

QUOD PROPONITE?

THE CLASSICS NEWSLETTER NEEDS A NAME!

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Lent 2009
Issue 1

Edited by Alice Merry, Maeve O' Dwyer and Rebecca Pound

Learning Rome: The British School at Rome Summer School 2008

By Camilla Read, Trinity Hall

In my lecture today, we looked at Hubert Robert's painting, 'the Finding of the Laocoon': the artist's idealization of the discovery of that most evocative classical work, in Nero's *Domus Aurea*. For most this painting raised questions about the actual findspot of the famous piece (Nero's palace or the Baths of Trajan?). But I wasn't questioning. I was remembering vividly a day in September, when I was wearing a yellow hard hat and trailing after a glamorous Italian guide around what remains of that notorious Esquiline playpen. The high halls, flooded with light in Robert's vision, I remember as dark and dank, lit only by the garish glow of artificial spotlights. The *Domus Aurea*, balancing somewhere between its Neronian ideal and this current reality is emblematic of the gap between the imaginary classical caput mundi we build for ourselves in our libraries, and the actuality of the place today.

In the introductory session to the British School at Rome Summer Robert Coates Stephens, the course director, raised precisely this issue. He stressed that one of the primary aims of the two weeks was to show us how the famous past of Rome figures in its present; it certainly fulfilled this agenda. Everywhere we went it felt like we were in some faulty time machine, parading every phase of Rome's history before our eyes. What sticks most clearly in my mind from Nero's house, for example, was the Renaissance graffiti on the walls: all the big names, from Michelangelo to Casanova, have literally written themselves into the history of the place.

As Classicists, we are expected to know Rome like the backs of our hands. Before I went on the course, I confess, I was a fraud. The Summer School, though, set me straight; it was definitely the best way to conquer the city. The days would be divided into themes - 'The Triumph', for example, or 'Bread and Circuses' - and we would have a lecture the evening before as an outline of the topic. We'd set off early, sightsee with the course directors or guest guides, packing in generally six or seven monuments a day, then we'd explore on our own

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On the steps of the BSR

or come back to the BSR to read or relax in the afternoon. We were taken into sites that are generally closed to tourists, for example the most recent excavations at the Forum of Julius Caesar, which are believed to reveal the first archaeological evidence for the sacking and burning of Rome by the Gauls in 387B.C. We had one day off, when a few of us hopped on a train to the prettiest little town, Sperlonga, nominally to see the famous villa and its art, but we didn't pass on the fresh fish lunch, the white sand beach and the bright blue sea!

The most important lesson I gained from the two weeks is summed up by the ubiquitous graffiti on walls all over the city: "Rome is not a museum". Rome is, and always has been, an experience - an experience, indeed, of the past in the present. My time there clarified exactly why it is I study Classics; that connection across all those years with people who clearly went through their lives feeling and thinking, in some crucial, very human ways, just as I do. Wandering around trendy Trastevere with the rest of Rome one evening, I mused on my classical predecessors spilling out of the tavernae as we did the small bars. I shared, for a couple of hours, a thoroughly Roman experience - and then I stopped thinking so hard and let an attractive Italian man buy me a drink. Applications for this year's course open in April (see www.bsr.ac.uk). Go on. Live a little.

Careers for Classicists: GCHQ

By Alice Merry, Queens' College

As my mother once said to me as I failed to change a light bulb, I am not exactly a 'practical person'. And I wonder whether you too have felt, as a Classicist thinking about careers, that the skills we have worked so hard to develop during our degree might not be very practical or useful in the 'real world'.

However, at a careers talk given recently about GCHQ, I was confronted with the idea that Classicists might actually be not only useful but even sought after...

The Government Communication Headquarters describe their role on their website: 'GCHQ is one of the three UK Intelligence Agencies and a part of the UK's National Intelligence Machinery. GCHQ works in partnership with the Security Service (also known as MI5) and the Secret Intelligence Service (also known as MI6) to protect the UK's national security interests.'

GCHQ are recruiting Classicists for their ability to learn languages rapidly, in order to re-train them in a modern (and usually fairly obscure) language, as one of their linguists. But this is not just a translation job; linguists work to translate sources in order to write them up as reports for customers such as other secret services or government bodies. One of the speakers compared her job to journalism, except that she knows what nobody else does!

