

I'm sure everyone can answer that question quite easily: archaeology and literature. However, a more detailed look at these two great sources of evidence is useful to remind us how much effort is needed to add even a few pieces to the puzzle of our picture of the past.

First let's look at archaeology. Archaeologists work on sites (towns, camps, cemeteries, harbours, villas and so on) where Greeks and Romans lived and worked, and in doing so, left physical remains behind them. In excavating these sites, which are generally buried under several feet at least of soil and debris, there emerge what we call artifacts (or artefacts — both spellings occur). Artifacts are the bits and pieces, occasionally even entire objects, made by their long-dead owners and lost or left behind in their buildings or communities. These may include coins, pottery or glass (usually broken), tools or weapons, even fabrics or leather, and in some especially favourable sites, papyrus documents. Bones of human beings or animals are also found (not precisely artifacts of course!), but human bones are not as commonly found as we might hope, as bodies were so often cremated.

What difficulties do sites and artifacts offer as sources of evidence? Obviously, archaeologists must be highly trained for many years to acquire the skills for excavating and interpreting their finds. Experts in dating techniques, pollen or bone identification, pottery restoration and the recovery and restoration of such fragile materials as rusted iron or charred wood act as consultants at every "dig", as the excavation at a particular site is often called. Sites which might to you or me look like muddy trenches half filled with water, or banks made of layers of pebbles and gravel, provide a great deal of information — but it must be recorded and then interpreted with painstaking skill, or valuable evidence can be lost entirely and beyond any hope of recovery.

Another difficulty facing the experts is that of interpretation, particularly if the artifact is one which gives us a visual representation of some aspect of the Greco-Roman world. Vase-paintings, mosaics, relief-sculptures show very varied scenes: dinner parties, shops, soldiers, ships, cockfights, religious worship, vegetables, victorious generals. Almost everything you can imagine seems to turn up on some coin or pot, wall or floor. But what these bits of visual evidence (and often these are really "bits": damaged and fragmentary and partial relics) can't tell us about is the mind of their maker. What did he or she intend? Or feel about the subject matter? Were they "message" artists, or interior decorators, or propaganda experts, or cartoonists? There's just no way we can be sure we can guess correctly.

Secondly, there is the written word. We have copies of books by dozens and dozens, hundreds even, of ancient authors. "Copies" is certainly the

Learning about Greece and Rome

by S.B.P. Haag

How do we know what we do (or think we do) about the world of the Greeks and Romans? For most of us, it's a matter of finding an interesting shelf of books in the library and away we go. Such writers as Michael Grant or Peter Green have written many readable, often attractively illustrated books about the ancient world for the general reader. But where do they get their knowledge from? Just how do modern scholars learn about the life and thought of people who lived two millennia ago?

right word. Not one "autograph" manuscript of any well-known piece of classical literature has survived, to my knowledge, that's to say, one produced by the original author. Very few manuscripts are even as old as fifteen hundred years. Almost all our poems of Homer and Vergil, plays of Aristophanes and Plautus, histories of Thucydides and Tacitus have reached us in the form of manuscripts from the Middle Ages or even the Renaissance. We know very well that we owe a huge debt of gratitude to all those anonymous copyists who carefully reproduced and re-reproduced earlier manuscripts. They usually tried hard not to copy inaccurately, but naturally enough, we know they weren't always successful, and nonsense crept in or lines fell out, leaving modern editors the real challenge of emending the texts. Occasionally physical damage has contributed to editors' headaches: worm-holes, fire, torn or stained or missing pages.

Obviously, these texts are in Greek or Latin, two languages it takes many years to learn thoroughly. It takes even longer to learn about the world of the writers, too, as we must do if we are to understand even dimly what they wrote about. Then there's the question of those writers' intentions, just as with the non-verbal artists and artisans. We can never be certain we are recognising their biases, their prejudices, their sarcasm, mockery, or conventional comment. So much of what occupies classicists today is debate over the appropriate interpretation of Greek or Roman literature.

Two very interesting "bridges" between archaeology and literature deserve special attention: papyri and inscriptions. Here too we have our highly-trained experts, the papyrologists and epigraphers. Archaeologists still dig up new finds of papyri, usually in Egypt because the dry desert climate has helped to preserve them. Inscriptions on stone or some other durable surface also still emerge from digs. After the inevitable frustrations of repair, restoration and living with the fact of the often missing pieces, the scholars find that the information they can glean from these fascinating writings adds precise details to the always imperfect reconstruction of the past. The bills of sale, the marriage-contracts, the letters and the legal documents we have recovered from papyri by the hundreds can help us, just because there are so many of them, to form a better idea of how people went about their private and public lives. As for inscriptions, many of them on monuments of various sorts, they provide us with the closest thing that the classicist has to statistical data — at least when the epigrapher has restored and copied and reported on them, or "published" them.

So the next time you take a book on Classical Greece or Imperial Rome off the library shelf, spare a moment to think about how many hours and years of how many scholars' time have gone into giving you a reasonably reliable account of life two thousand years ago and more.