

## Material Culture and the Greek and Latin Classroom

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### ABSTRACT

Responding to the new *Standards for Classical Language Learning*, this article emphasizes the importance of material culture to the study of Greek and Latin language and literature at every level, both K-12 and college. Using inscriptions on Greek vases and Roman coins as well as maps and house plans as examples, it demonstrates ways to insert material culture into the Greek and Latin classroom that will enhance a student's knowledge of the language. It also shows how the use of material culture will help a class meet not only the Cultures goal of the new standards, but also the Connections, Comparisons, and Communication goals.

### KEYWORDS

Roman coins, Material culture, Inscriptions, Maps, House plans, Standards, Greek vases

A student starting French or Spanish can hold a short conversation in the target language after just one week of class. What can we offer students beginning their journey in ancient Greek or Latin? This article will demonstrate ways to insert material culture into high school and college Greek and Latin classrooms through inscriptions on Greek vases and Roman coins and through the exploration of maps and plans. By adding material culture to the pursuit of Greek and Latin as soon as possible in the elementary and intermediate classrooms, instructors can offer additional practice in the language, present an immediate and meaningful application for the hours of memorization faced by the beginning student, and fulfill multiple goals required by the new *Standards for Classical Language Learning*.

The *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages*, published in 2015, and its application to Latin and ancient Greek, the revised *Standards for Classical Language Learning*, embrace knowing and understanding the culture behind a language as part of the five Cs of learning languages – Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities. These standards recognize both that language offers a gateway into another culture and that a true understanding of another

language cannot be attained without an appreciation of the language's cultural context. According to the Cultures goal of the [\*Standards for Classical Language Learning\*](#), "Learners use Latin or Greek to investigate, explain, and reflect on the relationship between the products and perspectives of the cultures studied." The tangible material remains of the Greek and Roman worlds (that is, the "products") and the practices associated with those remains therefore form an essential background to the study of Greek and Latin, and every Greek and Latin classroom at every level should incorporate references to material culture.

Many, if not most, K-12 faculty routinely do incorporate such references, often through extensive units on Roman art and architecture. College faculty, however, sometimes point out that there are entire courses on college campuses devoted to Greek and Roman art and archaeology and question why they should expend valuable time meant for languages on such topics. Not every Greek or Latin student, however, takes art or archaeology courses; even for those who do, references to material culture as support and explanation for literary texts serve both to enhance the text and to reinforce the many interconnections within a liberal arts curriculum. In addition, the typical college classroom contains future K-12 teachers, and it is important for college faculty to guide them through how material culture could be used in their own potential classrooms. Finally, including material culture in the Greek and Latin classroom will help the language student not only with the language itself, but also with issues of time, place, and social rank in antiquity.



**Fig. 1. Detail of Attic black-figure neck-amphora; scene of Dionysus holding a kantharos facing two maenads holding a hare, by the Amasis Painter, c.540**

BCE; from Vulci, now in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Médailles 222. [Photograph by Marie-Lan Nguyen, Wikimedia Commons.](#)



**Fig. 2. Detail of handle on the François Vase, Attic black-figure volute-krater; scene of Ajax carrying body of Achilles, by Kleitias (potter: Ergotimos), c.570 BCE; from Chiusi, now in Florence, Museo Archeologico 4209. [Photograph from Wikimedia Commons.](#)**

*Greek vases* – The opportunity to transliterate names on a 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE vase gives students right at the start of elementary Greek an immediate, solid connection to the past as well as significant practice with the alphabet. The simplest exercise would be to assign the students relatively isolated images of well-known gods and heroes, as in Figs. 1 and 2. Having individuals or small groups work out that the label above the male figure on the left of the scene in Fig. 1 identifies him as the god Dionysus or that the inscriptions next to the men in Fig. 2 identify them as Achilles and Ajax would encourage the students with the crucial feeling that they are mastering this new alphabet early on.

This exercise also reminds students that language and writing change over time, so the inscriptions may be retrograde (written right to left instead of left to right), as with the label for Achilles in Fig. 2. Likewise, inscriptions may also use a slightly different form of the Greek alphabet (the “old Attic alphabet”) and somewhat different spellings than they see in their textbooks. Boardman (202) includes a chart of various letter forms found on 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE Attic vases. Especially notable differences in spelling include the use of epsilon and omicron in place of eta

and omega and the use of the letter [heta](#) (H) for an initial h-sound. See, for example, the spelling of Hermes on the Euphronios krater in Fig. 3, below.



