



# ANCIENT WISDOM

It may appear to be the study of dead languages – and dead people – but there's a lot of fundamental truths about human nature to be discovered in a Classics degree, as **Jonathan Knott** reveals

'don't like Cicero,' says Rachel Cunliffe, a second-year undergraduate reading Classics at Cambridge University. 'I think he was an arrogant so and so who thought he was far more important than he actually was. But I recommend that every modern politician who wants to give inspiring speeches should study him. To read him you'd think he was the most incredible man in Rome.'

Fellow student Afra Pujol i Campeny from Barcelona in Spain agrees that classical figures have a lot to teach today's leaders. She picks out Pericles, an influential statesman in 5th century BC Athens, as a timeless model of good leadership. 'He had to face really complicated situations in Athens after a war against the Persians but he managed to renew the city and create a system, which, although it had negative aspects, was a kind of Utopia. The Acropolis and all the heritage left in Athens is proof of that,' she says.

## Beyond Latin and Greek

To many, Classics is the painstaking study of dead languages, but its scope goes way beyond learning Latin and Greek. The classical world spanned two millennia and three continents, and Cunliffe has been able to choose from about 40 final-year options covering architecture, political philosophy, linguistics and religion. One paper examines the perception of women and sexuality throughout antiquity; another looks at the history of tragedy from classical Athens to the 21st century.

So the perception of Classics as a reverent tour of canonical texts and distinguished statesmen is fundamentally misguided. Studying the ancient world forces us to reassess our assumptions – about them and us – and, through negotiating the debates and controversies they encounter, reach a deeper understanding of a wide variety of issues.

'The similarities and differences between the ancient and modern worlds are not always where people expect them to be,' says Dr Michael Scott, who lectures in ancient history at Cambridge. Teaching ancient Greek democracy recently in Rio de Janeiro, Scott found that students soon revised their idea that the political system was the direct ancestor of our own. 'As the course progressed, students realised they found certain elements of ancient democracy strange and even downright distasteful: there were no votes for women and it existed alongside slavery,' he says.

There are also parallels where one would not necessarily expect. In a BBC documentary he made about the ancient oracle at Delphi, Scott stresses the religious shrine's role as a vast hub of communication. 'Delphi was a place where people came to find a form of resolution to their dilemmas, literally wrote on each others' "walls", "posted their status" through victory dedications, and created groups of friends and allies. It also gathered together the ancient world's history, knowledge and achievements: Twitter, Facebook and Wikipedia all rolled into one!'

Scott is now working on a programme on luxury in ancient Greece. 'Our modern concerns about excessive pay and bankers' bonuses have ancient precedents,' he says. 'The Athenians were always working to keep luxury in check and harness the wealth of individuals – through making them pay for public festivals or war ships. But they also realised luxury could be used to unite their community, not just divide it.'

'The more you delve into any society, the more complex and intriguing it becomes. A lesson can start on one topic and, with the help of some good ideas, questions and imagination, can end up anywhere.'

Direct engagement with the primary sources is one thing that will always make Classics stand out: whether it's an inscription from Turkey that helps us understand how Roman emperors managed their image, a painted vase that can be used to analyse the evolution of military tactics, or a fragment of philosophy that shines new light on the links between ancient literature and science.

Pujol i Campeny often finds the themes in classical literature startlingly contemporary, such as in *Medea*, the tragedy by Euripides, in which the heroine revenges herself on her husband by killing their children.

'It is amazing how Euripides managed to portray a woman's character in such depth,' she says. 'Greek plays are focused on emotions. The context is a distant world but the psychological content is surprisingly relevant nowadays. It's frightening sometimes because you realise that we think we have advanced a lot but we haven't. All the issues we deal with nowadays existed before.'

It was the epic poetry of Homer that Gavin Finney, who graduated in Classics in 2006 from Bristol University, most enjoyed studying. 'The *Odyssey* is simply a brilliant story,' he says. 'There are questions about gods >>>

and humanity, and it's full of fantastical mythical creatures, but at the same time it's just a guy trying to get back to his wife.' During his course, he wrote an essay on sociobiology in the ancient world, and a dissertation on comedy: from ancient writers through to Shakespeare, *South Park* and *Family Guy*.

