

A219 DVD1: transcript

Section 1, 'Course introduction'

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[**Paula James** *voice-over*]

The Classical world is a world of the past. But in numerous ways it's still present today. *Exploring the Classical World* is a course about the past of Greece and Rome, and how we can study it on the basis of what survives. This video offers a first impression of the Classical world, and introduces some members of the course team.

[**Felix Budelmann** *interview*]

Starting with some visual evidence brings out I think two questions that are crucial to this course and more generally to studying the Classical world, I would say. First, there is the question of what do we actually have left by way of evidence? But secondly, how do we get from what we have left to some sort of sense of what the Classical world has actually been like such a long time ago. So for instance, we have plenty of ruins of ancient temples that we can look at, but the question of course is, what was it like for the people there sacrificing to the gods, praying to the gods? What were their beliefs, what were their practices and so on? Or we have written texts of ancient plays, of historians and so on, but how do we get from a written text to a sense of the performance in an open-air theatre filled with 15,000 people? It's those sorts of questions that this course is about, and that I think any study of the Classical world is about.

[**Paula James** *voice-over*]

The Classical world is immensely varied, and it would make little sense trying to take in a bit of everything. So the course concentrates on four particularly rich periods and places. Among the earliest things to survive from Greek civilisation are two massive poems, the *Odyssey* and *Iliad*. These are a unique combination of traditional, orally transmitted tales and subtle studies of outstanding individuals, their trials and relationships.

[**Chris Emlyn-Jones** *interview*]

The first perception we have of the Greeks were men of enormous power and charisma called Odysseus and Achilles, and they were involved in a war

against a citadel called Troy. We know about them through poems which were orally transmitted through the centuries until they reached their final form under the name of a supreme poet we call Homer. The events of Troy that we know about in the poems occurred in about the twelfth century BC and we think that Homer's poems date to about the end of the eighth century.

[Paula James voice-over]

One of the main themes of the *Odyssey* is that of social displacement, wandering, and the attempt of the absent (presumed dead) hero Odysseus to return home. The Greeks called that quest *nostos*. The other major poem that survives, the *Iliad*, tells the story of the war at Troy and the clash between exceptional heroes, such as Achilles and Agamemnon.

[Chris Emlyn-Jones interview]

The poems are primarily about fighting and action, but beside all this there's a very strong feeling of the interaction between characters, their psychology, their humour, their friendships, their hates, and these were qualities which the later Greeks appreciated and developed very much in their culture.

[Paula James voice-over]

Compared with these poems, what survives on the ground is scanty, but we look in particular at some remarkable decorated pots designed as funeral objects. These and other artefacts found in a cemetery at Athens suggest a society in which, as the poems demonstrate, the prestige of individuals and the display of that prestige are paramount. At the same time, artistic designs on pottery are beginning to reflect Greek myths and legends and the enormous influence these had on later Greek culture. From Homer's world, we move a couple of hundred years forward in time to our second period of study, Athens in the fifth century BCE – 'Classical' Athens as it is often called. Many of the things we associate today with Ancient Greece stem from here.

First, there's theatre. The vast majority of Greek plays that we have today were first performed in fifth-century Athens. They were staged in this theatre, dedicated to the god Dionysus, on the slopes of the Acropolis. In the course you study two plays, *Persians*, a tragedy, and *Lysistrata*, a comedy, and you are prompted to think not just about how they may have been performed in the Theatre of Dionysus, but also about how they are performed today.

From the slopes of the Acropolis, we move up to the Acropolis, or citadel, itself. At the beginning of the century, the Persians devastated Athens, including the Acropolis. It was then rebuilt in the course of the fifth century.

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You look at the site, its buildings and in particular at the most famous product of the fifth-century building programme, the Parthenon, a temple in honour of the goddess Athena.

[James Robson *interview*]

I guess that the Parthenon is one of the best-known, if not the best-known, monuments from Classical Athens. But the fact that it has this status as something of an icon for us brings certain consequences. I think because it's part of our world we think that we know it and understand it somehow. Whereas if we want to appreciate its significance for fifth-century Athenians we need to look at it with fresh eyes and to think about its relation to the world in which it was built.

It's true I think that the Parthenon is a remarkable building, and deserves a lot of the attention which it attracts. It's beautifully proportioned and its sculptures are exquisite and extraordinarily detailed. At the time it was built it was the largest temple in Greece and in its design and execution shows an amazing mixture of traditional elements, but also innovation.

[Paula James *voice-over*]

Perhaps the most famous and certainly the most controversial part of the Parthenon is the long frieze that ran all the way around the temple.

[James Robson *interview*]

Large sections of it still survive, and I think it's easy to forget when we look at it close-up in museums or in books that it would originally have sat high up on the temple underneath the roof. The frieze is so famous nowadays that it's odd to think that there are no ancient sources that tell us what it depicted, and so one of the questions which scholars ask is just what was going on and how we are to interpret it.