**Fig. 3. Detail of Attic red-figure calyx-krater; scene of Hermes (standing, center) watching Hypnos and Thanatos carry Sarpedon from the field of battle at Troy, by Euphronios (potter: Euxitheos), c.515 BCE; formerly in New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, now in Cerveteri, Museo Nazionale Cerite. [Photograph by Jaime Ardiles-Arce, Wikimedia Commons.](#)**

In addition, Greek vases offer practice and reinforcement for vocabulary and grammar. Fig. 3 shows Hermes attending the removal of Sarpedon's body from the battlefield of Troy by Hypnos and Thanatos. Each figure is labelled, so the student is able to gain visual reinforcement of the vocabulary for the twin concepts of *hypnos* and *thanatos*, sleep and death. The vase represented in Fig. 3 also presents lessons in verbs and adjectival agreement. It is a *kalos* vase – that is, it is inscribed with a youth's name and the information that he is *kalos*, or "handsome." *Leagros kalos*, or "Leagros [is] handsome," is written retrograde between Hypnos and Hermes, reminding the student that the verb "to be" may be left out of a Greek sentence and that the subject and predicate adjective of a linking verb must agree in case, number, and gender. The signatures of the vase's potter (*Euchsitheos epoiesen*, or "Euxitheos made," to the left of Hypnos) and painter (*Euphronios egraphsen*, or "Euphronios painted," above the head of Thanatos) introduce two more verbs, both in the third person singular aorist.



**Fig. 4. Detail of Attic black-figure amphora; scene of Achilles and Ajax playing a game, by Exekias, c.530 BCE; from Vulci, now in Vatican, Museo Gregoriano Etrusco 16757. [Photograph by Jakob Bådagård, Wikimedia Commons.](#)**

Fig. 4 illustrates the famous Attic black-figure amphora by Exekias that depicts Achilles and Ajax playing a game during a lull in the fighting at Troy. Exekias included the names of the heroes in the genitive and even what they were saying during the game (Achilles is announcing that he has a four and Ajax that he has a three), as well as a *kalos* inscription and his signature. (See Clark, Elston, and Hart 100 and 143 for more on *kalos* inscriptions and signatures.) Vases such as the ones represented by Figs. 3 and 4 could be saved for later lessons – for the genitive, numbers, adjectives, and verbs – or they could be used at the start for practice in transliteration and then reintroduced when relevant grammar comes up, each time reinforcing and building upon earlier lessons.

Many elementary textbooks include simplified stories involving Greek gods and heroes, and it might be possible to return to some of these same vases when those stories turn up. Moreover, there is potential for again reintroducing these vases, by now old friends, into the intermediate or advanced classroom. Noting the range of the different vase shapes used at a symposium, for example, could help set the scene while reading Plato. (Steiner 237-39 and Oakley 18-19, for symposium shapes.) The images of various gods, heroes, and events might also be recalled while reading Homer. It should be mentioned, however, that the vase in Fig. 4 holds something of an object lesson – pun intended – for budding Hellenists, since it reveals a scene included neither in Homer nor in any surviving written tradition. Where did Exekias come up with the idea for an image of Ajax and Achilles playing a game while armed and ready for battle in an instant? Perhaps it is from an oral or written tradition that is otherwise lost.

Finally, it is worth noting that the use of Greek vase painting in a Greek language class responds to the Connections goal of the new [Standards for Classical Language Learning](#), as well as to the Cultures (products, practices, and perspectives) goal. The Connections goal requires that “Learners build, reinforce, and expand their knowledge of other disciplines” – in this case, art history and literature – “while using Latin or Greek to develop critical thinking and to solve problems creatively.”