The broad range of skills classicists gain can lead to a variety of careers; Harry Potter author JK Rowling, London Mayor Boris Johnson and CIA head Porter Goss are all Classics graduates.

Finney, who now works as an advertising copywriter, believes his background enables him to think creatively. 'It has helped me when thinking about language to understand people and the emotions behind their actions,' he says.

Eline Sleurink, a final-year Bristol classicist, will be working in asset management at an investment bank next year. 'A lot of places are actively trying to encourage people who haven't just done economics and finance,' she says.

'They want people from a variety of academic backgrounds who can bring new ideas. Whenever I've been interviewed, people have said what they like about classicists is that they have good research and presentational skills.'

Adrian Murdoch, who works as a senior TV reporter for a leading financial news agency in Germany, says his classical education has helped him think as an individual. 'The point of a degree is to learn how to think for yourself,'

he says, 'I suppose I'm biased, but I'd say that Classics is better at that than most subjects, because from day one you're studying poetry, politics, history and philosophy. You're not only changing topic every week, you're also changing discipline.'

Since studying Classics at Oxford, Murdoch has written several books, including one on the battle of Teutoburg Forest between the Roman army and the Germanic tribes. 'The Romans failed to grab the hearts and minds of the people. They presumed their civilisation was better, and thought that if they turned up and showed it to the locals they would agree. It went really rather wrong,' he says.

#### Find your voice

There are any number of different routes within the subject. 'The scope for finding your own voice and deciding what you want to do within the subject is considerable,' says Murdoch. 'Classics gives you independence of thought. It's one of the most exciting three or four years you can possibly have.'

Employers appreciate the versatility of classicists, says Christopher Pelling, a professor of Greek at Oxford University, who has noticed the emphasis of the degree changing over the 40 years he has taught it at Oxford. 'It's become much more about the study of a civilisation. We use the language as

a way into things; not just history or literature, but bringing everything together to look at a different society. It involves a lot of human empathy alongside logical thinking.'

The kind of people who study Classics has also changed. 'It was still possible in the 1960s for people from independent schools to just drift into studying Classics. Now we have people who want to do it; they're interested because of what they see on television and on their travels, and through reading literature in translation. People now come from a much broader range of backgrounds,' says Pelling.

Many people study Classics having never learned Greek before, and it's possible without either ancient language. James Wakeley went to a comprehensive that did not offer Latin or Greek, and is now one of nine students in his year reading Classics at Cambridge, while learning both languages from scratch. 'It's been a lot of work, but I'm getting a huge amount out of it,' he says.

Other degrees focus on classical history or archaeology with optional study of the languages. 'There isn't a typical classicist,' says Cunliffe. 'You're unlikely to be in a job where someone says, "We need someone to translate this piece of Cicero"'. But there are always going to be occasions where you have to think quickly, analyse something in detail, or think about things from a different angle.' ■

## MY EXPERIENCE



**NAME** Marcelina Gilka  
**FROM** Poland  
**COURSE** BA Classics, University of Exeter

I study Classical studies and Spanish, but I have enjoyed the Classics element so much I'm going to change to straight Classics. It's the subject for me.

The staff on the course are just great. The Classics modules I'm studying at the moment are Latin, and Greek and Roman Narrative. We generally have to do a lot of work in our own time and then discuss it in seminars. I love studying Latin – it was my favourite subject at school. I want to learn Greek in future semesters too – the language, though, as opposed to the history.

I like the history, but it's good we can choose how our degree develops. I have followed the literature and linguistic side of things more than the history as it's what I'm interested in, but there are lots of other modules I could choose.

They give us lots of module flexibility too. Normally we'd translate Latin into our own languages but in my course we do it the other way around too, and I'm really happy about that. Latin's much more complex than English; you have to think about the structure of the language more, so we learn faster.

There's a real social side to our study here. The Classics department sends out lots of emails about various voluntary extracurricular activities, such as the academic meetings where lecturers give one-hour talks on the topics they're particularly interested in.

Then there is the more social Classics Society, which organises parties and trips abroad. I could study abroad for a year if I wanted but I think I'll stay in the UK for the three years. After my degree, if it works out as I'd like it to, I'd like to stay at university and do a master's or PhD, maybe even go into teaching.

My experience at Exeter so far has been a very happy one. The city is just the right size for me and I often go for a trip to the seaside – Exmouth is just 25 minutes away on the train.

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