

Now that you are winding up for a new semester, and may still be reeling from the last one, I thought I would cheer you up by telling you something of your ancient counterpart. By the end of this you may be thanking your lucky stars that you weren't born then! Let's see what it would have been like for you if you'd been the scion of a well-to-do Roman family about the end of the first century A.D. Let's say too that you are fifteen years old.

Get up in the morning before dawn. Grab a small piece of dry bread and a piece of cheese for breakfast and get ready to go. You will need your books (i.e. your papyrus rolls which your father, being well off, has purchased for you), your tabellae or writing-boards (covered in wax and etched upon with your stilus) and your capsa or satchel for holding everything. Of course, being a pampered rich type you have a slave to carry this for you - your capsarius. You also have a slave who escorts you to and from school, your paedagogus (whence 'pedagogy' in English); in addition to looking out for your physical protection from kidnappers or thieves, this slave might be educated and would be trusted by your father with keeping your general behaviour up to the mark. In the school itself he would keep an eye on your progress.

At this point there might be a distinction between boys and girls; although girls often received a good education, they were not sent out for it so often as the boys, and were more commonly educated in the home by a private tutor or their mother. By age fifteen many of them were married and had new worries; so let us carry on the day with a fifteen-year-old male, who is now reaching an exalted level of post-secondary education. His chief study is rhetoric, the art of public speaking. This is a crucial skill if you're going to have a public career since it's the only effective form of mass communication. To plead your case in the Senate, in the law courts and in the assemblies (comitia) requires persuasive talents or your political career will be very short-lived. In addition the ability to analyse any problem, to articulate your thoughts and communicate them with others was regarded generally as the true mark of the educated person (and is still so regarded).

As you proceed to your school near the Forum you pass others where primary and secondary education is being taught. Well do you remember those days. The cry of an eight-year-old boy in the primary school brings back painful memories of your own magister's cane, which he used quite liberally to bring home the basic lessons of reading, writing and arithmetic. As you pass the secondary "school" (which might be only a single room separated from the street by a curtain) you hear the monotonous drone of the morning's recitation.

Today they're doing one of Horace's greatest hits - exegi monumentum aere perennius, Odes 3.30. There might be a Greek recitation next, say from Homer, though your grandfather says they don't do half the Greek they did in his day. Well do you know what came next: the praelectio or reading of the day's new text by the master (the grammaticus) - another passage from Horace, perhaps, or Terence or Virgil. After his performance the grammaticus would get the pupils to "construe"; they'd answer questions about each line's grammar (how many nouns ? how many verbs ?) and metre (what's the rhythm ? how many feet ? where are the breaks ?). The master would then explain the finer points -

the stylistic devices, the rare words, the mythological characters, the morally edifying qualities of the selection. The students would all write the passage out and read it aloud.

Three years you spent doing this; when you reached fourteen you left it behind with some relief. Of course in serious moments you have to admit that you really learned a lot of literature and history. However, that's behind you now. You're getting along quite well in your rhetorical studies. Last year was a bit of a bore; most of your time was spent in elementary exercises like paraphrasing Aesop's fables or putting the same sentence together in half a dozen different ways. This year you're getting into the actual arguing and composition: you have to show that Ajax was a better person than Achilles, or make up Cato's suicide speech, or convince your fellows that it's really better not to marry. You've been reading Sallust and Cicero and soon you'll be getting into the top-flight stuff: the declamations. These are full-fledged public speeches, carefully judged for content, style and delivery. First you will learn the art of the suasoria, in which you pretended to be a statesman advising some famous person of legend or history what to do; then the controversia, in which the master (called the "rhetor") makes up some fictitious law and requires you to prosecute or defend a case under it. The purpose is to prepare you for actual political life; but it isn't here that you will learn real law, only the technique of advocacy. To learn the law of Rome you must tag along at the heels of your father or some friend of his as he goes about his daily business. By means of this so-called "apprenticeship of the forum" (tirocinium fori) you learn the law by seeing it in action. You will begin this process next year when you don the toga virilis, the mark of manhood. After that most of your time will be spent in the Forum; there'll be some time left for more rhetoric on the side, but not a lot. Some of your friends whose fathers think it's important will be going off in a couple of years to study philosophy in Athens, but your father thinks the Forum is the best place for seventeen-year-olds before they go off to do military service.

But all that's a way off yet. For now there's work to do. How long to the next holiday? Let's see, next market-day (Nundinae) is still a few days off; we never have school on those days, you can't hear yourself think for all the noise in the Forum. There's the odd festival day here and there but nothing substantial until the Quinquatrus for Minerva (19-23 March). Of course we've just had a good holiday for the Saturnalia (17-23 December). But I can hardly wait for summer: there's a good break (1 July - 15 October).

At this point I'll break the reverie and bring you back to modern times. I'm sure you've noted with envy the length of the summer holidays. Is there anything else you would care to swap? Maybe not; perhaps it all seems very tedious to you. But it wasn't all drudgery. Good teachers could make the great literary heritage of Greece and Rome come alive and produce a humane and cultivated person. Unfortunately such teachers were rare, and I doubt many of us would be happy in a Roman school. No films, no projects, no field trips, little variety. But here's something all of us will envy the Romans for: they didn't have final exams, either.