*Practical matters* – Photographs of Greek vases are most often taken at an angle that highlights the characters depicted rather than the inscriptions. In addition, the inscriptions themselves are quite small in proportion to the overall scene. Thanks to the proliferation of on-line images, however, just a little patience will allow the instructor to locate appropriate illustrations for this exercise; and if the student is given computer access to an image, he or she should easily be able to enlarge the inscription portion for better identification of its letters. Good starting points for finding images of vases are basic introductory books on Greek art; more specialized books, such as Boardman, mentioned above; and the on-line [Beazley Archive](#). After finding some likely vases for the exercise, it is then easy enough to search on-line using specific museums, artists’ names, and mythological characters as key words in order to find good views of those particular vases.



**Fig. 5. AE sestertius of Nero, struck in Lugdunum, 64-68 CE; obv.: NERO CLAVD CAESAR AVG GER P M TR P IMP P P head of Nero, laureate, left; rev.: PORT AVG S C harbor at Ostia with ships, lighthouse topped by statue of Neptune above, dolphin and personification of Tiber reclining left below. [Roman Imperial Coins I \(2<sup>nd</sup> ed.\) Nero 441.](#)**

*Roman coins* – What, then, can we give to the beginning Latinist? The texts and images on Roman imperial coins can be used to provide both a boost to vocabulary and that all-important connection to the past. Fig. 5 presents a sestertius of Nero, struck in Lugdunum (modern Lyon) between 64 and 68 CE, depicting Nero himself on the obverse and the new port at Ostia (Portus) on the reverse. Students should be able to make out the name “NERO CLAUD” for Nero Claudius, and the titles or abbreviations of the titles “CAESAR AVG GER” for Caesar, Augustus, and Germanicus; “P M” for Pontifex Maximus; “TR P” for Tribunicia Potestas, or the power of the tribuneship; “IMP” for Imperator; and “P P” for Pater Patriae, thus expanding and improving their vocabulary as well as giving them a better idea of the role of an emperor.

Armed with the following list of the titles commonly found on coins from the principate, students should be ready to tackle almost any obverse inscription. The titles may be abbreviated in a number of ways, utilizing just one or two syllables, or even just the initial or initials of the title. The most common of the abbreviations are included in parentheses. The titles should also make it clear to the students that Octavian Augustus managed to avoid the fate of his great-uncle and adoptive father, Julius Caesar, by avoiding the title of king while taking on an unusual number of Republican titles and powers that together gave him exceptional authority over the government, the military, and the state religion.

- AVGVSTVS (AVG, etc.) – a special name granted to Octavian in 27 BCE in recognition of his special authority and taken as a title by every subsequent emperor
- CAESAR (CAES, etc.) – a name Octavian inherited as the adopted son of Julius Caesar, and again taken as a title by every subsequent emperor; sometimes also used as a title for the heir/s to the throne
- CENSOR (CENS) – an emperor sometimes took this title when he held a census; Domitian took the title for life (CENSOR PERPETVVS)
- CONSVL (COS) – this title for the two most powerful officials in the Republic, elected annually, was typically taken at least once by an emperor. If he took it more than once, the title may be followed

by a Roman numeral indicating how many times he had held the office at the point when the coin was struck.

- IMPERATOR (IMP, etc.) – the title for a victorious general in the Republic, if he was so hailed by his troops, soon came to be associated only with the emperor, or a privileged member of the imperial family
- PATER PATRIAE (P P) – a title, “Father of his Country,” given to Octavian Augustus in 2 BCE and taken by subsequent emperors
- PONTIFEX MAXIMVS (P M, etc.) – the title for the chief priest of the state religion, taken by Octavian Augustus in 12 BCE and by subsequent emperors
- TRIBVNICIA POTESTAS or TRIBVNICIA POTESTATE (TR P, etc.) – Since Octavian Augustus was a patrician, he could not be a Tribune of the People. He side-stepped that difficulty by taking on the power of a tribune. Subsequent emperors did the same, regardless of their birth. This title may be followed by a Roman numeral indicating how many times it had been annually renewed and can thus serve to determine the year the coin was struck.





