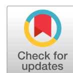

Public Humanities (2025), 1, e61, 1–7
doi:10.1017/pub.2025.2

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

ARTICLE

Classical Studies and the Public Humanities

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(Received 22 July 2024; revised 04 October 2024; accepted 03 December 2024)

Abstract

This article introduces the reader to current work at the intersection of classical studies and the public humanities. It begins from the observation that in recent years, efforts by classical scholars to relate to a wider public have intensified and taken on a new quality. Not so long ago, public-facing research was considered detrimental to "real" scholarship. By contrast, as this article sets out to show, there is now a growing interest in a true exchange of perspectives, knowledges, and methodologies with stakeholders outside of the confines of the academe. I argue that some of the most interesting work in this space emerges from the way in which the aims and objectives of the public humanities intersect with several trends currently driving classical studies. These include the emergence of the digital humanities, the maturing of classical reception studies, and the (often difficult) conversations around calls to "decolonize" the classics.

Keywords: classical reception studies; current trends; decolonising the classics; digital classics

We do not need to invoke Theodor Mommsen's Nobel Prize in literature, awarded in 1902 for his weighty, three-volume *Römische Geschichte* (*Roman History*), to illustrate that classical studies always had the capacity to engage the wider public. Students of the ancient world have for some time been collaborating with museums, schools, and other public-facing institutions advising on the production of exhibits, curricula, and even Hollywood blockbusters. And yet in recent years – coinciding with the rise of the "public humanities" as an interdisciplinary field of study – efforts by classical scholars to relate to the wider public have intensified and taken on a new quality: public-facing research is increasingly no longer considered detrimental to "real" scholarship; its aim has not remained limited to "outreach," or popularizing the Classics' or "translating" difficult and unwieldly academic research for "consumption" by a wider audience – even though all of these efforts remain valuable in their own right. Rather, there is now a growing interest in engaging in what has been termed "co-production": a true exchange of perspectives, knowledges, and methodologies with stakeholders outside of the confines of the academe.[1] Co-production has led to collaborative partnerships between classical scholars on the one hand and public institutions, NGOs, artists, and culture workers on the other.

[1] "Co-production" differs from traditional "outreach" in that it does not merely pass on existing scholarly knowledge for consumption by members of the general public; rather, it directly involves public stakeholders in the production of this knowledge.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

What is driving the opening-up of a discipline that not so long ago was firmly associated with elitism and the propagation of knowledges often inaccessible to the wider public?

Together with increasing external pressures to show "impact" beyond the academe, much current innovation in this space springs from the aims and objectives of the public humanities aligning with several trends currently driving classical studies: the rise of public-facing digital Classics, the emergence of classical reception studies, and, above all, the (often difficult) conversations emerging from calls to "decolonize" the Classics, that is to dismantle the power structures and forms of domination that have traditionally driven the generation and dissemination of knowledge about the ancient world through its languages, material remains, literatures, and histories.

1. The rise of digital classics

The emergence of computing and the evolution of digital tools in its wake have deeply transformed the Arts and Humanities.[2] Their arrival has not only impacted traditional forms of research and teaching in a broad array of disciplines related to human cultures and societies; it has also allowed researchers to crunch, visualize, and articulate sets of data – including (but not limited to) texts and images – pertaining to the Arts and Humanities in new and exciting ways, making these fields interesting and intelligible to wider audiences.

The possibilities afforded by digitalization have been embraced by classical studies particularly enthusiastically.[3] The roots of this transformation reach back to the 1990s (and sometimes even earlier) when classical scholars first started to draw on the new possibilities provided by computing to process data (including literary texts) in new ways.[4] Since then, the emergence of "digital classics" has gradually led to fundamentally new approaches towards the collection, evaluation, and presentation of data available for the study of the ancient world.[5] Mailing lists, websites, databases, and apps have transformed the work students of the ancient world are able to do.[6] Ancient literary and material sources have become available to a larger public.

Greek and Roman texts – the literary sources on which the study of the ancient world is based – are now readily available in a variety of formats online both in the ancient languages and in translation.[7] For those who want to learn how to read ancient Greek and/or Latin themselves, there are now several generally available tools, including extensive online

[2] See, for example, Berry 2012, Bodard and Mahoney 2016, and, more recently, Drucker 2021.

