St. John's College, Oxford

Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition 2025/6

The St. John's College Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition ran for the sixteenth time during the academic year 2025/6. The number of entries was at a record high: we had 191 participants (up on last year's 149) taking up all the different essay questions, from a wide range of geographical areas and academic backgrounds. 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 9 different schools. The top prize went to the Ancient Archaeology category winner, who was also awarded the separate prize for the best essay by a student who did not previously take any classical subject at school: this triple award is an enormous achievement.

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

For the Subject Exploration Day on 22nd April, there were 84 participants, again a record high. The participants were strikingly enthusiastic and engaged, asking thoughtful and probing questions throughout the course of the day.

The participants attended a short introductory talk about Classics at St John's, and then enjoyed range of academic 'lightening talks': mini-lectures united by the theme of 'Nature' in the ancient world. They also took part in tours of the college led by current Classics students and had a Q&A session with tutors and current students. 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 we must preface this with some general comments on **the problem of the use of generative AI**, which we encountered on an unprecedented scale this year across all the questions. Some of the results of AI use were surface-level and now well known: a lot of hollow phraseology; some recurring and unusual stylistic features, and sweeping claims with very little backing. As last year, there was a higher-than-expected frequency of odd examples, and of particular examples which were then underdeveloped or mischaracterised and poorly understood in a way not consistent with what one would expect of a sixth-form student who had in fact read about it.
A new trend which reflects a different kind of use of AI was copious examples with references to obscure, unscholarly, and unsuitable online sources. There was also more general evidence of AI to generate examples and to structure the essay (with section headings which bore some of the features noted above).

This was all very demoralising for the markers, and self-defeating for the participants. First, even if we do not notice the use of generative AI (which this year we did in a huge number of entries), 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. 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. Literature: Does ancient literature ever treat the natural world as any more than a supply of resources?

The answer to the literature question (which received 70 entries) this year was 'yes'; the best essays, however, were often those which understood that the question was not quite as simple as it may have looked on first glance, and were able to interrogate the concept of 'a supply of resources' (understanding, for example, that a *resource* can mean more than a physical product like food or timber). Breadth of view helped with this: several candidates attempted to answer by focusing wholly on a specific text, e.g. the *Odyssey* or the *Georgics*, and while this was certainly a possible strategy it made it harder for them to approach the problem from multiple perspectives. At the other extreme, some essays were *too* broad - making surface reference to a wide range of texts without digging into the genres and contexts in which those texts were situated; generative AI (as discussed above), with its characteristic 'flattening' tendency, certainly had a hand in at least some of these. Some pieces were also let down by a failure to provide any citations or bibliography - entrants are reminded that giving your sources is a fundamental component of academic writing at all levels!

2. History: What was the biggest impact of the natural world on the course of Greek and/or Roman history?

The ancient history essays (61 entries) took a range of different approaches – some essays took a broader, survey approach, highlighting key differences between Greek and Roman topography. Others narrowed in on either Greek or Roman evidence, considering key geographic features, natural disasters, climate change events, and outbreaks of plague. A few of the essays narrowed their focus even further, considering the connection between certain aspects of the natural world (such as astronomy) and, e.g., religious beliefs or mania, or focusing primarily on the Mediterranean and its various impacts (greater connectivity, new trade routes).

The stronger essays tended to be somewhat narrower in focus, but to conduct deeper analysis and to show significant independence of thought. Amongst weaker essays, there was a tendency to somewhat misinterpret the question and lose sight of the primary *impact* of the natural world. Unfortunately, many of the ancient history essays also appeared to be generated or

heavily influenced by AI, resulting in numerous nearly identical sentences (e.g., "not a passive backdrop to Greco-Roman history; it was its primary drivers[sic.]" vs. "not merely the passive backdrop of Greek and Roman history but its principal structuring force"), tangents, and essay structures.

3. Art and Archaeology: Discuss the role of natural landscapes in the production and experience of ancient art.

The submissions for this year's archaeology question were comparatively very few (8 responses) and several were quite similar. A range of case studies arose overall, but famous examples of Roman wall painting proved a popular topic. Stronger essays put this material in conversation with other examples of ancient painting, but few developed that comparison into an argument that went beyond the simple observation of cultural difference. The submissions that chose to focus on a particular artistic medium/genre or time/place were fully entitled to do so, but none took full advantage of that opportunity for deeper analysis and these essays instead tended to be more descriptive than analytical. The best essays were those that showed wide-ranging interests and enliven their treatment of well-known case studies with original ideas. These kept a focus on the key terms of the question—production and experience—and explored both ideas in equal measure to discuss geographies and technologies of production, variations within ancient experiences of art based on a beholder's cultural and socioeconomic circumstances, and the capacity of modern environmental conditions to shape archaeological understandings of ancient evidence.

4. Philosophy: What, if anything, can we learn about ethics from the study of nature?

Essays responding to the philosophy category (54 entries) took varying approaches to the very broad question. The best essays tackled it head-on and answered it directly with the help of a small number of philosophical case studies from thinkers who considered the matter and/or used nature for the purposes of inferring ethical norms. Stronger answers carefully considered both sides of question: raising challenges for appeals to nature in ethical debates while also considering the potential ways in which such moves can legitimately be made. Less successful strategies involved either going through how just one or two schools of thoughts (often ancient) made arguments from nature without assessing those arguments, or listing and discussing a large number of texts, quotes, or thinkers without making their relevance to the question explicit. While most entries were careful to explicitly define "(the study of) nature" and "ethics" at the outset, many did so in a way too broad to be useful. For example, taking "ethics" to be "what is right or wrong" and so requiring the study of nature to teach us what is right or wrong set too high a bar, but there is more to be said if one considers ethical questions at a greater level or granularity. Depth and nuance are, as always, preferable to sweeping breadth.