

An Interview with Radd Ehrman, Classical Philologist

As translators, we are familiar with the concept of picking a word apart to grasp its meaning. We refer to glossaries and dictionaries to determine exactly how a word is defined in specific circumstances or fields. In literary translation, we often have to know precisely how a word or phrase was used at the time it was originally written, perhaps hundreds of years ago. To do that we must understand the context in which it was used—a complicated process that falls within the purview of classical philology.

My guest today is Radd Ehrman, a classical philologist and professor of Greek and Latin at Kent State University. He has an MA in classics from the University of Kansas and a PhD in classical philology from the University of Illinois. He has taught a wide range of courses at Kent State in Greek and Latin language and literature, from elementary courses in both languages to graduate courses on Latin authors. In describing his work, Professor Ehrman says that, “very generally speaking, a classical philologist is one who seeks to understand, interpret, and transmit to modern times the language and literature (both literary and non-literary) and their interpretation from Greek and Roman antiquity on the basis of words, grammar, idiom, etc., in the context of the genre and individual author.”

Dr. Ehrman, it’s a pleasure to be talking to you today. To get started, would you please tell us how you came to be a classicist?

What originally led you to the field, which has evidently kept you engaged ever since?

The earliest beginnings were probably prompted by my interest in mythology and reading old works in translation—works such as Homer’s *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. In high school, I took two years of Latin and was fascinated. That was all my school offered at the time, so I subsequently took two years of high school French. I really liked French, but it didn’t have the same appeal for me as Latin. So, when I became a freshman at the University of Kansas I took a



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Latin course and, again, found myself fascinated. I enrolled in Latin classes every semester after that and soon also began studying classical Greek.

It was the exciting nature of virtually everything I read in the classical languages—the war among gods, the creation of the universe, the transformations, the humor, the pathos, the attempt to understand humanity’s place in the universe—that kept me wanting to pursue classical philology even further. I was also taken by the very power of words and idioms found in ancient authors. All of these, I came to realize, can speak to modern audiences about a view of the world that is still important today. Classical antiquity in all its aspects, and not least its languages and literatures, has had such a profound influence in so many different ways on subsequent cultures and understandings of the nature of the world. In addition, I found myself drawn particularly to ancient comedy, not only because the surviving plays are so phenomenally funny, but because in the ancient texts of Aristophanes and Plautus I discovered the sheer power of words.

What was the subject of your doctoral thesis?

My doctoral dissertation was entitled *Lucilius and the Cross-Currents of Literary Thought in the Time of Scipio Aemilianus*. In it I examined aspects of the burgeoning Latin literature and the influence of the philhellenic movement in Rome during the third and second centuries BCE, which was supported by powerful individuals, such as Scipio Aemilianus,

and publicly opposed by others, including Cato the Elder. I discussed what early Latin authors, such as the satirist Lucilius and the comic poet Terentius, considered to be the nature of literature, and the relationship of early Latin literature to Greek and across Latin genres.

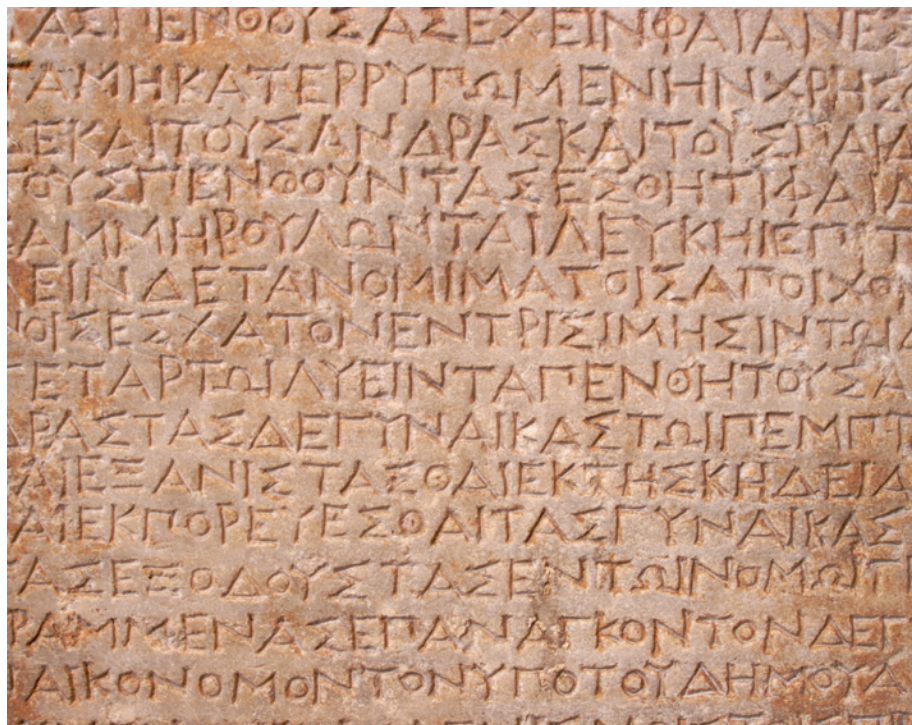
Have you ever worked as a translator, or done translations as part of your philological work?