[3] See Barker and Terras 2016. Digital Classicists (https://www.digitalclassicist.org/wip/) list various initiatives in digital classics. The Stoa consortium (University of Kentucky) provides a hub for work in digital classical studies: https://www.stoa.org. The Liverpool list remains the largest mailing list for all those who want to send and receive regular updates about conferences, jobs, and other classically themed news (in addition to occasional rants about various highly contested issues of current concern).

[4] *Perseus* (see note 5), for example, began in 1987 and quantitative computing approaches to the analysis of Greek and Roman texts were employed as early as the 1970s. The *Thesaurus Linguae Greaecae* (*TLG*), a digital and searchable collection of most texts that have come down to us from the ancient Greek world, was established in 1972.

[5] Classical studies and the digital humanities: for example, Bodard and Mahoney 2010, Barker and Terras 2016, and Barker et al. 2016.

[6] Classical studies and the digital humanities: for example, Bodard and Mahoney 2010, Barker and Terras 2016, and Barker et al. 2016.

[7] See, for example, the *Perseus Digital library* (Tufts) http://www.perseus.tufts.edu and *Laucus Curtius* (University of Chicago) http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/home.html.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

dictionaries and grammars.[8] Popular commercial language learning apps such as Duolingo, Mamrise, Mondley, and Cattus support Latin-learning (unfortunately, there is no app for learning ancient Greek yet). Museums have now fully or partially digitized their collections. Free databases relating to particular types of material evidence have arisen.[9] The most popular among them, the Beazley online archive housed at the University of Oxford, gives access to 100,000 extant samples of Athenian painted pottery and 25,000 samples of ancient and neo-classical engraved gems.[10]

The opportunities afforded by the digital humanities extend beyond making information accessible to a wider public. Some platforms process and visualize data in new ways, making them available and interesting to audiences not previously engaged. The *Ancient World Mapping Centre* (AWMC), housed at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, not only provides open access to its geographic information science data (GIS) relating to the ancient world but also explicitly invites members of the general public to engage with their material by providing large sets of geographical maps for free under the creative commons licence.[11] In a similar vein, the collaborative *Manto Mythlab* (a collaboration between Macquarie University, Australia, and the University of New Hampshire, United States) enables users to search literary and material representations of Greek myth for people, places, and objects – thus connecting data in new ways.[12]

These platforms attract huge user bases inside and outside of academia. The Beazley Archive Pottery Database receives 7–8 million page views per year.[13] As the largest collection of data on Greek painted pottery, it is used by schools, museum curators, collectors, large auction houses, and others.[14] In this vein, the digital classics support a broad array of activities and different forms of engagement and knowledge generation, reaching the public well beyond those with formal classics degrees. Unfortunately, not everybody in the world has access to a speedy internet connection. But those who do can now access an ever-growing body of information and engage with the ancient world directly.

2. The coming of age of classical reception studies

Over the last decades, Classical Reception studies have been one of the fastest-growing sub-disciplines within classical studies. This field prioritizes the experience of later periods – including our own – as sites at which knowledge about the ancient world is generated. It thus differs from the older interest in the "Classical Tradition": it is not merely concerned with how aspects of the ancient world are passed down to later periods.[15] Rather, it conceives of the act of "reading" – broadly conceived as any effort of sense-making – as a dynamic, two-way process that is able to illuminate ever new facets about both the ancient past and the present that engages with it. No longer an emerging area of scholarly engagement, classical reception studies are now well-established with their own questions, methodologies, journals, conferences, and book series.

