APRIL 2021, ISSUE 3

Classics Newsletter

This is the newsletter for anything to do with ancient Mediterranean cultures, including Greece, Rome, Egypt and the Persian empire.

Ancient Roman Graffiti:

This edition's cover image shows some of the last remaining fragments of ancient Roman graffiti, a hidden gem of classical civilisation that has lain undiscovered by modern archaeologists for over 2000 years. Much of this graffiti would not be preserved for us to see and appreciate today if it weren't for the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD 79, which covered walls of Pompeii and Herculaneum in a fine layer of ash and dust - and decades of painstaking restoration of these much scribbled-on walls has revealed a surprising amount of hilariously random statements carved into them by the general public, some of which we've included down below:

"On April the 19th, I made bread"

"Chie, I hope that your haemorrhoids rub together so much that they hurt worse than they ever have before."

"Epaphra, you are bald!"

"Tertius, you are disgusting - from Virgula"

"Oh walls, you have held up so much tedious graffiti that I am amazed that you have not already collapsed."

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Did you know...?

Rome might not have been built in a day, but legend has it that it was founded on April 21st 753 BC

Gladiators - Separating Fact from Fiction

When you think of Ancient Rome, you probably think of old guys in togas, Caecilius in his garden, and gladiators fighting to the death. However, with Hollywood's reputation for stretching the truth, and of course the obvious problem that it's been hundreds of years since the last (proper) gladiatorial games, just how much of what we read and watch is actually accurate? You might think you know all there is to know about gladiators, but read on to find out how much is fact and how much is fiction...

To properly appraise the accuracy of its media portrayals, it's important to first understand the origins and history of the gladiatorial games - after all, something that is accurate for one period might be complete nonsense one hundred years down the line. While the exact origin of gladiator fights remains unknown, it is thought to have developed either from the funeral games that were used as ways of appeasing the dead, or or to have come from other states or tribes around Rome.

The first gladiator fight in Rome is attributed to Decimus Junius Brutus, who had three pairs of gladiators fight in funeral games in order to honour his deceased father, and they soon grew in popularity and eventually developed into the sort of gladiatorial bouts we're familiar with seeing on our screens, with the fights being held in amphitheatres and held as an event in and of themselves as opposed to a form of funeral entertainment. These shows became more and more extravagant to impress the audiences, and at the height of the games audiences could expect to see exciting demonstrations such as mock naval battles in a flooded amphitheatre, wild and exotic animals being fought by trained gladiators and helpless prisoners alike, and fights by the novel woman gladiators.

The gladiators themselves trained in schools (called a ludus), which we know very little about. Whether gladiators were kept there as prisoners or because they chose to be, they were relatively well looked after - it wouldn't do to have your best fighter collapsing with malnutrition in the middle of a fight after all - with evidence showing that they ate a fairly healthy and balanced diet, had access to a heated bathhouse, and were trained well for their bouts in the arena.

Above: a reconstruction of a ludus;
Below: the excavation of the Ludus Magnus, the biggest gladiator school in Rome.

Now that we know the history of gladiator fights, it's time to look at some common misconceptions and separate fact from fiction...

Misconception #1: Every gladiator fight ended with someone dying.
The Truth: Most fights ended when one of the gladiators yielded, at which point it was up to the crowd (or, if he was there, the emperor) to decide if the victor should kill the defeated. Unless they had been truly horrific in the fight, most gladiators were allowed to live because the crowd wanted to see them fight again. While there were occasionally novelty fights where the gladiators were expected to fight to the death, killing half of the fighters every gladiatorial games would have been unsustainable and wasteful - after all, a lot of time and money was put into looking after and training gladiators.

Misconception #2: Gladiators were slaves and always treated terribly.
The Truth: While most gladiators were slaves, some were not and kept their place in Roman society, although they still became an infamis. In terms of their treatment, a famous example of a ludus in the media is the one portrayed in the film Spartacus (1960). The film's depiction of the gladiators as slaves treated cruelly by the master of the ancient Capuan gladiator school, Batiatus, is fairly accurate as he was considered to be a cruel master even by Roman standards, but most schools took relative care of their fighters, as they were their biggest assets and needed to be kept healthy.

Misconception #3: Whether or not the loser of a fight was killed depended upon them getting a thumbs up or a thumbs down.
The Truth: A myth that is shown prominently in the 2000 film Gladiator, the true origin of the thumbs up/down gesture is less clear. It's impossible to say exactly what hand gestures were used two thousand years ago, but theories include a thumbs up meaning to use your sword, and a thumbs down the sheath it, or the motion for kill being a thumb drawn across the throat (which may have been easier to distinguish from in the stands). In fact, the one thing that historians generally agree upon is that a thumbs down did not mean death.