I’ve worked as a literary translator, which in my field incorporates many aspects of philology. My published translations have been of a medieval Latin author, Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th-century Benedictine nun. My colleague, the late Dr. Joseph Baird, and I published the complete corpus of her surviving letters in three volumes with Oxford University Press. I’m currently revising my translation of the last of Hildegard’s three works of mystic visions, *Liber Divinorum Operum* (*The Book of God’s Works*), to include philological, and some historical, commentary.

I’ve also been working on a translation with commentary of the fragments of the *fabulae togatae*—Latin comedies set in Italian towns rather than Greek towns. None of these plays survive intact, but only through quotations from lexicographers, antiquarians, etc. This project calls upon almost all aspects of classical philology to attempt to understand, as far as is reasonably possible, the entire body of work from the surviving parts.

Do you think we’ve defined classical philology well enough? Is there something else we could say that might help a layman gain a better understanding of the field?

I think the definition stated at the beginning of this interview is sufficient. Readers should understand that there are various independent aspects that fall under the umbrella of “classical philology,” such as linguistics, papyrology, paleography, codicology, and textual criticism. There are certainly controversies, such as the applicability of various “theories,” the relationship of philology to hermeneutics, and so on.



Inscription of Classical Greek text on limestone tablet.

Should we make a distinction between philology and classical philology?

From my perspective, the distinction arises from the fact that a classical philologist studies material ranging from the earliest literature of Greece up through the fall of Rome and even into the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. But, just as a modern philologist will do, the classical philologist will also make use of the latest discoveries and theories of recent scholars regarding approaches to literature, including theories such as post-modern, feminist, narratological, and Marxist. In addition, the classical philologist makes use of developing understandings of ancient cultures through related fields, such as archaeology, papyrology, and numismatics.

As regards its etymology, the word philology¹ is derived from the Greek terms meaning a love of learning, literature, and reason. Is that an accurate assessment?

Yes. But as I try to show, philology is not only the love of those things, but also the application.

A philologist is therefore “one to whom the word is dear,” or “a learned lover

of the written word.” Is that how you describe yourself?

Yes, because classical philology deals with the written word. It’s important to remember that classical Greek and Latin were, of course, spoken languages of which only the written word has come down to us.

What are your specific areas of interest? Can you tell us why?

My specific areas of interest are Greek and Latin comedy in its various developments, from Aristophanes through the *fabulae togatae* and also in Medieval Latin. Ancient comedy, much like a situation comedy on television today, is a window into the world. These comedies depend to a large extent on reflecting the circumstances and reactions of ordinary people to everyday events and developing with the audience a sense of recognition of such events and their outcomes. The surviving plays of Aristophanes, Plautus, Menander, and Terence are very funny, and that is appealing to me.

Philology is concerned with the correct interpretation of texts, which you say must be found in the context of the genre and

individual author. Please tell us more about what “context” means here.

What “context” means is that the classical philologist and translator, just as any translator, has to look at the entire picture of the work to be rendered. For example, in the case of ancient comedy, it’s really hard to bring a line that is funny in the original into the target language and get somewhere near the original intent and result. Part of the reason is not only the extreme difficulty of rendering the expressions in a comic drama where a literal rendering will more than likely fall flat, but also because sensibilities of what is humorous, appropriate, or decorous are constantly in flux. Moreover, comic poets are writing for an immediate audience and not for posterity, so a clash of cultures can be an obstacle because that sense of recognition that is so important to comedy can be lacking when presented to a modern audience.

Compare modern reactions to a song by Gilbert and Sullivan, such as *A More Humane Mikado Never Did in Japan Exist*, where allusions that a Victorian audience would have appreciated may well be lost on a modern audience. In addition, Aristophanes, our earliest surviving Greek comic playwright, and Plautus, our earliest surviving Latin author, are both masters of the neologism and word play. They both could stand side by side with Shakespeare and not embarrass themselves. Therefore, the interpretation of the text depends not only on the original interpretation, and setting, of the works, but also on an understanding of the intended audience, historical and social background, and genre. The job of the classical philologist is to understand and impart all these.

You say that a philologist works with both literary and non-literary material. Please give us some examples of the non-literary type and explain why and how they are studied by philologists.