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Compiled by M Huckvale Translated by Meny

Patricia McGill, a linguist at GCHQ (and an MML graduate from Newnham College), gave me her views on the job.

What is the highlight for you of working at GCHQ?

The best thing about working at GCHQ is the unique opportunity to work with languages every day and for a meaningful and important purpose.

And what is the worst aspect of the job?

The worst aspect of the job is the frequent realisation that I still have so much to learn with my language and it is going to take a long time and a lot of hard work to get better!

Any surprising elements of the job?

I have been most surprised by the amount of responsibility I have been given at a fairly early stage in my career.

How did you find learning a language from scratch?

Learning a language from scratch was difficult but fun. I'd already done it in my degree at Cambridge so I was used to the challenge. There was a great sense of achievement at the end of the course.

What was your dream job when you were a child?!

I wanted to be either a musician or an architect when I was a younger!

Where do you hope to be in 10 years' time?

In 10 years' time I would like to be feeling confident as an expert in my subject area and in my language skills and I would hope to have achieved a managerial role too.

What job do you think you would be doing if you weren't at GCHQ?

If I wasn't at GCHQ I would hope to be working elsewhere in the civil service although that would mean foregoing the chance to use my language skills.

Finally, what advice would you give for Classicists who are interested in working for GCHQ?

I would suggest you do your research about the organization, decide whether you are willing to go through a potentially long application process and a period of intensive language training and then put in a strong and convincing application online! Classicists are particularly well suited to the linguist role at GCHQ as well as other intelligence analyst and management scheme roles so I would urge you to apply for these unique opportunities!

For more information go to www.gchq.gov.uk (where you can also find out about the nationality requirements that apply to the job)

Orfeo at the ADC

By Rebecca Pound, Trinity Hall

Cambridge University Baroque Ensemble and
Fitzwilliam Chamber Orchestra

There can be nothing more obvious than to set the story of Orpheus to music. The greatest musician of myth, famed for his skill with lyrics and lyre, finds one of his earliest modern expressions (we're talking 1607, so it's all relative) in Monteverdi's opera *Orfeo*. If not the oldest, this is at least one of the first true operas we know of - so, exciting stuff.

It of course tells the story of Orpheus, who uses his musical ability to charm his way into Hades and secure the release of his beloved Eurydice. As he leads her out of hell, he looks behind to check she is following; she promptly vanishes, in accordance with Orpheus' agreement with Pluto (and allowing those moralising Greeks a nice line in the virtues of self-restraint). The distraught Orpheus is then consoled by Apollo and whisked off into the starry sky. Incidentally, those hoping for the more traditional and gory end to the myth, in which Orpheus is torn apart by Bacchantes, will be disappointed: Monteverdi wrote both endings, before choosing the *deus ex machina* option - technologically more impressive, perhaps, but not nearly so dramatic.

As it happens, a few raving Bacchantes would have brought some much needed life to this frequently lacklustre production. From the opening toccata, it was clear that the drama of Monteverdi's music would be very much in absence: the Baroque Ensemble simply did not rise to the occasion.

Since we're in the realm of Greek myth, you could seek an explanation for this in the spirit of Music who introduces the opera. And you'd find one. Singing about the power of

music, she was so wooden that she would struggle to inspire a log, let alone Orpheus or an entire orchestra. Unfortunately, her lack of enthusiasm seemed to be shared by the chorus, who failed to inject much excitement into Orpheus and Eurydice's nuptials or evoke much of the carefree joy that should make the opening distinct from the tragic latter half of the opera. And some interesting directorial choices didn't help matters: think 'pastoral' dances, Pluto dressed as a wizard, and Apollo descending in a sun-balloon.

Despite this, on the whole the cast responded better to the change of tone after Eurydice's death. This was heralded by the Messenger, who was genuinely compelling in her grief and guilt - throw in a few more *oimoi*'s and it could have been Euripides. Orpheus too was well-acted and sung, though occasionally his solos lacked the dynamism expected of a character with such a reputation.