[8] See, for example, *Logeion* – a free, searchable online database that draws on an array of ancient Greek and Latin dictionaries: http://logeion.uchicago.edu.
[9] All of this first-hand information is supported by a large array of online encyclopaedias focused on the ancient world that provide context.
[10] https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/carc/Home.
[11] https://awmc.unc.edu.
[12] https://manto.unh.edu.
[13] https://digital.humanities.ox.ac.uk/project/beazley-archive-online-databases.
[14] See https://impact.ref.ac.uk/casestudies/CaseStudy.aspx?Id=4875.
[15] See in detail Hardwick 2011, 1–11.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The aims and objectives of classical reception studies often coincide with those of the public humanities, not at least in a shared focus on the viewpoints and experiences of different kinds of modern "readers" of the ancient world. The most productive work currently done in this space captures this diversity and actively brings the classical past to new areas of engagement. To give just one example, "Our Mythical Childhood" asks how children engage with the famous stories from Greco-Roman mythology in books, films, games, and other formats.[16] The initiative includes researchers from Poland, the United Kingdom, Cameroon, Israel, and Australia who use the tools of classical reception studies "to gain a deeper understanding of the key social, political and cultural transformations" that shape the engagement with Greco-Roman myth in different parts of the world.[17] With the support of a large grant from the European Research Council worth just under 1.5 million Euros, these researchers and their local teams established an array of collaborations to illuminate direct links between modern global challenges (such as climate change and famine) on the one hand and children's engagement with ancient myth on the other.

One of the core participants of this project, Susan Deacy of the University of Roehampton, has extended the focus of this project to include the needs of a particular set of youngsters. Her book *What Would Hercules Do? Lessons for Autistic Children Using Classical Myth* (2023) is addressed to professionals working with autistic children and inspires the use of Greco-Roman myth in working through the specific challenges posed by this condition.[18]

Our Mythical Childhood is just one project among many that uses the principles and practices of classical reception studies to engage the wider public. And yet it is typical in that it reveals one of the undeniable strengths of the public humanities more generally: to show "impact" beyond the academe. Asking how the ancient world speaks to present-day concerns opens up the door to more "applied" classical studies with real-world outcomes.

3. Decolonising the classics

Recent calls to challenge and dismantle power structures, practices, concepts, and perspectives first shaped by colonialism extend far beyond classical studies. They ring throughout most, if not all, disciplines in the Arts and Humanities, reaching into the social and in some instances even the "hard" sciences.[19] In classical studies, the calls to decolonize the curriculum have echoed particularly forcefully: in earlier eras, knowledge of Greco-Roman antiquity served a crucial role in establishing the social and cultural hierarchies according to which familiarity with "the Classics" doubled as a marker of education and privilege.

Here in the twenty-first century, this self-understanding of classical studies has been thoroughly shaken. Often difficult debates about the future of the discipline have instigated new thinking about what studying the Greco-Roman past is about, who gets to speak authoritatively about the ancient world and in what form, and for whom the knowledge generated by classical studies is intended.[20] There is a growing and sustained push from within the discipline towards a broadening of participation and a diversification of perspectives both past and present.

[16] http://www.omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/people/susan-deacy.
[17] https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/681202.
[18] Deacy 2023. See also https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/85763.
[19] See, for example, Mitova 2020.
[20] Classical studies and postcolonialism: for example, Hardwick and Gillespie 2007, Hardwick 2011, Ram-Prasad 2019, and Goff 2020.

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Not everybody, however, is prepared to decolonize the Classics. Predictably, perhaps, in some corners of academia, as in some parts of public life, there is considerable resistance against giving up long-cherished assumptions about the nature of the ancient world and the parameters of our modern engagement with it (scholarly and otherwise). Not everybody wants to dismantle traditional power structures; some find that they serve just fine. Some publics prefer to hang on to old, comforting ideas of "the Classics" that are grounded in the old status quo. We have seen open confrontations and ugly debates driven by clashing visions of the ancient past and differing views about the purpose of Classical studies.[21] Some modern "readers" of the ancient world, including members of the Far-Right in the United States, have instrumentalized classical texts and traditions to promote bigotry, racism, misogynism, and white supremacy.[22]

This has left classical studies in a contested space between the push to transform and reinvent itself and a defensive position that struggles to respond to harmful appropriations. Here, too, the rise of classical reception studies has sharpened awareness of the ideological forces pertaining to the reception of the ancient world in the modern.[23] It has become blatantly obvious that modern engagement with classical antiquity can serve both as a tool of oppression as well as one of resistance and liberation.[24] Understanding how class, race, gender, and social status intersect with modern readings of the ancient world is an important step towards coming to terms with ideological abuses of all kinds.

