Classics is the study of the civilisations of ancient Greece and Rome. These civilisations had an immense influence on the development of western civilisation. Much of our modern language, literature, art and architecture, drama, philosophy, political and legal systems is derived from Greece and Rome. Classics aims to understand these cultures, and to appreciate what they achieved and how important they have been in historical terms. At the same time Classics students are challenged to confront the major questions which the Greeks and Romans faced and which humanity has faced down the ages — about human behaviour, human society, ethics, war, politics, religion, indeed the whole meaning and purpose of life.

“I quickly realised that to understand the Classical tradition was to gain a greater understanding of the present-day world in which we live.”

Michelle Sim MA (Classics)
Archivist, Air Force Museum of New Zealand
Why study Classics?
Greece and Rome lie at the root of western civilisation. To understand anything properly you need to have an appreciation of its origins. In studying the Greeks and Romans we are studying the western roots of our own culture.

Classics is a self-contained inter-disciplinary subject. It has links to almost every other arts subject — anthropology, art history, gender studies, history, languages, philosophy, political studies, religion, theatre studies. Western medicine and science too have their roots in Greece and Rome.

By studying Classics you will develop your awareness of language, your sensitivity to literature and art, your understanding of history and politics, your knowledge of religion and mythology, your appreciation of ethical and social issues. You will certainly broaden your intellectual and cultural horizons, and you will develop valuable generic skills transferable to the outside world.

Background required
No specialist knowledge is required, as Classical Studies, Greek and Latin are all taught from scratch. If you have done Classical Studies at school you will find that our first-year courses build on and extend your knowledge. Students with NCEA level 3 Latin are granted direct entry into 200-level papers.

Careers in Classics
Arts degrees do not pretend to be vocational degrees. For some jobs you may well need further specialist training. But there are plenty of employers who value a well-rounded education such as Classics provides. Employers value transferable skills — the ability to think through a problem, to see both sides of a question, to analyse, to present an argument, and to express yourself clearly and fluently.

Recent Classics graduates have made careers not only in school and university teaching but in university administration, foreign affairs, trade and industry, social welfare, local government, tourism, computing, insurance, law, librarianship, book selling, publishing, museums and art galleries, fashion and design, broadcasting, journalism, tourism and the theatre. This list emphasises the versatility of Classics graduates. You might be surprised that a recent New Zealand ambassador to Indonesia was a Classicist, but it’s true.

Student Exchange
You may be able to do part of your study overseas through the University’s extensive exchange programme or as a postgraduate student.

But, even if you don’t, your study of Classics is going to enrich your OE enormously. Students repeatedly tell us after all that study, there is something magic about your first glimpse of the Parthenon by moonlight!

Classics at Otago
Otago’s Classics Department was the first established in New Zealand, in 1871.

Your First Year of Study
At Otago we offer papers in Classical Studies, Greek, and Latin. If you plan to major in Classics in a Bachelor of Arts you can do so with any combination of these three subjects that suits your interests.

Majoring students will need to do at least two of our first-year papers. Classics, Greek and Latin can also be taken as minor subjects. We encourage you to study one or both of the languages.

First year Classical Studies papers introduce you to Greek and Roman archaeology, history, mythology and etymology. You can study:
~ the archaeology of Greece from the late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age, focusing on the Trojan War
~ the history of ancient Sparta, democratic Athens, Alexander the Great, the fall of the Roman Republic, and the first Roman emperors
~ the major gods and heroes of the Greeks, and their links with Egyptian and Babylonian gods
~ words and concepts derived from the Greeks and Romans.

Greek and Latin coursebooks are modern and designed for beginner students. Right from the beginning they focus on the reading of continuous texts. Vocabulary and grammar are introduced gradually and consolidated by a variety of exercises.

Continuing your Studies
In Classics we investigate the social conditions of life among the Romans, especially through the issues of family life, slavery and gladiatorial combat.

We study the stories of love and war, and of fantasy and fear, of Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Virgil, and Juvenal. We study the development of Greek tragedy, and set it in its religious, political, intellectual and ethical contexts.

We examine the development of Greek art, from the time of Alexander the Great to that of Augustus. We explore the political use of art and architecture by the Romans in their empire. There is an excellent collection of Greek and Roman art in the Otago Museum which you will study in our art and archaeology papers.

We explore the significance of the myths and rituals of ancient Greece, and compare them to myths of other cultures. We analyse the extraordinary conquests and personality of Alexander the Great. We study the archaeological evidence for warfare in Greece in relation to contemporary military theory and practice. We examine the role of oratory and the techniques of persuasion in the speeches of Cicero. And we read the works of some of the major Greek and Roman authors in their original words.

For questions about Classics
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Email university@otago.ac.nz

www.otago.ac.nz/classics

profile

MICHELLE SIM
Graduate

“I didn’t take Classics at High School. I didn’t even begin University with the intention of majoring in Classics, but by the end of my first year at Otago, I had discovered a life-long passion for all things Greek and Roman.

This was due in no small measure to the broad range of quality programmes offered by the Classics Department, which all highlighted the fascinating depth and enduring relevance of the Ancient World. I quickly realised that to understand the Classical tradition was to gain a greater understanding of the present-day world in which we live, and to appreciate the many legacies which we now attribute to the cultures of Ancient Greece and Rome.

Few disciplines can offer the same diversity of subjects as Classics, something I made the most of in my time at Otago. Within a single degree course I had the opportunity to study mythology, language and literature, art and architecture, and social history. Furthermore, I recognised the benefit (and thrill!) of being able to study the ancients in their own language, and so, with the encouragement of the Department, combined both Latin and Greek language with my developing interest in the history and archaeology of Bronze Age Greece and Classical Rome.

Through my years of studying Classics at Otago, what always stood out to me most about the Department was the consistently high standard of teaching, reflected in the extraordinary degree of support and commitment that all staff display towards their students. No matter what level you are at, they are always on hand to help you realise your goals.

No Classics degree is ever a waste – don’t let anyone tell you otherwise! The valuable and diverse skills you acquire – critical analysis, written and verbal communication, and research ability to name but a few - are easily transferred to any number of vocations. In my case, after completing my MA at Otago, I found I was well-placed to move into the Museum and Heritage sector. My current job as an Archivist at the Air Force Museum of New Zealand seems a world away from studying the life and times of the Ancient Greeks and Romans, but there is never a day goes by when I do not put into practice those versatile skills gained through Classics.”

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The Basis of Western Civilisation