

A Brief Genealogy of ‘Classics’ as the Name of an Academic Discipline

J. B. Rives

UNC-Chapel Hill Department of Classics
Working Group in Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Black Lives Matter
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The current name of our discipline has its ultimate origin, not surprisingly, in a metaphor. The Latin noun *classis* (perhaps from the archaic verb *calo*; cf. Quint. *Inst.* 1.6.33) originally signified (to use the definition provided by the *OLD*) ‘one or other of the five classes into which Servius Tullius is said to have divided the Roman citizens on the basis of property.’ The adjective *classicus* derives from the noun. Its more common meaning is ‘naval’, reflecting the common use of the noun *classis* to refer to the fleet (*OLD classis* 3, *classicus*¹ 2), but a very interesting passage of Aulus Gellius reveals another meaning as well. [Handout #1]. For Cato, the adjective meant literally ‘first class’, in a system where rank and value were explicitly determined by property ownership. (In this regard Cato’s usage did not differ much from contemporary American usage; the adjective ‘classy’ obviously connotes ‘class’ in a similarly restricted sense, ‘upper class’ rather than ‘lower class’, in a system in which wealth is likewise the chief determinant of class.)

Although this meaning of *classicus* seems to have been fairly rare, it was apparently picked up in a metaphorical sense by the archaizing intelligentsia of the 2nd c. CE. Gellius (again) records a discussion in the salon of M. Cornelius Fronto about which Latin words could or should be used only in the singular or the plural. (And for those of you unfamiliar with the implications of this setting, I’ll just say that one of the main things that such discussions were meant to accomplish was to establish and reinforce social status.) Fronto cited the authority of Caesar’s treatise *De analogia* and his interlocutor quoted Plautus and Ennius, and Fronto ended the discussion by declaring that at the moment everyone was too distracted by business concerns to have a proper discussion and so he gave them homework instead. [Handout #2] It’s worth noting that the metaphor is continued by the second adjective; according to the *OLD*, the primary meaning of *assiduus* is ‘settled on the land, land-owning, wealthy (as opp. to *proletarius*)’. Here Fronto (or Gellius) transfers the idea of ‘first class’ from the sphere of property ownership to that of literary value, although in both cases of course the ultimate concern is with social value. For Fronto and his ilk, older writers such as Plautus and

Ennius were simply of more value than recent writers. This is apparently the first extant example of the word ‘classic’ meaning, well, ‘classic’.

At this point I want to digress briefly on a related idea, that of ‘canon’, which I think has a good deal of overlap with the idea of ‘classic’. The use of the word ‘canon’ to mean ‘an authoritative list of approved authors or works’ is a modern one, dating only to the late 19th c., and was originally a metaphorical extension of the ecclesiastical use of the term in reference to the books of the Bible. The ecclesiastical usage goes back to the 4th c. CE, and itself derives from the metaphorical use of the Greek word κανών, literally ‘a bar or rod to keep things straight’, to mean ‘standard, rule’ (cf. English ‘ruler’). But if the ancient Greeks and Romans did not use the actual term ‘canon’ to refer to the idea of an authoritative list of approved authors or works, they were certainly very familiar with the idea itself. Hellenistic scholarship produced canons of the Ten Attic Orators, Nine Lyric Poets, Eight Maids-a-Milking, and so forth, and Roman scholars soon followed suit.¹ A famous example of this kind of canon-formation is Quintilian’s extended assessment of earlier Latin writers as models for the developing orator. It’s worth stressing, although I imagine that most of it are already aware of it, that the modern canon of classic Greek and Latin writers, as instantiated in graduate program reading lists, for example, derives, with a few tweaks, from those established already in antiquity. The passage from Gellius gives us some sense of the attitudes of those who established these canons and who in his day seem to have begun describing the authors on them with the adjective *classicus*.

Although I wasn’t able to consult the *TLL*, this passage of Gellius seems to be the only extant example of this usage in classical Latin, which suggests that it wasn’t very common. And unfortunately, the 1400 years after Aulus Gellius are for me a blank; working from home I simply wasn’t able to track down anything relevant. But according to a note in the *OED*, ‘The word [*classicus*] was used in post-classical Latin from 1512 with reference to highly-regarded authors who wrote in Greek or Latin, both pagan and Christian’, and I was able to find one specific example of that, dating to 1526, in the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*. [Handout #3] In any case, it must have been reasonably well established and widespread, because the usage of the English

¹ I can’t resist bringing in here one of my favorite minor figures from antiquity, Volcatius Sedigitus, who according to Pliny (*NH* 2.214) acquired his cognomen from the fact that he was born with six fingers on each hand and who in his work *De poetis* provided a ranked list, in iambic senarii no less, of the ten greatest Latin writers of comedy (Plautus is 2nd, Terence 6th; preserved in Gell. *NA* 15.24).

adjectives derived from it, ‘classic’ and ‘classical’, which the *OED* allows us to trace starting in the mid-16th c., seems to presuppose it.

