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THE CLASSICAL WORLD

The legacy of the classical world is all around us: democracy, theatre, lyric poetry, the Olympics and a fair bit of philosophy and architecture have their roots in ancient Greece. But on a smaller level, too, we inhabit a world created by our classical forebears. Take the language we use, such as the Latin phrases still in common use: *carpe diem* ('seize the day', from the poet Horace) or *in vino veritas* ('in wine there is truth', from Pliny the Elder). In England, most people carry a piece of *The Aeneid* about with them every day: the line *decus et tutamen* ('an ornament and a safeguard'), taken from Virgil's poem, is inscribed around the edges of pound coins. American money, too, bears a Latin phrase: *E pluribus unum* ('out of the many, one') dates back to another text that has been attributed to Virgil. (Pleasingly, it's a pesto recipe.)

This is all the more impressive since many works of classical literature, philosophy, science and mathematics haven't survived. Just imagine if some of the classical works that didn't make it into

the modern age were still with us. Think what riches we would possess if we had all one hundred or so of Sophocles' plays, rather than the mere seven that have been preserved. Nobody can study Aristotle's theory of comedy, the second part of his book the *Poetics*, on a university literature course, for the simple reason that no copy of the work has survived.

Given that books are the bread and butter of the book you now hold, it seems fitting to begin with the ancient world, since it was there that the book itself was effectively invented. The oldest book comprising multiple pages (that is, not simply a big scroll) is often said to be the Etruscan Gold Book, which was produced around 2,500 years ago. It comprises six large sheets of 24-carat gold which have been bound together with rings, thus forming a unified object that might be labelled a 'book'. It was only discovered in the mid-twentieth century; unfortunately, as it was written in the Etruscan language, which we know very little about, deciphering it proved tricky, to say the least. To this day, we have no idea what it says.
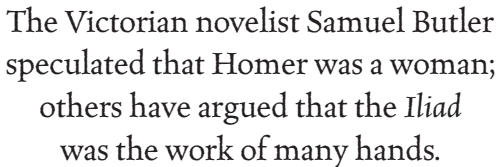
Fortunately, there are many works of poetry, drama, fiction, science and philosophy that we *can* decipher and read. So, rather than scratching our heads over the impenetrable oddities of Etruscan script, let's have a look at some of those.

✧ Homer's Epic ✧

We know Homer for two epic poems: the *Iliad*, about the Trojan War, and the *Odyssey*, about what Odysseus did on his way home to Ithaca. The *Iliad* is the first great work of Western literature, probably composed in around the eighth century

BCE. It recounts the ten-year Trojan War between Troy and a number of Greek states, with a particular focus on the final moments of the conflict. It features everything from fearsome Amazons (warrior women whom Homer calls 'antianeirai', which has been translated as 'equals of men') to conquering heroes such as Agamemnon and Achilles. And that's all just things beginning with the letter A.

Who 'Homer' was remains a mystery. We're not even entirely certain when he lived, assuming that he did at all. The precise nature of the composition of the *Iliad* also remains something of a mystery: the poem probably started out as part of an oral tradition and was only written down much later, but whether Homer was the blind bard of legend remains unknown – and, after nearly three millennia, unknowable.

> The Victorian novelist Samuel Butler speculated that Homer was a woman; others have argued that the *Iliad* was the work of many hands.

The stories in the *Iliad* have found their way into numerous aspects of our daily lives. The story of the Greeks cunningly entering their enemies' city disguised in a big wooden horse inspired the *Trojan horse* (in computing, a piece of malware that infiltrates your computer by disguising itself as something benign). The character of Hector gave us the verb *to hector*, meaning to harass or bully someone. And if we wish to draw