St. John's College, Oxford

Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition 2021/22

The St. John's College Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition ran for the eleventh time during the academic year 2021/22. While we were down from the last year's record number of 203 participants, the numbers remain very healthy and were at the high end for us historically at 145.

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. Two innovations of this year were the establishment of a separate prize for the participants who had not previously taken Classical subjects in school, which had 16 entrants, and opening up of the study afternoon to students enrolled in St John's Inspire outreach programme for non-selective state schools, even if they did not submit an entry for the competition. The geographical range remains satisfyingly broad, with participants from all over the UK, from London, Exeter, and Berkshire, to Leicester, Durham, Newcastle, and Perth. There were 15 prizes and commendations awarded, to participants from Berkshire, Brighton and Hove, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Durham, Hertfordshire, London, and Surrey.

This year also saw the return of in-person study days. For the first time, we have run two parallel study days (on 21 and 29 April), which proved to be a successful experiment: there were 110 attendees between the two different dates, including 7 students from the Inspire programme who did not take part in the essay competition. The attendees of the study days took part in two academic sessions in different subjects each, and also had a general introductory session on Classics at Oxford and St John's and a Q&A session with tutors and current students. They also had tours of the college with current students in Classical subjects, and a possibility to ask informal questions over tea and cake at the end of the day.

This year, the questions were set and the essays marked by Dr Emma Greensmith (Fellow in Classical Literature), Dr Georgy Kantor (Fellow in Ancient History), Dr Alison Pollard (Lecturer in Classical Archaeology), Dr Matt Hosty (Lecturer in Classical Languages), and Dr Marion Durand (Associate Lecturer in Ancient Philosophy). They offer their reflections on essays in their fields below. For the study days, they were also joined by Dr Justine Potts (Woodhouse Junior Research Fellow in Classics). Dr Panayiotis Christoforou (Lecturer in Ancient History), and Daniel Sutton (currently finishing his D.Phil. in Ancient History, and himself a past participant in the essay competition). Overall, we were very positively impressed by the quality of essays and the range of subjects on which students wrote. The questions were as follows:

1. 'No (wo)man is an island.' How self-sufficient are characters in ancient literature?

The mammoth number of entries for the literature section (69) revealed an equally huge range of responses: the essays offered many different takes on the question, definitions of the term 'self-sufficient' and even stances on whether to be self-sufficient is a good thing or not!

Recurring topics included the role of the gods/ level of divine assistance; gender; civic duty, and political structures (e.g. the Greek polis, or *Romanitas*). The most common texts discussed were: the *Iliad* & *Odyssey* (Penelope was a frequent star), the *Aeneid*, tragedy (especially Medea, Oedipus, Ajax and, this year, Antigone). There were also discussions of ancient comedy (Greek and Roman) , Seneca, as well as works from beyond the Greek and Roman world such as Beowulf and Gilgamesh (which *very much* come under the remit of 'ancient literature'). Many essays brought in material evidence, philosophical ideas and modern cross-comparisons too.

The best answers struck a good balance between range and depth. Some essays covered an impressive range of examples, but the most exciting ones did not to so as just a survey; the texts were fully analysed and specific passages explored. Other equally strong essays focused on a pair of texts (e.g. contrasting two from a different genre or area), or even one case study – but in these cases, care needs to be taken to explain *why* the individual text is an important or meaningful example of 'ancient literature' as a whole.

Finally, it was indeed interesting to see how differently each answer defined 'self-sufficiency', and it's important to note that this choice affects the entire essay (it's not just about defining your terms in a dictionary sense at the start). We were particularly pleased to see sensitivity to how slippery 'self-sufficiency' can be. For example: are we more 'impressed' if a character does something without divine support, even when often divine support is required for heroic victory? Or: how does self-sufficiency relate to ideas like heroism, glory, and strength of character (they are not one and the same thing)? And: *if* self-sufficiency is a good thing, then does it rule out caring for other people (like Achilles does for Patroclus, or Penelope for Odysseus)? The best essays teased out some of these fascinating complexities.