The English adjectives, broadly speaking, have two main areas of meaning: Greek and Roman language, literature, and culture, on the one hand, and ‘first-class’ or paradigmatic on the other. The latter meaning is presumably chronologically prior, since it’s the one that, as we’ve just seen, actually goes back to the Latin word. That sense of the word has obviously continued to be important, and is now probably much more widespread. But the use of ‘classic’ and ‘classical’ to refer to Greek and Roman antiquity is very early and seems originally more widespread. According to the *OED*, we find examples of the adjective ‘classical’ in the sense ‘of or relating to the ancient Greek or Latin writers whose works form a canon of acknowledged excellence’ starting in the mid-16th century; I’ve provided the first few examples from the *OED* entry in handout #4. From the late 17th c. the use of term becomes generalized to refer to any aspect of Greek and Roman antiquity or the study thereof. The same was originally true of the parallel adjective ‘classic’, which was common in this sense from the late 16th through the early 18th centuries; again, some examples in handout #5. It seems that it was only in the course of the 18th c. that the current usage of the two adjectives became fixed, with the adjective ‘classic’ restricted to the sense in which we use it today, and the adjective ‘classical’ preferred for referring to Greek and Roman antiquity. Yet the earlier sense of ‘classic’ was preserved in its use as a noun, to mean ‘an ancient Greek or Latin writer or literary work, of the first rank and of acknowledged excellence’; examples in handout #6. And it’s of course from this usage that the name of the discipline derives, first normally with ‘the’ but starting in the mid-19th c. more commonly without the definite article; examples in handout #7.

So that, in a nutshell, is how ‘classics’ came to be a technical term for the study of Greek and Latin language and literature in particular, as well as the adjective ‘classical’ to refer to the study of Greek and Roman antiquity more broadly. The cultural assumptions that determined this development are clear: first-class and paradigmatic authors are by definition ancient Greek and Roman authors, specifically non-Christian Greek and Roman writers, and of these only a specific subset whose ‘first-class’ status was in many cases already established in antiquity. And these cultural assumptions, as I’m sure we’re all aware, are ones that were established by the writers and scholars of the period that we now know as the Renaissance. I stress this because the discourse of those writers and scholars

provided an alternative set of terms for describing the study of Greek and Roman language, literature, and culture, namely, ‘humanist’ and its cognates. That in fact seems to have been the original term of art in the southern Romance languages: it’s found in Italian and Catalan from the late 15th c. and in Spanish and Portuguese from the mid 16th c. ‘Humanist’, in the sense of ‘a scholar of Greek or Latin language and literature’ was adopted into English shortly thereafter; the *OED* provides examples of that use of the word from the late 16th to the early 19th c. At that point the term starts to become restricted to the scholars of the earlier period, the 14th through 16th centuries, which is how we generally use it now. But related terms continued to have specific reference to Greek and Roman antiquity: for example, ‘humane letters’ or, in Latin, *literae humaniores*, which as some of you know has long been and still remains the official title for the BA program at Oxford that focuses primarily on the study of Greek and Roman antiquity.

For our purposes, the most interesting of these terms is ‘humanity’. This word is attested in English with the modern sense of ‘humaneness’ as far back as the Wycliffe Bible in the late 14th c., but starting a century later it’s also used to denote a field of study, generally in juxtaposition with ‘divinity’; that is ‘humanity’ came to designate secular studies, those of the humanists, in contrast to religious studies. This use of the term lasted into the 19th c., and in some specialized cases has persisted down to our own day; most strikingly, at the University of Glasgow the title ‘Professor of Humanity’, which dates back to 1618, remains the official designation of the holder of the chair in Latin. (Just as an aside, I would suggest that we **not** consider replacing ‘Classics’ with ‘Humanity’; I suspect that a proposal to rename ourselves ‘the Department of Humanity’ might occasion considerable pushback.) Starting in the early 19th c., however, it became increasingly common to pluralize ‘humanity’ and employ it with the definite article, and by the end of the century ‘the humanities’, the form of the term with which we’re familiar, was firmly established as a technical term. It seems that initially, it too designated primarily the study of Greek and Roman antiquity, but starting in the mid-19th c. its semantic range began to expand to include the study of other languages and literature, art and music, and so forth, until by the early 20th c. it had acquired more or less the meaning that predominates today.