At the same time, there is a continuing and sustained effort from within the discipline to extend what classical studies in the twenty-first century look like and how they relate to society. The "Classics Everywhere" initiative of the *American Society for Classical Studies*, recently renamed "Ancient Worlds – Modern Communities," seeks to support "projects proposed *by* rather than *for* historically underrepresented minoritized communities."[25] It explicitly aims at "interdisciplinary collaborations; artistic projects and creative adaptations; projects involving global reception and comparative approaches; and projects that are critical of classics as it has been practised and structured as a discipline."[26] This open call has led to the funding of a broad array of public-facing projects: from the production of podcasts, to art, archaeology, and theatre projects, to more experimental formats involving homeless shelters, medicine, video games, and modernized retellings of ancient myths.[27] It seems that classics (with a lower case "c") indeed has the capacity to be "everywhere" and that ancient worlds converse with modern communities in more ways than traditionally imagined.

Occasionally, at least, this new focus is wide enough to extend to people at the very margins of society, such as prison inmates. Prison teaching programmes have a long tradition in

[21] See, for example, Zuckerberg 2019 and the public resistance to the public-facing classical studies journal *Eidiolon* as described in the journal's last editorial: https://eidolon.pub/my-classics-will-be-intersectional-or-14ed6e0bcd1c.

[22] See, for example, Zuckerberg 2019.

[23] In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Lorna Hardwick broke new ground by highlighting how modern readings of Greek and Roman texts (not merely in scholarship but in society more generally) are influenced by historical, social, and politico-ideological context (see, e.g., Hardwick and Gillespie 2007).

[24] Hardwick and Harrison 2013, in particular chapter 2 (Hardwick/Questioning the Democratic Turn'). See also Zuckerberg 2019.

[25] https://www.classicalstudies.org/outreach/ancient-worlds-modern-communities-formerly-classics-everywhere.

[26] As above.

[27] See https://classicalstudies.org/about/ancient-worlds-modern-communities-formerly-classics-everywhere-funded-projects.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

many Western societies, including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. They usually focus on vocational training, but many also feature the arts and humanities, providing an opening for classically themed courses. Such programmes are typically offered by correspondence, as in-person stand-alone efforts, or, indeed, as part of larger "prison-to-college" programmes that allow those incarcerated to pursue formal tertiary study after their release. Several US universities (including Princeton, Yale, Wesleyan, and Columbia University) have formal prison teaching programmes offering instruction in diverse topics such as Latin language, myth, and Greco-Roman literature in translation.

Focused on the experience of inmates and the idea that the engagement with the ancient past – its languages, literatures, and histories – can empower those incarcerated, prison teaching programmes are invariably complex and contested sites. Race, gender, and socio-economic status all play into the ways in which prison inmates engage with the ancient world – as do differences in education. And yet, questions pertaining to the human condition resonate most forcefully with this audience: the moral dilemmas and power dynamics problematized in much Greco-Roman literature as they extend into questions of masculinity, heroism, honour, individual responsibility, conflict, and anger.[28] Engaging with the ancient world enables some inmates to reflect on their own experience; it also helps to re-humanize a group of people that counts among the most marginalized in Western societies. This matters particularly in the context of the US penal system. With their large proportion of inmates of colour, US prisons are notoriously sites of disenfranchisement, racism, and dehumanization.

4. A shared future for classical studies and public humanities

As a discipline, classical studies feature several public-facing projects that illustrate the immense potential of this kind of work. These examples often intersect with larger trends currently driving classical studies and play an important and ongoing role in (the unfinished business of) repositioning the discipline in a quickly changing cultural landscape. This transition has not always been easy and conflicts continue to erupt exactly in the very space where classical studies and the public humanities intersect – only underlining the significance of this work. What is needed now is a wider and more direct engagement by classical scholars with the methods and questions of the public humanities as an emerging interdisciplinary field of endeavour.

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Author Contributions. Conceptualization: J.K.; Data curation: J.K.; Funding acquisition: J.K.; Investigation: J.K.; Methodology: J.K.; Project administration: J.K.

Funding Statement. None.

Conflicts of Interest. The author declares none.

[28] See the case studies discussed in Capettini and Sorkin Rabinowitz 2021.

https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.2 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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Cite this article: Kindt, Julia. 2025. "Classical Studies and the Public Humanities." *Public Humanities,* 1, e61, 1–7. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2025.2

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