2. Was one's community in the ancient world limited to one's city?

There were 29 entries for this year's ancient history question. There was a range of interesting approaches, from comparative study of several different ancient societies, to more narrow focus on a specific city, often Athens at the end of the fifth century BC, but sometimes Sparta, Thebes, urban communities of the Roman Empire, or even palace societies of Mycenaean period. Even the imaginary city of Aristophanes' *Birds* made a pleasing appearance! As many entries noted, the answers to the question did not of course stand static across the whole broad chronological and geographic span we conventionally term 'ancient history', and would differ substantially between pharaonic Egypt, pre-Roman tribal societies of north-western Europe, and cities of Classical Greece, to pick a few examples.

Strong essays questioned the concept of citizenship and explored tensions between religious, ethnic and linguistic communities extending beyond one's city-state with the local loyalties. Some essays explored the ways in which membership of early Christian communities and their networks worked in the civic world of the Graeco-Roman Mediterranean. There were also some impressively thoughtful explorations of the communities to which resident foreigners and exiles in an ancient city (particularly in classical Greece) could belong, a question with poignant contemporary resonance. Others address the problems of community belonging for the slaves.

One pitfall which not everyone evaded was to focus overmuch on trade between cities and other forms of short-term inter-community travel, without probing whether it all cases generated community links across the city-state boundaries. It might be interesting for some of those who explored this to play with the online tool that allows you to map and explore the networks of 'proxeny' (ritualised 'friendship' with foreign communities) in the Classical and Hellenistic Greek

world, available at http://proxenies.csad.ox.ac.uk/ - one way of visualising the networks of community extending beyond one's city in that period.

3. Many ancient philosophers emphasised the importance of friendship and community in the good life. What place do you think others have in the happy life?

There were 17 entries for the philosophy section. The essays engaged with a wide range of views from Antiquity, with a slight preference for Aristotle and the Stoics. Most essays showed impressive knowledge of the view(s) they brought to bear on their answer and some offered nuanced analysis of the place they afford to others in their conception of the happy life. Discussions of friendship were particularly well handled. A number of essays took very exegetical approaches, reporting how ancient philosophers might have answered the question. The more successful of this kind considered which school of thought might give the better answer to the question. In such cases, a careful consideration of the criteria for a good or plausible view was crucial. As was questioning assumptions notably about how to understand happiness, the nature of the happy life, or the so-called goal of life. The very best essays took a more argumentative stance, using ancient philosophical view to bolster their own independent thinking, as indeed the question invited.

4. Does Greek and/or Roman art ever express notions of community, or is it simply a reflection of wealthy and powerful individuals?

There were an unprecedented 30 entries for this year's archaeology essay. This is a subject which challenges Classical Archaeologists and the competition essays made engaging and creative points to support different arguments. Several entries acknowledged that chronological and political context are crucial factors in this discussion and gave a strongly argued but balanced assessment of the archaeology. Some went into detail about the community itself and picked up on the relative dearth of women, children and the enslaved in the material record. Alongside old favourites it was great to see some lesser-known examples cited, including the Lycurgus Cup, the Ashmolean's Shoemaker Vase, Tanagra figurines and Pompeian graffiti.

Participants may wish to explore the different interpretations surrounding some of – what appear to be on the surface – unproblematic artworks. Did you know that not everyone is convinced that the Parthenon frieze shows the Panathenaic procession? Some argue that it shows the mythical king Erechtheus offering up his daughter for sacrifice to save Athens; others propose that it's the procession to present the heroes who died at Marathon to the gods. (The problem is that no surviving ancient literature mentions it, probably because it was so difficult to see in its original location!) Similarly, the excavation reports of the marble Prima Porta Augustus reveal a very private rather than public setting: it seems to have been displayed in a covered area against a wall in the gardens of Livia's personal villa outside the city of Rome. And it's worth questioning scholarly assumptions that you may read in books and articles. How strong is the evidence to support the claim that the Riace Bronzes were created for dedications at Delphi, Olympia or Athens? Or that the Alexander Mosaic is a copy of a famous Hellenistic painting?

As ever, the best essays reflected close analysis of the archaeology and confirmed that participants had had a *really good look* at the objects under discussion. (On this note, try to find recent photos of Trajan's Column and investigate *exactly who* is standing atop it now. And exactly *why* does the inscription say it was set up? You may be surprised!)