literature category, or Hatshepsut, Cleopatra VII, Livia, and Agrippina in the archaeology category, or very extensive but surprisingly similar discussions of wholly or semi-legendary early Roman kings for the history essay.

This was self-defeating on two levels. First, even if we do not notice the use of generative AI, this is quite unlikely to gain a prize or a commendation: generative AI models operate on the basis of big data and go for the most typical. An essay produced that way will almost by definition end up unoriginal and will not stand out among other submissions. It is only by thinking for ourselves that we are able to look at a problem from a new angle. Secondly, and more importantly, this is to miss the learning opportunity that writing an essay such as this provides. As an important recent study from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (<https://www.media.mit.edu/publications/your-brain-on-chatgpt/>) shows, outsourcing the writing process develops a significant 'cognitive deficit'. One of the most striking results of their research was to show that just four months in, 83.1% of the cohort using ChatGPT could not recall a single sentence of their latest essay. Doing research outside the curriculum, as one needs for essay competitions such as this one, is not only an opportunity to win a prize but also an opportunity to develop study skills that will come helpful in university education and to learn something new. Do not miss it!

1. Does ancient literature equate might with right?

The best essays in the literature category (56 entries) took a sensitive approach to the notions both of might and right: the former can be both physical, mental and political strength and power, and the latter can encompass the ability to do something and a sense of justice or moral righteousness. Some pieces then explored the concept through a particular genre or period (e.g. epic, or literature from the Roman Empire), others took a more cross-comparative approach across literary space and time. In either case, the most important thing is to avoid being too schematic, and paying attention to the subtitles, tensions, and even contradictions in different text's treatment of authority and power.

2. Why did monarchies succeed in Greek and/or Roman history?

In the ancient history category (37 entries), there was a range of monarchies explored from the Mycenaean palace-states to the Late Roman / Early Byzantine empire, by way of the legendary seven kings of Rome, Spartan dual kingship and Augustan principate; interestingly, not many essays went for Alexander and/or his Hellenistic successors, for instance for the nearly three centuries of Ptolemaic rule in Egypt. Some essays took a comparative approach, and some zoomed in on a particular period: both could work very well, and there are examples of both approaches among the winning essays. As it was explicitly noted in some of the stronger entries, it was a better strategy to stick to historically attested monarchies rather than explore the early Roman or archaic Spartan kings, known to us mostly through much later representations. Even if Romulus existed at all (which is quite impossible to prove), what we learn of him from Livy or Dionysius of Halicarnassus is evidence for the ideas of monarchy in the age of Augustus, not in the

eighth century BC. The strongest essays were successful in disentangling various components that went into the success of a monarchical state: ideology (including religions and visual representations of power), military support, fiscal underpinnings and more.

3. *Was Plato right that the best rulers are reluctant ones?*

In the philosophy category (35 entries), a large number of answers took a historical case-study approach, considering whether historical rulers who were reputed to have been reluctant were good and vice versa (Cincinnatus and George Washington made surprisingly frequent appearances). Others delved deep into Plato's *Republic*. The stronger entries remarked that reluctance is not what Plato believed made rulers good but rather that the qualities necessary for good leadership entailed reluctance to rule. It is this line of thought that the question invited pressing. Independence of thought, real engagement with the relevant philosophical questions (here in ethics and moral psychology, notably) and nuance in argument should be favoured over surveying of historical facts or views.

4. *How important was the visual representation of women for expressing royal and/or imperial power in the ancient world?*

The strongest responses to this year's archaeology question (21 entries) paid close attention to the historical circumstances surrounding visual representations of women, investigating the motivations of the people (often men) who were responsible for the creation of these images and also contemplating the experiences of the people who saw them. Almost all the essays were structured as a list of case studies, with Roman and Egyptian examples receiving by far the most coverage. Due to the dramatic appeal of ancient literary sources describing the lives of these (in)famous royal/imperial women, a considerable number of answers slipped into storytelling, sacrificing space that should have been used for analysis and argument. More disciplined assessments of the archaeological evidence, in addition to the deployment of examples from a wider range of places and times (Athens, Assyria, Kush, Mycenae), were welcome and impressive elements of the responses in which they appeared. Of these, the most successful essays explored the significance of similarities and differences between the varied contexts and media that they discussed.