Ultimately, however, the fact that this performance did not enthral may in part be the fault of the story itself. It's hard to feel sympathy for a couple that is hardly seen together. While Orpheus' laments for Eurydice were moving, they were difficult to believe in because his love itself seemed implausible.

Although based on a new, much-vaunted (but actually sometimes faintly Loeb-ish) English translation, this production does not quite manage to be as fresh as it clearly wants to be. There are hazards with any adaptation of Greek myths, chief of which is that it will seem irrelevant. Sadly, this was the case here: too little humanity in the characters and too many mistakes in the production made it hard for the audience to connect with Orpheus' tragedy. Which is a shame really, because the very attempt to perform a 400-year-old opera about a myth far older still proves that it's still a story worth telling.

Babylon: Myth and Reality

By Alice Merry, Queens' College

An incredible sight awaits visitors as they step inside the first room of the Babylon Exhibition. Beautiful glazed brick panels show fierce bright golden lions on intense blue backgrounds, along with oddly adorable dragon-like creatures called Mushhushus.

Sadly, the rest of the exhibition didn't quite live up to the first room. There were many items showing incredibly tiny and intricate cuneiform writing, which would have been more interesting if the crowds didn't make it so difficult to get close. Interesting pieces such as 'the first map of the world' were memorable, however much of the exhibition focused on later interpretations

and myths of Babylon. These were certainly interesting (especially worth seeing was the striking *Nebuchadnezzar* by William Blake). Yet, although the museum claims that the exhibition 'brings together such works of imagination with archaeological treasures from ancient Babylon, to reveal the reality behind the legends', I couldn't help feeling that it failed to convey that reality.

It is easy to see why it is so difficult to gather objects that might reveal more about ancient Babylon. The site of this great ancient city is now the site of conflict in Iraq. The final exhibit was a brief film that revealed the severe physical damage that the site has and continues to suffer as a result. Let's hope that this exhibition can raise awareness of the need to protect cultural heritage in Iraq, and that one day we will be able to see more of the reality behind the myths of ancient Babylon.

Calendar of Events

BABYLON:

MYTH AND REALITY

The British Museum
Until 15th March
http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/all_current_exhibitions/babylon.aspx

See *Babylon: Myth and Reality Review* – page 3

DEADLINE FOR NOMINATIONS FOR HERODOTEANS' ELECTIONS FOR 2009-2010

8th February midnight

DR JAMES WARREN

'The Harm of Being Born'
11th February 8pm
Latimer Room, Clare College

ARISTOPHANES

FROGS

Bloomsbury Theatre
Performance by UCL
11th - Friday 13th February
<http://www.thebloomsbury.com/event/run/1262>

HERODOTEANS' ELECTIONS FOR 2009-2010

12th February 1pm

GRADUATE SPEAKER SESSION

17th February 8pm (venue tbc)

Featuring:

CLAIRE STOCKS

'Where's Hannibal? The cultural re-appropriation of the Hannibal mythology in modern Tunisia'

HANNAH WILLEY

'Gender Indifference in the Epidaurian Iamata - A divine Approach to Healing'
AILSA MCDERMID
'Self definition, garden definition: the cases of Flora and Pomona'

EURIPIDES

HIPPOLYTUS

Temple Theatre
Tour 24th February- 14th March
<http://www.templetheatre.co.uk/>

HERODOTEANS' ANNUAL DINNER

5th March

JUSTIN MAROZZI AND PAUL CARTLEDGE

'Travels with Herodotus'
9th March 7.30pm (venue tbc)

DIDO

QUEEN OF CARTHAGE

National Theatre
Previews begin 17th March
Standard performances 25th March - 7th May

The director (James MacDonald) will be discussing the play on 3rd April 6pm.

<http://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/dido>

ARISTOPHANES

CLOUDS

24th - 28th March

<http://www.cloudslondon.com/about.html>

Photos from 'Where's Hannibal?'

The mountain oasis of Chebika and below, Roman temples at Sufetula
Photos by Claire Stocks
(see Graduate Speaker Session 17th Feb)



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CAMBRIDGE CLASSICS NEWSLETTER

and feel free to talk to any of us in the faculty.

Thanks to the Herodoteans and the Classics Faculty for their support. (And to David Butterfield for a last minute Prose Composition lesson!)

