**St. John's College, Oxford**
**Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition 2017/18**

The St. John's College Classics and Ancient History Essay Competition ran for the eighth time during the academic year 2017/18. The competition was 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. The number of entries declined only very slightly from last year's all time high at 156 (161 in 2016/17), spread geographically from Glasgow and Newcastle to the south coast, and 83 participants were able to join us for the study afternoon on 19 April, the highest number yet. We have been very pleased by the variety of approaches, intellectual acumen, and enthusiasm for the subject shown in the essays, as also by the active discussions on the study day. It was also a particular pleasure to meet students interested in all of the different degree courses involving the study of ancient world that Oxford and St John's have to offer.

## 1. Classical Literature

There were 96 essays answering the literature question ('How do gods and fate help the development of the epic plot? Discuss with examples from Greek and/or Latin literature'). The topic of gods and fate and their interaction with the development of the epic plot has been approached by students mainly focusing on Homer's epic and Vergil's Aeneid, with some of them also bringing in references to less studied works (at least at the school level), such as Apollonius Rhodius, Lucretius or Lucan. Generally, they have showed good knowledge of the content of these epics, but a more critical approach to the issue would have been desirable in a few cases, both in terms of strength of the argument made, use of sources, and in terms the structure of the work. Whilst most students have demonstrated familiarity with the role of gods in epic, some of them would need to think a bit more on the meaning of the idea of fate. The winning essay has shown a mature approach on the subject, with emphasis on a parallel reading of Iliad and Aeneid. It was distinguished by its critical use of secondary bibliography, well integrated with personal outlook on the issue under discussion.

## 2. Ancient History

There were 27 essays addressing the history question, 'How can we write Graeco-Roman history from the point of view of the poor?' It was a very pleasing field, perhaps the strongest for the history question in the years we have been running this competition. Knowledge of a wide range of evidence, from Homer, Aristophanes, and Xenophon's *Memorabilia* to Pliny, Pompeian graffiti, and Oxyrhynchus papyri, has been shown in most of the essays, though perhaps stronger on the Roman side than on the Greek. A number of essays, quite sensibly, strongly focussed on archaeological evidence for the poorer strata of ancient society, which perhaps detracted from the popularity of the archaeology question this year. Some of the strongest essays engaged critically both with the nature of our souces, often zooming in with very interesting analysis of specific pieces of evidence, and with theoretical approaches to the notion of 'the poor', from Marxist understandings of de Ste. Croix and Hobsbawm to Alföldy's *Social History of Rome*.

## 3. Philosophy

There were 29 essays on the philosophy question ('"I know nothing except that I know nothing" (Socrates). Is it possible for someone to teach if he does not know anything?'). Many showed a good knowledge of Socrates, as he is presented in Plato's dialogues, and discussed whether or not he really knew nothing at all, and whether or not he could be said to be teaching the people he talked with. The winning entry was particularly clearly written and well-argued. The arguments premises were set out in the introduction and then defended very forcefully. Each part of the essay made a very clear contribution to the overall conclusion. It was an exemplary piece of philosophy.

## 4. Archaeology

This year, only four students chose to submit essays on the archaeology question ('"We shape our tools and thereafter they shape us". If correct, what are the implications of this statement for the field of Graeco-Roman archaeology?'). This was a difficult question, and one which was responded to in strikingly different ways in each of the essays. There was considerable variation in the classification of what could be termed a 'tool'; for some this comprised diverse categories of material culture, from roads to the written word, for others the term received a narrower definition: sculptural tools, or archaeological tools. A wide range of reading was undertaken by all to pursue these different topics. Some interpreted the question in terms that led them to explore, ambitiously, the evolution of specific tools from the past to the present. The best essays engaged closely with the question and used a set of case studies to explore the interaction between tools and ancient societies, in order to consider what archaeologists could learn about Graeco-Roman society from ancient objects.