If we define “literary” rather narrowly to mean something along the lines of a work with a narrative structure of some kind, whether fictional or nonfictional, then “non-literary” could include material such as tax documents, graffiti, contracts, and inscriptions. Studying this material is

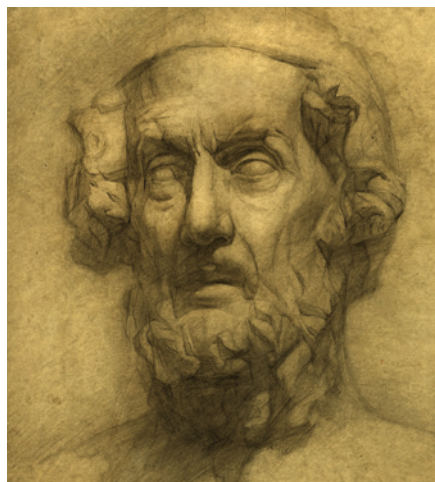
useful for philologists for many reasons. For example, inscriptions can tell us a great deal about historical background and (in the case of tomb inscriptions) family and other personal relationships that might not otherwise be quite so apparent. As another example, although certainly not limited to this, graffiti and papyri can tell us about current events, popular opinions, and also give us a clue into how words were pronounced (since people often spell the way they hear).

In antiquity, a philologist was a commentator on ancient texts, such as *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey*. What exactly would those commentators do, and has that changed much in modern times?

In the case of the commentators on the works of Homer, the issue was to try to discover which lines of the epics were really “written” (better, composed) by Homer and which were spurious; that is, which were later additions to the text. A written text of Homer is not known to have existed until a considerable time after any original was created. (And even “original” is something of a misnomer, since Homer’s poems were presented orally for a long time.) The commentators were attempting, as philologists do today, to establish, as closely as possible, the “original” or “authentic” text. Modern philologists, however, may not agree with their criteria.² Ancient philologists, including those working in the Library at Alexandria, looked at a variety of issues, such as whether a line was of unsuitable dignity for the grandeur of the epics, or whether a line was, in the context, repeated inappropriately from elsewhere. They didn’t necessarily alter the texts in most instances, but they did notate them for future references.

Please tell us about the very early development of philology at the Library of Alexandria in the third century BCE. How did it influence the birth of punctuation and what we now call copyediting?

Aristophanes of Byzantium is credited with establishing some sort of punctuation—including marking the accentuation of words and using sign notations to indicate whether a line of Homer was to be regarded as spurious—



Homer

but we can hardly say that punctuation was standardized. By way of comparison, look at an early edition of, say, a novel by Charles Dickens and note how differently it’s punctuated in comparison with a 21st-century edition. At any rate, we can say that people like Aristophanes of Byzantium gave punctuation a start. Others also contributed to the field, so the development and application of punctuation has a very long history.

I might point out that both Greek and Latin can often have a sort of “imbedded” punctuation, so to speak. For instance, in Latin a question can be indicated by the use of the enclitic *-ne* attached to the first word of a sentence. So, *videt vir canem* is a statement, “The man sees the dog”; whereas *videtne vir canem* asks “Does the man see the dog?”

Philology, as a discipline, has meant different things at different times for over two thousand years. Can you discuss the different classifications and tell us where classical philology stands today in terms of linguistics and the humanities?

Classical philology is allied with linguistics, in that philology uses linguistics to understand the language component of texts in various aspects. It’s not, however, the same thing as linguistics. To a larger degree, classical philology considers other factors in interpreting texts, such as the contemporary culture and history. Classical philology is foundational to the humanities because it provides access

to texts in both the original (as far as can be determined, as we noted earlier) and in current, idiomatic (and hence intelligible) translations, as well as in their interpretation on a variety of levels. In fact, a recent book by James Turner calls philology “the forgotten origins of the modern humanities.”³

Finally, what of the future? What shape will philological studies take in the years to come?

It’s hard to predict precisely other than to say that philological studies will, in my view and despite a reluctance in several quarters to even use the term “philology,” continue to assess texts, textual variations, lexical matters, and interpretation and their degree of importance. It will also assess the relationship of ancient terms to modern words, phrases and idioms, contemporary settings, and their influence on more recent literature. As new literary theories and practices develop and older ones are perhaps discounted or not appreciated as much as they once were, classical philology will take note of new ways to understand text both in the original and in the interpretation.

Thank you for your insights into this field. It’s quite fascinating for those of us with an enduring interest in the origins of humanity and our ability to communicate. ○

NOTES

1. See <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/philology>.
2. See Reynolds, L.D., and N.G. Wilson. *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature*, third edition (Oxford University Press, 1991), 9–15. http://bit.ly/scribes_scholars.
3. Turner, James. *Philology: The Forgotten Origins of the Modern Humanities* (Princeton University Press, 2015), <http://bit.ly/Philology-Turner>.



Tony Beckwith was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, spent his formative years in Montevideo, Uruguay, then set off to see the world. He moved to Texas in 1980 and currently lives in Austin, Texas, where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist. Contact: tony@tonybeckwith.com.