



St. John's College, Oxford
Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition 2022/23

The St. John's College Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition ran for the twelfth time during the academic year 2022/3. The numbers and geographical spread remained strong with 161 participants (up on last year's 145), well spread between different essay questions, and we had a remarkably impressive field this year. 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 24 prizes and commendations awarded, to participants from 23 different schools in Birmingham, Cambridgeshire, Greater London, Hampshire, Hertfordshire, Lancashire, Warwickshire, Wiltshire, Wirral, Worcestershire and Yorkshire. The top prize went to the Philosophy category winner (selective state school in Cambridgeshire). As last year, 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 the Literature category winner (non-selective state school in Hampshire).

This year, the essays were marked by Dr James Oakley (Lecturer in Classical Literature), Dr Georgy Kantor (Fellow in Ancient History), Dr Alison Pollard (Lecturer in Classical Archaeology) and Professor Alison Hills (Fellow in Philosophy). For the subject exploration afternoon, they were also joined by Dr Emma Greensmith (Fellow in Classics), Dr Matt Hosty (Lecturer in Classical Languages), Dr Matthew Nicholls (Senior Tutor and specialist in Roman architectural history) and Dr David Lee (Lecturer in Ancient Philosophy).

There were 95 participants for the Classics and Ancient History subject exploration afternoon on 19 April, including 28 from the college's Inspire programme for non-selective state schools in our target outreach regions. The participants attended a talk about Classics at Oxford and in St John's, a range of academic talks united by the theme of 'Memory', 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. The day was crowned by the tea and cake in our Garden Quad.

1. Discuss the role of bad memories in ancient literature

The answers to this question were numerous (37 entries), and offered a wide range of perspectives on the idea of 'bad memories' and their representation in ancient literature. Essays tended to focus on two significant texts, the accounts of Aeneas in *Aeneid* 2-3 and of Odysseus in *Odyssey* 9-12 of their journeys to the (temporary) havens of Carthage and Scheria respectively. Some tragedies, particularly the *Medea*, also made appearances, as did philosophical works; there were even occasionally sources from further afield, such as from Egypt's New Kingdom.

The best answers tended to consider a wide range of ancient literature, and think about the ways in which bad memories could differ between texts and genres, and to what extent this was mandated by the format in which they were depicted. Some candidates also thought about the interaction between 'bad memory' and 'forgetfulness', with productive results: the difficulties of both forgetting but also retelling a bad memory within a work of literature produce discrepancies ripe for analysis.

Nuanced engagement with secondary literature was pleasing to see, as were attempts to relate ancient ideas about bad memories to modern understanding of the brain and its functions, though there was a slight over-eagerness to apply modern concepts and diagnoses such as PTSD to ancient (and fictional) characters, without consideration of the ways in which we might *differ*

from ancient authors in our approach to memory and trauma. But overall these were a varied, interesting, and fun approaches to a complicated and potentially difficult topic.

2. *'So that human achievements may not be forgotten in time' (Herodotus). Was Greek and/or Roman historical memory primary about nostalgia for past achievements?*

This was the most popular category this year, with 46 answers to this question, and on the whole the quality was very high. The stronger essays distinguished between different kinds of historical memory and explored other motivations in the work of ancient historians: from the often present moralistic impulse to political invective to the sheer intellectual curiosity of a Herodotus. There was sometimes a fruitful exploration of the degree of commitment to truth in ancient historians (with different conclusions arrived at) and the implications of that for any idea of historical memory. The difficulty was often bringing these different strands together in a balanced way. A few essays explored historical memory more broadly, rightly making the point that it was not – and of course is not – limited to what we find in the work of historians.

It would have been worth wondering to what extent (and at what points) a feeling we can identify as 'nostalgia' could arise in the ancient world, where the processes of social change were much slower than now (see these ideas explored on the medieval material by our colleague Professor Hannah Skoda: <https://www.sjc.ox.ac.uk/alumni/sjc-online/sjc-online-medieval-memory-and-nostalgia-professor-hannah-skoda-recording/>). Was the nostalgic vision of Athens in Pericles' Funeral Oration only possible because of the rupture of the Peloponnesian War? Was the idealisation of early Rome by Sallust or Livy a function of the terrors of the transition from the Republic to the Empire? Is pastoral poetry flourishing because Alexandria and Rome lose touch with the countryside? It might also be worth thinking whether piety towards ancestors (or gods, rightly emphasized in some essays) is the same as nostalgia. For instance, stories of the miracles of Asclepius dutifully collected and inscribed at his great sanctuary at Epidaurus or a hymn from Maroneia in Thrace praising the gifts of the goddess Isis to humankind (online at http://www.attalus.org/poetry/isis_hymns.html#3) are undoubtedly vehicles of historical memory, but are they nostalgic if they presume that gods are still active and present in the world?

3. *Did art and archaeology in the ancient world ever try to manipulate its viewers memories of historical events?*

There were an incredible 45 entries for this year's archaeology essay. Applicants discussed an impressively wide range of topics spanning an enormous geographical and chronological range, including the Aztecs, Maya, Assyrians, Parthians, Persians, Minoans, Mesopotamians and Sumerians, as well as the Greeks and Romans. The best essays were grounded in detailed discussion of the art and archaeology and really dug into their visual presentation of specific historical events. Alongside discussion of old favourites like Actium, the return of the standards from Parthia and the Persian Wars, candidates also explored representations of the Dacian Wars, the conquests of Alexander the Great and even Constantine's defeat of his rival Maxentius!

It can often be an interesting exercise, whenever you're reading modern accounts or interpretations of archaeological remains – either online or in print – to ask: 'What are the facts?', 'How much of this is interpretation?' and 'What is this author basing their suggestions on?' The Alexander Mosaic from the House of the Faun in Pompeii was discussed in several essays, but how strong is the evidence that it was based on a much earlier Greek painting when all we have is this singular mosaic from a very Roman context? Other important areas of investigation concern *visibility*, *audience* and *agency*. When looking at tomb paintings, for example, *who* in their original context would get to see them, and how would this affect the messages they conveyed?

How easy was it to read and digest the images and text on the Behistun Inscription or on Trajan's Column? And *who* was responsible for setting up even the grandest imperial victory monuments like the Arch of Titus? (Since he's shown on the underside zooming up to the heavens on the back of an eagle, ready for his deification, it certainly wasn't him!)

4. *Sometimes we have false memories. So can we ever trust what we remember?*

This year's Philosophy question attracted 33 entries, more than in previous years. Almost all the essays made a good attempt at the first part of the question, giving many very good examples of false memories of different kinds and several interesting attempts to explain how they might come about and why. Some drew on their knowledge of philosophical discussions of memory in Plato and Aristotle and sometimes in modern philosophy too.

The best essays also tackled the second half of the question, about whether to trust our memories. Some good answers asked whether we can tell false memories from true memories, for instance, or whether we have no option but to trust memory, since all forms of reasoning rely on memory to some extent. The strongest essays gave vivid examples of false memories, argued strongly for their conclusions about trusting memory, and showed their own independent line of thought.