**Fig. 6. AE sestertius of Vespasian, struck in Rome, 71 CE; obv.: IMP CAESAR VESPASIANVS AVG P M T P P P COS III head of Vespasian, laureate, right; rev.: LIBERTAS PVBLICA S C Libertas standing left holding pileus and rod. [Roman Imperial Coins II.1 \(2<sup>nd</sup> ed.\) Vespasian 82.](#)**



**Fig. 7. AE dupondius of Vespasian depicting son Titus, struck in Rome, 73 CE; obv.: T CAES IMP PON TR P COS II CENS head of Titus, radiate, right; rev.: FELICITAS PVBLICA S C Felicitas standing left holding caduceus and cornucopia. [Roman Imperial Coins II \(2<sup>nd</sup> ed.\) Vespasian 614.](#)**



Fig. 8. AE as of Vespasian, struck in Lugdunum, 71 CE; obv.: IMP CAES VESPASIAN AVG COS III head of Vespasian, laureate, right; rev.: FIDES PVBLICA S C Fides standing left holding patera and cornucopia. [Roman Imperial Coins II \(2<sup>nd</sup> ed.\) Vespasian 1164.](#)





**Fig. 9. AE sestertertius of Vespasian, struck in Rome, 71 CE; obv.: IMP CAES VESPASIAN AVG PM TR P P P COS III head of Vespasian, laureate, left; rev.: FIDES EXERCITVVM S C hands clasped before aquila on prow. [Roman Imperial Coins II \(2<sup>nd</sup> ed.\) Vespasian 156.](#)**

Words that typically appear as vocabulary in elementary Latin textbooks are both inscribed and visually realized on Roman coins. Students may find it easier to remember that *libertas*, *felicitas*, and *fides* are feminine once they have seen coin images with female personifications of public liberty, public happiness, and public faith (Figs.6-8). They may also find it easier to remember the definitions of the words once they can visualize Liberty with the cap that a slave wore upon manumission, Happiness with a caduceus and cornucopia representing commerce and prosperity, and Faith with a patera used for liquid libations. Vespasian was certainly trying to send a message to the Roman people about his reign and the foundation of his new dynasty after the death of Nero and the Year of Four Emperors. He did not neglect the military either, as the coin represented in Fig. 9 demonstrates. Its inscription, FIDES EXERCITVVM, referring to the faith and confidence of the army, expands vocabulary practice by including not only a fifth declension nominative singular, *fides*, but also a fourth declension genitive plural, *exercituum*. Many other useful personifications appear on the coins of the principate, including *Aeternitas*, *Pax*, and *Virtus*, to name just a few.

While discussing the vase by Exekias that depicts Achilles and Ajax playing a game (Fig. 4), I mentioned that it holds an object lesson on the dangers of relying exclusively on surviving literature for the preservation of Greek legend. The great English poet Alexander Pope (1688-1744) was surely referring to the sestertertius of Nero represented in Fig. 5 when he pointed out another object lesson – that

individual structures and sculptures disappear, but their representations on coins mean that we can use coins to reconstruct the past.

From Pope's [\*Moral Essays, Epistle V. To Mr. Addison, Occasioned by His Dialogues on Medals\*](#)

*. . . Ambition sigh'd: she found it vain to trust  
The faithless column and the crumbling bust;  
Hugemoles, whose shadow stretch'd from shore to shore,  
Their ruins perish'd, and their place no more!  
Convinced, she now contracts her vast design,  
And all her triumphs shrink into a coin.*

The personification of ambition by Pope is especially noteworthy, since it connects to the many personifications employed by the Romans and reminds students that we really do the same sort of thing today with our personifications of Lady Liberty holding a torch, blind-folded Justice wielding scales and a sword, and so on. The subfields in Classics known as “classical tradition” and “classical reception” fall under the Comparisons goal of the new [\*Standards of Classical Language Learning\*](#), which requires that “Learners use Classical languages to investigate, explain, and reflect on the concept of culture through comparisons of the cultures studied and their own.” Roman coins, such as those bearing personifications, can be used to evoke discussions of our own use of images and in that way can be used to meet the Comparisons goal of the new standards, as well as the Cultures goal.

*Practical matters* – A good starting point for finding images of coins is the web site of the [American Numismatic Society](#) and its list of [on-line resources](#), including the [Online Coins of the Roman Empire](#). Excellent images are also readily available on the web sites of coin dealers, but these should be used with care. Coins are small, easy to retrieve via illicit digging, and easy to transport illegally to other countries for sale. Even reputable coin dealers sometimes acquire and sell coins with an uncertain provenance, a practice those devoted to the ancient world should discourage.



