

How to read classical texts

How to read and approach classical texts

1. Understand their context: In what time were the texts written and what was the general history of that time? In Classical times, magic was already disconnected from (state) religion. Mystery cults were a big thing, much like fraternities in the last century.
2. Understand the different approach to knowledge: Authors back then often asked questions instead of laying everything out in the open. Also, what fiction and historical writing means to us today doesn't necessarily mean the same in antiquity, so try to approach it with an open mind: Don't take everything for a fact and don't expect the same level of entertainment or structure that you find in more modern literature.
3. Keep in mind that back then magic was for most times strictly forbidden. They had laws against it and punishment wasn't mild (e.g. Apuleius' *Apologia*, a great text on Apuleius' trial against accusations of him being a magician). So authors put information into their texts in different ways and magical aspects of writing were often hidden in stories, or buried within philosophy texts:
 - Use of fiction (Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* (more commonly known as *The Golden Ass*) is a good example)
 - Hiding bits of knowledge or information within lots of text that doesn't seem connected or reads like rambling (they are all guilty of that)
 - Hiding under the guise of philosophy, especially Plato
4. Be patient when reading classical texts and if you are new to those, give yourself time to adjust, expect to get bored, confused and fascinated. It's worth it, especially when you read about something that you've only seen in vision before.

Short selected author infos

BC

Hesiod, ca. 750–650 BC, (was writing around the same time as Homer), wrote in ancient Greek, Archaic period in Ancient Greece

Plato, ca. 428–348 BC, wrote in ancient Greek, Classical period in Ancient Greece

Virgil, ca. 70–19 BC, wrote in Latin, most active in the Augustan period in Ancient Rome

AD

Plutarch, ca. 46–120 AD, wrote in ancient Greek, Ancient Greece in the Roman era, Middle-Platonist

Apuleius, ca. 125–170 AD, wrote in Latin, Numidian, Roman era, Middle-Platonist

Plotinus, ca. 205–270 AD, wrote in ancient Greek, lived in Roman Egypt, founder of Neoplatonism

Porphyry, ca. 235–305 AD, from Tyre, Lebanon, Roman era pupil of Plotinus, Neoplatonist

Iamblichus, ca. 245–325 AD, Syrian, Roman era, pupil of Porphyry, Neoplatonist

Forms of citations you might find while doing research

When researching Classical texts, authors and their works are sometimes cited in shortened form, e.g. Plutarch's 5th chapter* in his essay on Isis and Osiris will be quoted as "Plut. Is. 5". Title citations are often Latinised and vary, you might find "Plut. de Is." Instead of just "Is.". Plato does his own thing though and is cited with Stephanus numbers (after the editor of a Plato edition from 1578). If an author has only one known work (such as Herodotus' *Histories*, you'll only find the citation of his name, e.g. book 5 in his *Histories* simply would be "Herod. 5".

You can find the full titles through pages like these:

https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liste_der_Abk%C3%BCrzungen_antiker_Autoren_und_Werktitel (although in German, you only have to click on the initial* letter of the author and find the works listed. Since they are usually in Latin or Greek, it won't matter that the site is in German. I find it the most helpful site for this.

How to find proper sources

Classical text editions/websites that can be trusted and that are bilingual:

- **Loeb Classical Library** (Harvard University Press), "LCL", green layout for Greek authors and texts, red layout for Latin authors and texts, always has an English translation next to the original text
- **Sammlung Tusculum** (De Gruyter), blue layout for Greek texts, red layout for Latin texts, German translation next to the original text
- **Perseus digital library**, has Greek and Latin texts (often based on Loeb editions) and translations (also has the LSJ ancient Greek dictionary embedded and shows the grammatical form of every word, so it's great for learning the languages): <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>
- **Penelope-LacusCurtius** (University Chicago) is another site for great translations: <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/home.html>
- **archive.org**, has many older Loeb editions as full text scans