Misconception #4: Gladiators trained with real weapons.
The Truth: Fighting with real weapons can be bad for your health, so in the schools, gladiators trained with wooden weapons to avoid injury

Hopefully you've learnt more about the truth of Roman gladiators. If you have any recommendations for books, TV shows, or films about gladiators (or if you want to name and shame any that are full of misconceptions) Please let me know at 15hadland272@kechg.org.uk

Chloe Hadland, 12SW

Classics in the News...

Aten:
Ancient Egypt's 'lost golden city'

The city of Aten, buried under sand for at least 3,000 years and known as Egypt's 'lost golden city', was recently discovered by a team of archaeologists led by the renowned Egyptologist Zahi Hawass and is believed to be the largest ancient city found in Egypt to date. This discovery has been described by experts as one of the most important finds since the unearthing of Tutankhamun's tomb almost 100 years ago by the English archaeologist and Egyptologist Howard Carter and the city has also been compared with Pompeii due to its incredible natural preservation.

In September 2020, the excavations began 300 miles south of the Egyptian capital Cairo and along the west bank of the River Nile. Over the course of the last seven months, 'a large city in a good condition of preservation, with almost complete walls, and with rooms filled with tools of daily life' has been unearthed, according to the team's official statement. Several neighbourhoods and administrative districts in the city have also been excavated, as well as items of jewellery such as rings and scarab beetle amulets and even a bakery complete with ovens and pottery used for storage.

The foundation of the city, named after the Egyptian sun god Aten, dates back to the reign of Amenhotep III (the grandfather of Tutankhamun), as evidenced by the finding of mud bricks bearing his seal. He reigned over an empire stretching from the Euphrates (the longest river in Western Asia) to Sudan for nearly four decades and died around 1354BC. Amenhotep's rule is remembered for its opulence and prosperity, which is why the discovery of Aten is so groundbreaking, as according to Betsy Bryan, Professor of Egyptian art and archaeology at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland, the unearthing of Aten 'will give us a rare glimpse into the life of the Ancient Egyptians at the time where the empire was at its wealthiest'.

Simran Rakar, 12MP

Did you know?

Greek mythology creative writing online workshop in half term

Join Dr Amanda Potter from the Open University for an online creative writing workshop, via Zoom. We will use characters and themes from Greek mythology, and paintings from the Brighton Museum collection, as an inspiration for your work. Suitable for participants with all levels of experience, all you need is internet access, paper and a pen.

https://www.brightonfringe.org/whats-on/greek-mythology-creative-writing-online-workshop-153588/

Romulus and Remus: *finish building the city*

Remus: let's name this city "Reme"

Romulus:

Meme sent in by Jude Shayeb 11S

JOKE

A Roman walks into a bar
He holds up two fingers and says "give me five beers."

When the teacher thinks you're studying but you're actually planning to invade Britain

Herostratic Fame- 'At Any Cost'

Ruyi Zhang 12P explores the story of Herostratus, who famously burned down the Temple of Artemis in Ephesus in order to, well, become famous...

Would you consider yourself **impressive** for single-handedly **demolishing** an internationally renowned construction as epochal as, say, the White House, or Buckingham Palace? Possibly, yet it is difficult to equate this feat with one executed by a man of ancient origins, **Herostratus**, as (1), with our modern backdrop, there are perhaps alternative paths of destruction with weightier implications; and (2), to comprehend the extent of his **sacrilege** for any amount of comparison, we'd need to investigate the significance of the monument wrecked.

Temple of Artemis

"Lo, apart from Olympus, the Sun never looked on aught so grand."

— Antipater of Sidon

Antipater's poetic proclamation continues: when he 'saw the house of Artemis that mounted to the clouds, those other marvels lost their brilliancy.' It seems, in fact, many were entranced by the divinity of the temple, in such swathes of appreciation that some 1800 years or so later, figures of the Renaissance continued the lauding and extolling. Justified, even for a Wonder of the World?