Let me now turn to the final phase in the development of the term ‘classics’ to designate the study of Greek and Roman antiquity, which involves the transformation of a field of study into an academic

discipline in the modern sense, with all the trappings of departments at post-secondary educational institutions, professional associations, specialized journals, research institutions, and the rest. That, of course, is a development that encompasses far more than our own discipline, and one that I won't attempt to trace. Suffice it to say it for the most part took place in Germany over the course of the 19th c. and that particular aspects of it, specifically the organization of universities into separate units with distinct academic focuses, began to be adopted in the US in the post-Civil War period. In order to trace this development, one would ideally trace the appearance of academic units with official designations as Departments of Classics or Classical Studies, but I suspect that would not be an easy task.

Fortunately, it's easier to trace other indices of the crystallization of an academic discipline, and these make it clear that in the decades from about 1870 to about 1910 the terms 'classics' and 'classical' became firmly established as designators of the academic discipline focused on ancient Greece and Rome, especially, but not exclusively, in Anglophone countries. I'll mention just a few of these. First, the foundation of learned societies and research institutions: the American School of Classical Studies at Athens was founded in 1881, the Associazione Italiana di Cultura Classica in 1897, the (British) Classical Association in 1903, the Classical Association of the Middle West and South in 1905, the Classical Associations of both South Africa and Ireland in 1908. Second, the establishment of specialized journals: *Classical Review* began publication in 1887, *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* in 1890, *Classical Journal* in 1905, *Classical Philology* in 1906, and *Classical Quarterly* in 1907. Third, the appearance of histories of the discipline: Conrad Bursian, published his *Beiträge zur Geschichte der classischen Studien im Mittelalter* in 1873 and *Geschichte der classischen Philologie in Deutschland* in 1883; in English, John Edwin Sandys published his three-volume *History of Classical Scholarship* in 1903-1908. I find this a particularly interesting index, because works like these helped instantiate the academic discipline of classics by fashioning a history for it.

The picture, however, is more complex than I've suggested. If you were able to resist the bludgeoning force of this barrage of names and dates, you might have noticed some interesting omissions. The fact is that, alongside 'classical', several other terms were used to designate the academic study of Greek and Roman antiquity. One set of terms highlight methodologies, especially 'philology'. The two oldest classical journals in Germany, the homeland of classics as an academic

discipline, are *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie*, established in 1827, and *Philologus*, in 1846. In the US, the American Philological Association was founded in 1869 and the *American Journal of Philology* began publication in 1880; in Britain, the Cambridge Philological Society was founded in 1872. ‘Archaeology’ is of course the analogous term: the Archaeological Institute of America was founded in 1879 and the *American Journal of Archaeology* began publication in 1885. Then there are the straightforward terms ‘Greek studies’ and ‘Roman studies’. In France, the Association des Études Grecques was founded in 1867, although its counterpart, the Société des Études Latines was not established until 1923. Similarly, in Britain, the Hellenic Society was founded in 1879 and the Roman Society in 1910. All four associations began publishing their similarly-named journals shortly after their foundation.

This multiplicity of terms that could be used to designate the academic discipline continued in the years after WWI. A particularly interesting example is the work of the French scholar Jules Marouzeau (1878-1964) establishing an ongoing international bibliography of classical scholarship. The kick-off publication was his two-volume *Dix années de bibliographie classique* (1927-28), but the follow-up annual publication was called, as we all know, *L’Année philologique* (1928-), despite the fact that it was intended from the start to cover scholarship on all aspects of Greek and Roman antiquity. After WWII, however, it seems that ‘classical’ became firmly established as the internationally recognized designation for the academic study of Greek and Roman antiquity. We might regard as a turning point the founding in 1948, under the auspices of UNESCO, of FIEC, Fédération Internationale des associations des études classiques. In the 21st century, ‘classical’ has begun to trump other, earlier designations. We’re all familiar with the name change of the APA to the SCS, but I’ll just briefly mention another similar change: in 2005, the Cambridge Philological Society rebranded its journal, which since 1882 had been called the *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society*, as the *Cambridge Classical Journal*.