Fig. 10. Map of Gaul in the time of Julius Caesar. [Source: Feitscherg, Wikimedia Commons.](#)

*Maps and plans* – Exploring the Greek and Roman worlds through the use of maps and plans provides additional aspects of material culture that can readily be integrated into an intermediate classroom. Although map work might not at first seem to be part of material culture, it should be kept in mind that archaeologists are always concerned with the place as well as the period for the use of an artifact. Here, I am going to focus on Caesar, a typical choice for the third or fourth year of Latin in high school and the third semester in college, but this exercise could be used with many other authors, both Latin and Greek, including, for example, with Xenophon and his route in the *Anabasis* through Asia Minor and Mesopotamia.

It is important for students to know the location as well as the date of the events that they are studying. Further, they should understand how ancient geography relates to modern geography. To drive home this understanding of place, each student could take a turn at a map and point out – in Latin – the locations and

boundaries for the various parts of Gaul, including the area from which the Helvetians were migrating (e.g., see the [video media file](#) of the opening of Caesar's *Bellum Gallicum* 1.1, read by Christopher Francese, illustrating the three parts of Gaul). The presentation could be a set piece that the student prepared before class, or it could be a matter of calling upon students to listen to questions in Latin and then to state the answers in Latin while pointing to the relevant area. (“*Ubi est . . . ? Quid appellatur hodie?*”) Students may even be organized into teams, since competition, and the very human desire to do well in front of peers, would keep the class motivated. In presenting information about boundaries, geographic features, the various types of Gauls, and those frightful Germans, the student should model his or her statements on what Caesar himself wrote in the first section of his *Gallic Wars*, so that an understanding of the Latin is integrated with an understanding of the geography. Certainly such an exercise in presentational speaking enhances a student's ability to pronounce Latin correctly, something to be desired. Students sometimes choose to learn Latin just because they think that they will not have to speak it. As I point out to my own students, however, if they do not master a consistent pronunciation system, then they cannot expect to retain a word in the mind's ear even long enough to move from an answer in a dictionary back to the text they are trying to translate. In addition, such presentations respond to the Communication goal, as well as to the Cultures goal, of the new [Standards for Classical Language Learning](#). The Communication goal requires that “Learners present information, concepts, and ideas” via either presentational writing or – as in this exercise – presentational speaking.

A similar exercise might be held for the ancient Greek or Roman house – a presentation in Greek or Latin naming rooms and their functions and even describing furniture and decorations (e.g., see Magister Craft's video, [Domus Romana](#)). House plans are very important to many commonly read ancient texts. Knowing, for example, how a house in fifth century BCE Athens was laid out, with the men's dining room separate from the women's quarters, helps reveal the culture that produced Plato's *Symposium*. The references to various rooms in Trimalchio's house in Petronius' *Satyricon* also come to mind, as do the letters of Pliny the Younger describing in one instance his villa at Laurentum and in another the key areas of his residence at Misenum during the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius (2.17, 6.20). Understanding the role that open courtyards played in Roman architecture would certainly help a student appreciate Vergil's description of Priam's palace during the fall of Troy. Considerations of who—that is, what social class, or classes—actually lived in the

type of house described are important to bring up. After all, not everyone was rich enough to own an atrium-style house, or was a slave serving those who were rich enough. Likewise, considerations of time should be mentioned. Practices developed and changed over the centuries, and advances in building materials, such as concrete, led to the development of apartment houses in Rome. Students wrongly tend to think of Rome as not so much eternal as unchanging. Getting periods right will help students fix in place a timeline of literature and understand better what is found in that literature.

The new [Standards for Classical Language Learning](#) offer instructors new challenges, including those of integrating cultural products and concerns into Greek and Latin classrooms. By using inscriptions on Greek vases and Roman coins, however, it is possible not only to excite students during their first steps in a new language, but also to help them build vocabulary and practice grammatical forms. By requiring oral presentations involving maps and plans related to the text under consideration, the instructor offers both exercises in pronunciation and contextual awareness. Finally, including material culture in the Greek and Latin classroom gives a class multiple opportunities to meet not only the Cultures goal of the new standards, but also the Connections, Comparisons, and Communication goals.

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