

New Ancient History degrees at Southampton

The University of Southampton will once again be welcoming students to specialise in the study of the Classical World in 2016.

Its Classics department was one of those culled in the 1970s, but this did not mean the end of Classicists at Southampton. Brian Sparkes, specialist in Greek art history, transferred to the Department of Archaeology. Roman Archaeology was represented by Simon Keay, with Martin Millett from 1999 to 2001, and then myself from 2001. Whilst Classical Archaeology flourished, so did Ancient History within the History department. The Parkes Centre for Jewish/non-Jewish relations appointed Sarah Pearce, a specialist in Jewish communities in the Hellenistic and early Roman east, and Dan Levene, who works on Jewish and Aramaic magical texts from Late Antiquity. Through the work of academics in both departments, there was a continual stream of undergraduate, masters and doctoral students specialising in the Classical world, but within the wider context of Archaeology and History, and with limited interaction between the two groups.

In the last 5 years, the changing climate of higher education led to an expansion in Classical topics in both departments. Increasing interest in outreach led to the appointment of Helen Spurling to promote the Parkes Centre as part of her lectureship, whilst Dragana Mladenovic joined Archaeology as part of the Portus Project. At the same time, there was a large increase in History students to over 250 single and combined honours undergraduates being admitted each year. This led to a need for more History modules, and to in part satisfy this, I started teaching modules in Roman history, initially at first and second year levels. These were offered as part of the History programme, and proved popular, both with students wanting to specialise in Ancient History, but also with Medievalists and Modernists who wanted a taste of something different. A consultation with the History students revealed that after 20th century history, they most wanted more Ancient History modules.

This suggested the viability of Ancient History as a degree independent of the History degree, and led to the design of a new single honours programme and a suite of combined honours. These draw on both existing modules as options, and new core modules. The majority of existing modules are offered by History and Archaeology, but collaboration between departments in the Faculty of Humanities means that we can draw on a wider range, such as Ancient Greek Philosophy, reception of ancient myth, and the ancients on film. We are also able to offer beginners Greek and Latin courtesy of the Modern Languages department! This use of existing modules provides a reassuring safety net, and removes some of the risk of embarking on a new programme. These modules will still be available to the students within the department offering them, so warding off threats from the central authorities for low module recruitment.

The structure of the programme echoes that of the History programme. There are compulsory modules in semesters 1 and 2 of the first year, providing a grounding in the key events and features of each phase of ancient history, as well as the materials and controversies. In the second year, the compulsory group project enhances transferable skills, with each group required to research a topic, give a presentation on it, and then generate a public outcome, from a museum display to a session in a local primary school. In the third year, all students are required to undertake a double-weighted dissertation. The remainder of the modules are option modules, initially those already on the books, but in time, developing new ones as the student numbers increase. In the first year, these are mainly single modules, in year 2 a combination of single and double modules, and in year 3, the special subject. These are generally two part double modules, based upon the research expertise of the teaching staff. Current examples include Roman Imperialism and the Jews from Sarah Pearce, and my own Being Roman. For many students, these special subjects feed into their dissertations, and allow them to make the transition to researchers in their own right.

In addition to the traditional three year single honours programme, applicants can choose from further combinations. Humanities departments have a range of combined honours degrees, and it is planned that eventually, there will be combined honours Ancient History and Archaeology, English, Film, Modern Languages, Philosophy, and History. However, these are being introduced in two tranches, and in the first year, combinations of Ancient History and History, and Archaeology, and Philosophy, and Modern Languages will be offered. Also in keeping with Faculty policy, all programmes are being offered as a four year degree, with the third year spent abroad with one of our partner institutions. Once at Southampton, students will also be allowed to register for the 'minor' pathways, using their free-electives to study 25% of their degree in another subject, such as a modern language, another humanities subject, or a subject from social sciences or sciences. This is usually only advised for single honours students, and would give a degree of Ancient History with xxx.

It is this flexibility and the range of topics on offer which we hope will appeal to prospective students. Already, we are able to expand our expertise in anticipation of the degree starting. The removal of the government cap on students resulted in a high recruitment in History for the coming academic year (2015-6). A projected intake of c.240 History students was transformed into an actual intake of over 300, and so a number of 2-year fixed term posts have been approved. Whilst some are earmarked for modern history, we have been allowed to advertise for a post in Ancient Greek History, something identified internally and externally as a gap in our current provision, and a further post in Roman History.

As ever, the launch of a new subject area is a risky undertaking, particularly in the current uncertain climate. However, it has been demonstrated that the demand is there from our current students, and hopefully we can persuade prospective students that Ancient History at Southampton has a lot to offer.

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