



The Classical Association  
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F.A.O. Alex Orgee  
Classics Subject Advisor

Dear Alex,

As the Subject Association for Classics, we are writing to you to represent the concerns of numerous Classics departments who have contacted us regarding the GCSE Classical Civilisation examinations undertaken in the summer 2022 series. We have summarised the feedback from teachers below, the majority of which focuses on the Homeric World (J199/21) and Myth & Religion (J199/11) papers:

### **Advance Information Notices**

At the release of the Advance Information Notices in February 2022, we relayed to you the feedback shared with us by teachers, to which you responded. We recognised at the time that you had done all that you could within the policy remit. Following the release of the exam papers, our teachers have once again commented that these notices were more confusing than helpful. As stated by one teacher; *'While it [the advance notice] suggested topic areas for the longer questions, it included a caveat that any topic could be included in the shorter answer questions, thereby meaning the students had to revise everything on the syllabus anyway.'* Additionally, teachers reported that the Myth & Religion paper involved topics that, to their knowledge, had not been included in the Advance Notice Information.

We are aware that at present, Ofqual have yet to make any decisions regarding adaptations to the 2023 exam series. Should they decide to bring England in line with the decisions already made in the other jurisdictions of the UK, we would like to offer our support in formalising these adaptations in whichever capacity you see fit.

### **Questioning**

For both the Myth & Religion and Homeric World papers, there is strong feeling within the teaching community that the obscure, and at times ambiguous questioning did not allow students to



demonstrate their knowledge adequately. Teachers were particularly dismayed with the content of the lower-tariff questions, which seemed to focus on the detail of relatively obscure parts of a content heavy syllabus, limiting the accessibility of the paper to students across an ability range. Following the disruption of the past two years, teachers felt that the papers did not appear to take into consideration that students are very unlikely to have had equal teaching experience during the pandemic. Our teachers have provided specific feedback on the individual papers, that we have collated here:

### **Myth & Religion**

- Several short answer questions required niche knowledge (Q2, Q7) and sources which were very hard to read or interpret (Source N).
- The specification does not appear to state that students must consider Orpheus in terms of heroism (Q20).
- One teacher suggested that the image chosen for Source D required lateral thinking, with perhaps only more able students were able to deduce from the presence of Athena on the vase.
- The 15-mark question on Athena and Mars appeared very challenging for GCSE students (Q25). Additionally, the importance of Mars to the Romans is given only a brief mention in the textbook.

### **Homeric World**

- As with the Myth & Religion paper, several low-tariff questions required obscure knowledge (Q1, Q3b). Indeed, the examiners' report noted that many candidates did not get question 1b correct, which does not seem particularly surprising given the nature of the preceding question. Regarding Q3, teachers expressed their concerns that the information required for this answer is not addressed in the textbook, and thus would rely on a teacher being especially knowledgeable in dating Bronze Age material. Similarly, Source D was thought to be a difficult source to interpret, as the information is limited both in the textbooks, and elsewhere.
- The required answer for Q4b appears to automatically penalise students who could not identify the answer to Q4a, as examiners rejected answers which did not specifically focus on the two types of shield in the source. There also appears to have been a particular interpretation of the question required - responses that the Mycenaeans were warlike were not accepted, as the source shows a hunting scene. More explicit questioning would better guide students to the appropriate answer. As one teacher suggested: *'What does the use of these shields in the situation in the source tell us about the Mycenaeans?'*, would be more appropriate than *'What does the use of these types of shields tell us about the Mycenaeans?'*
- The wording of question 12 also appears unhelpful to students: *'Odysseus took women and riches from Ismarus. Why else would Odysseus have sacked Ismarus?'* The mark scheme credited needing supplies, which would be inferred from taking women and riches.



Furthermore, the mark scheme credited the Cicones as being allies of the Trojans, which is not mentioned by Homer and thus requiring obscure knowledge.

As raised with you in the Classical Civilisation Subject Team meeting on 13th July 2022, we suggest that OCR consider reverting to the types of low-tariff questions used in the legacy qualification. The current specification appears to favour 1–2-mark questions, the answers to which are often reliant on candidates successfully answering the preceding question. We recognise the difficulty exam setters face in appropriate phrasing but feel that the current lack of clarity in the wording of questions not only knocks the confidence of students of all levels, but directly limits accessibility to the paper for lower-ability and SEN students.

### **Assessment and Grading Standards**

At the most recent Teaching Board meeting on 17th September 2022, concerns were expressed over the apparent shift in standards of marking by your examiners. As expressed at that meeting, examiners ought to be bound to the standards set by the board and should not contradict the information that is given to teachers. The centres that have contacted us have also provided specific areas where they felt the marking of these papers was particularly unfair:

- Regarding Q5 of the Homeric World paper, examiners rejected answers which referred to poor medical care. The justification for this stated that this could be true of any period. However, acceptable answers included that weapons used (e.g., spears, bows) were ‘not powerful’, which arguably could also be true of any period. Teachers feel that the examiners had very fixed ideas of what they wanted answers to be, and were unusually stringent when awarding marks, actively penalising students for misunderstanding questions which, as previously mentioned, were felt to be ambiguous. Additionally, several of the answers credited in the mark scheme could not be deduced from Source B - marks were awarded for stating that hunting was done on chariots, or that weapons were used at a distance (suggesting that the hunter would not want to be close to the animal), neither of which are depicted in the source.
- There appears to be some inconsistency in how 8-mark questions are assessed. The Examiners' Report for Myth & Religion states that there should be no introduction or conclusion, and that the questions want candidates to focus on the sources. However, in the Homeric World report, a four-line conclusion is suggested, and it is stated that the source should only be used for one or two brief points. Additionally, the textbook states that ‘it is not necessary to have a conclusion to gain full marks’, which further adds to the confusion.
- Furthermore, there is discrepancy between the grading of the Myth & Religion and Homeric World papers, where the average grade is one band lower on the Homeric World paper. One teacher commented that a candidate at their centre achieved a grade 9 for Myth & Religion, but a grade 5 for Homeric World.



We recognise that unlike previous years, you were unable to check the Examiners' Reports for this exam series, but it is imperative that both teachers and students can have faith in the marking and grading of their papers, particularly when it follows a tumultuous period in education.

While the content of the GCSE course is varied and interesting, examination of that material remains a problem. Exams which focus on obscure details, with unclear questions, and which adopt an inflexible approach to marking, do not enable students to perform confidently. Teachers have expressed their enjoyment of, and confidence in, the Roman City Life paper, which suggests that the paper-setting and marking issue is specific to the two papers we have focussed on in this letter.

As the partnership between the Classical Association's Teaching Board and OCR continues to strengthen, we would welcome the opportunity to support you in reviewing and improving the areas where concerns have been raised and will continue to support the dialogue between you and the Classics teaching community.

Yours sincerely,

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Education Co-ordinator & Chair of CATB

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