



Advice to a student of Classics

by William Lawrence

Classics Interviews: ancient Greek

You may be asked why schools still study ancient Greek since the language is no longer spoken. Here are a few ideas:

The School Timetable

Look at the secondary school timetable and you will see that almost all the subjects are ancient Greek words; so the Greeks studied these ideas first and are worth studying for their ideas in their own language (just like the Romans in Latin!).

Greek: Biology, Physics, Zoology, Philosophy, Mathematics, Economics, Politics, Music, Drama, Geography, History, Technology, Theatre Studies.

Latin: Greek, Latin, Art, Science, Information (Latin) Technology (Greek), Computer Science, Media Studies.

Greek Literature

Some of the finest world literature is written in Greek and has survived over many centuries before the advent of printing because educators of every age have understood the educational value of these great works (such as Homer for epic poetry; Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides for tragedy; Aristophanes for comedy; Herodotus and Thucydides for history; Plato and Aristotle for philosophy).

English Language

English is descended from Anglo-Saxon from the invasions of the fifth century AD but some 60% of its vocabulary is derived from Greek and Latin. Study Greek and you can quickly see the Greek roots of words which you use every day; so Greek increases your English vocabulary and helps with spelling too.

English Literature; European Art and Music

Greek and Latin literature provide two of the great sources for English Literature, European Art and Music. Milton wanted to emulate Homer and Virgil with his great epics *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained*. Painters were inspired by Greek Mythology to create great works of art and composers great works of music: Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne*; Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*.

Oriental Languages; Romance Languages

Greek and Latin provide a superb training for tackling oriental languages (such as Arabic, Chinese, Japanese and Korean). Although there is no linguistic connection in terms of vocabulary etc, Greek and Latin enable a student to engage with the principles of an oriental language very quickly and to spot similarities in the way such a language works.

Latin, of course, is the basis of the Romance Languages (*Romanus* = Roman) and provides an excellent training for

studying French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian and Spanish.

Politics

Athens introduced the concept of democracy to the world and its system of direct democracy is still practised in some form at cantonal level in Switzerland. The works of Herodotus (*The Histories*), Thucydides (*The Peloponnesian War*), Plato (*The Republic*) and Aristotle (*The Politics; The Constitution of the Athenians*) allow students of politics to study different systems of government in their earliest forms.

Art and Architecture (Public Buildings and Statues)

Think of the great public buildings modelled on Greek or Roman architecture: the British Museum with its classical temple front (Ionic columns and pediment); the National Gallery (with its temple front and Corinthian/Composite columns); the Tate Britain Gallery (with its temple front and Corinthian/Composite columns); the National Theatre's Olivier Theatre recalling an ancient Greek theatre, as well as many of the municipal buildings in the Midlands, the North of England, Scotland and Wales. Think of public statues inspired by Greece and Rome (Achilles in Hyde Park); Boudicca (Boadicea) and her daughters on Westminster Bridge opposite the Houses of Parliament; Britannia (inspired by Athena – goddess of wisdom and war;

Poseidon – god of the sea; and perhaps Boudicca herself) on public buildings (especially in London).

The Olympic Games

The modern Olympics had their origin in Ancient Greece with foot races, long jump, javelin, boxing, wrestling and equestrian events still part of the modern (and ancient) Olympics.

Classics Interviews: Latin

You may be asked why schools still study Latin since the language is no longer spoken. Here are a few ideas:

Roman Britain

The Romans governed Britain for 350 years (AD 43 – AD 410) so they had a huge impact on our way of life. The Romans brought town planning, roads, grand public buildings (public (heated) baths, theatres, amphitheatres, public latrines and sanitation), Roman law and the discipline of the Roman army. The Romans spoke Latin; so all these aspects of their civilisation were expressed in Latin which has been taught in this country for 2000 years. British chiefs were keen to get their sons to learn Latin for obvious reasons.

Before the Romans the British tribes had lived in a much less organised way; so many of them recognised the benefits of a superior civilisation. Remember, too, that 350 years is a very long period of time. If you go back 350 years from 2000 AD, you reach 1650 (Charles I was executed in 1649!); so you can see how much influence the Romans had on our way of life (for example, any towns ending in *-caster*, *-cester*, *-chester* derive from the Latin word *castra* – a Roman military camp because the towns developed from the original Roman military settlement).

Roman Literature

Some of the finest world literature is written in Latin and has survived over many centuries before the advent of

printing because educators of every age have understood the educational value of these great works (such as Virgil's *Aeneid* – the story of Trojan Aeneas' journey to found a new city in Italy which eventually became Rome).

English Language

English is descended from Anglo-Saxon from the invasions of the fifth century AD but some 60% of its vocabulary is derived from Latin and Greek. Study Latin and you can quickly see the Latin roots of words which you use every day; so Latin increases your English vocabulary and helps with spelling too.

Romance Languages

Latin is the basis of the Romance Languages (*Romanus* = Roman). If you learn Latin, you will find it easier to study French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, and Spanish. You will also find it helpful in tackling so-called harder languages such as Arabic, Chinese and Japanese.

Employment prospects

Employment prospects are very good as employers recognise that Greek, Latin, Ancient History and Classical Studies are challenging subjects which require serious thought. Here are some examples of distinguished people from recent times who studied classical subjects and went on to pursue very different careers:

(i) *20th Century examples*: Mike Brearley (England cricket captain); Sir Anthony Cleaver (Chairman of the UK Atomic Energy Authority); Colin Dexter (author); Sir Nicholas Goodison (Chairman of the London Stock Exchange); Tony Harrison (playwright and poet); Sir Anthony Leggett (Nobel Prize in Physics); Sir Jeremy Morse (Chairman of Lloyds Bank); Ruth Padel (poet and academic); Dame Stella Rimington (Director of MI5 and author); Sir Peter Stothard (editor of *The Times*).

(ii) *21st Century examples*: Jonathan Evans (Director-General of the British Security Services); Martha Lane-Fox

(Chancellor of the Open University and digital entrepreneur); Baroness Susan Greenfield (neuroscientist); Tom Hiddleston (actor); Boris Johnson (politician and author); Martha Kearney (BBC Radio and TV presenter); Chris Martin (lead singer Coldplay); Nick Owen (Chairman Luton Town FC and TV presenter); J K Rowling (author *Harry Potter* series).

Your own ideas: Think up your own examples.

Further questions to consider for a Classics interview or a general interview

Why study Classics? Why do you want to study Classics?

Tell me about an *x* which has inspired you and why:

a book
a piece of music
a painting/photograph
a museum
an art gallery
an art/museum exhibition
a building (architecture)
a play
a concert
a film
travel to some historical/cultural site (UK or abroad).

(You do not need to have done all these things but think through what you have done. You'll probably find that you have a lot you can talk about).

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