



## WHAT DOES THIS PROJECT MEAN BY 'CLASSICS'?

The term 'classics' is these days often used to mean any iconic, archetypal or ideal example of a thing—vintage cars can be 'classics', as can pop songs, or novels or recipes. But in our project we understand the term to refer to the cultural output specifically of ancient Greece and Rome. This is what the term most often meant in the period we are primarily researching (1789-1939), and is what it means in educational contexts today.

### HISTORICAL MEANING

The words *classic*, *classical* and *Classics* all stem from the same Latin term, *classis*, as our word 'class'. When the Romans heard this noun, it contained a resonance that we do not hear when we say *class*: deriving from the same root as the verb *clamare* ('call out'), a *classis* consisted of a group of people 'called out' or 'summoned' together by a trumpet. In Virgil's *Georgics*, the plural neuter noun *classica* actually means 'trumpets' (2.539). A *classis* could be the men in a meeting, or in an army, or the ships in a fleet, or sub-divisions of such groups. The word has always been associated with Servius Tullius, the sixth of the legendary kings of early Rome, who held a census in order to find out, for the purposes of military planning, what assets his people possessed. It is this procedure that explains the ancient association of the term *class* with an audible call to arms.

In Servius' scheme, the men in the top of his six classes -- the men with the most money and property -- were called the *classici*. The Top Men were themselves the 'Classics'. This is why, by the time of a Roman writer in 2nd-century AD, Aulus Gellius, by metaphorical extension the Top Authors could be called 'Classic Authors', *scriptores classici*, to distinguish them from inferior or metaphorically 'proletarian' authors, *scriptores proletarii* (*Attic Nights* 19.8.15). The opposition between 'classics' and 'proletarians' was born!

From the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, the word *classicus* is used by scholars writing in Latin to describe admired authors of antiquity, both Greek and Latin. Melanchthon calls Plutarch a *classicus* writer in 1519. So when a term was needed in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to describe the canonical texts of Greek and Roman antiquity studied by youths privileged enough to receive more than a rudimentary education, it was inevitable that the term *Classics*, the 'top authors', was adopted to describe the subject area—the term is first used with this meaning in 1711.

### WHY WE HAVE CHOSEN THE TERM TO DESCRIBE THE PROJECT?

- It was the term used during the period of our project.
- It is all-embracing. We don't just mean the *written texts* of the ancient Greeks and Romans, but their entire cultures, like the Victorian Charles Kingsley who referred to them jointly as 'classical civilisation'. Ancient philosophy, history and material culture were by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century added to the 'classical curriculum'.
- Using the term reminds us of the historic connection between socio-economic hierarchies ('class') and also the differences between the cultural and imaginative lives of people in different classes. It helps us ask (1) whether 'Classics' has been used to maintain class distinctions, but also (2) whether Classics' elite connotations must remain inevitable or not. These are the questions asked by our project.