A modern 1:25 scale model of the Temple of Artemis, at Miniatürk, Istanbul, Turkey. By Zee Prime at cs.wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=6347027

Staged to adorn the rolling hills and vast fields of Ephesus (near the modern town of Selçuk) in Ionian Greece (present-day Turkey), the temple's nascence was rooted in the patronage of a foremost conquering Lydian, Croesus, in 560 BCE. Obscenely wealthy, out of respect or in a bid to scratch his own mark on history (not dissimilar to our Herostratus yet decidedly, with better methodology), Croesus irrigated the architectural project that eventually materialised into a temple to awe all onlookers. For who could deny the staggering authority of 40 feet-tall slabs of stone guarding a structure of 150 feet, its columns seemingly extended not metaphorically, but physically, to the seats of the gods. Directly due to Croesus's generosity, treasured works of art were also stored within, and since the temple was situated on already hallowed grounds, its spiritual significance offered a protective sanctuary to the unjustly prosecuted and the helpless vulnerable; no one would seek to desecrate sacrosanct property. Beyond this religious connection, merchants, common amblers, and kings alike would pay homage through the sacrifices they could offer.

Act of Ruination

Back to an often-deployed historical narrative to contextualise events- the facts. On July 21 of 356 BCE, the arsonist struck.

How'd he do it?! How can marble be burned? It was misfortune indeed, that the roof, stairways, doors, and numerous other furnishings were crafted from wood: highly flammable. With the essential strengthening foundations and supports in ashes, only the columns were left to smoulder in abject rage.

A Psychological Explanation?

And those with slight investment always wonder, why? Could Sartre with his speculations in 'Erostratus' (a short story) be hinting at an ancient neurotic sadist? This, admittedly, does not provide the most convincing explanation of Herostratus; he targeted a building and not a person. Though universally considered a heinous, ill-justified desecration, Herostratus' motivations for his one-man rampage are unsurprising, and sadly, rather common. He is believed to have been a man of low social standing and quite possibly enslaved. And so, in reducing to the ground a monument of such import, he simply wanted to gauge a reaction on par with his original destruction. A thrum of power. Stronger if the crime crueler. This certainly isn't something unheard of as it so frequently happens that people attack with what they believe to be sound justification, 'it would prove to the world their harboured strength, and they would be recognised for it.' And how flawed that is.

Legacy of Irony

No doubt, it is questionable as to why, terrible as the crime was (and so tainted would any glory acquired be), Herostratus arguably achieved the fame he lusted for by mere implication in the phrase used, 'Herostratic fame.' This attribution of his name is the very same process by which instrumental contributors within the literary, scientific, and technical sectors lend theirs to areas of virtuosity and benefit. And so, despite Ephesian emphasis on torture on the racks succeeded by public execution (in order to render Herostratus an example of what he did) and on the enforcement of the law damnatio memoriae/"damnation of memory" (whereby his name was stricken from all official records, and the mention of it forbidden, through word or in writing, on pain of death) all their efforts were ultimately undermined: in its origin by Theopompus, the ancient source on the deed, and extensively by continuous hoards of people, we who associate a single person with the burning, and yet remain confounded on the identities of architects of the temple itself.

Ruyi Zhang, 12P

Classics Competitions

University of Oxford: Creative Writing Competition

The Oxford Centre for Byzantine Research, in partnership with the Faculty of Classics, is delighted to launch its 2021 Creative Writing Competition. Prizes will be awarded to the top three creative pieces written in response to images from the Manar al-Athar Photo Bank. This unique photograph collection contains around 80,000 images of archaeological sites, buildings and artwork from areas of the former Roman Empire and neighbouring regions, with a chronological range from Alexander the Great (c.300 BCE) through to the Islamic period. These images are ideal creative stimuli giving glimpses of an incredibly rich and diverse cultural heritage. They capture many evocative locations, beautiful artefacts, complex architectural styles, places of historical importance, and a huge range of religious iconography (from paganism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam).

The competition is open to everyone in Year 9-13 and the deadline is Thursday 27th May. The top prize is £250!

For full details see the website:

https://clasoutreach.web.ox.ac.uk/creative-writing-competition-2021

University of Oxford Drama Competition

The Faculty of Classics, in partnership with the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama (APGRD), is proud to launch the David Raeburn Prize, an exciting new performance competition for young people from across the UK. The judges will be looking for powerful, creative and exciting interpretations of ancient material. Performances are to be delivered entirely in English and must be no longer than 5 minutes. This competition is open to any participant aged 11-18 (or Years 7-13, or equivalent). The deadline is Thursday 2nd December 2021, so you've got plenty of time to practise! The top prize is £200.

For full details see the website:

https://clasoutreach.web.ox.ac.uk/drama-competition-2021

Let Dr Kerr know if you enter either of these competitions!