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## Electronic Antiquity

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## Electronic Antiquity

*Technology is bringing the Classical World to a wider audience than ever before.*

**T**he discipline of Classics is the custodian of the Greek and Roman past, and classicists today stand at the end of a tradition that began with the poets who sang songs of the Trojan War and transmitted their lore, their cultural possession, in the “text” of song. Later, Greek-speaking scholars — who were not all Greeks but may have been Jews, Arabs, Ethiopians or Etruscans — preserved knowledge on papyrus and added to that knowledge through reading, commenting, excerpting and editing the texts in their possession.

As technology changed, classicists changed with it — and helped to change it. The scholars of Alexandria in the third century BCE (Before the Common Era) read from papyrus rolls. The faculty of the library of Pergamum, when there was no papyrus to be found, invented “Papyrus of Pergamum,” made of cured, stretched sheepskin; its name, “papyrus pergamentum,” gives us the word “parchment.”

The classicists of the Roman period gave up the rolled-up book in favor of the “codex,” the form that the ink-and-paper book has taken ever since. In later antiquity, scholars invented and adopted other technologies that we take for granted: putting

spaces between letters, using upper- and lower-case letters, punctuation, page-numbers, alphabetization.

The works of the Greeks and Romans are there for all to see — the temples and buildings, the roads and vases. But the ideas of the Greeks and Romans are accessible only through the texts that survive from antiquity, and the only gateways to those texts are the Greek and Latin languages. For this reason, the discipline of Classics has always required of its students a knowledge of the ancient languages and a dedication to reading Greek and Roman literature in the original language.

**B**ut just as in the first millennium, classicists are always looking for better ways not only to access the texts of their discipline, but also to store, share and analyze them.

In 1972, classicists at the University of California-Irvine began the audacious task of encoding in electronic media all surviving ancient Greek literature. This project, the “Thesaurus Linguae Graecae” or “Treasury of the Greek Language,” was a pioneering effort to bring computer technology to bear on humanist scholarship. Thirty years later,

the texts of the TLG (which began their lives on spools of magnetic tape, moved to CD-ROMs in 1985, and now reside on-line) include virtually all texts from the eighth century BCE to the seventh century CE (Common Era), as well as a majority of Greek texts up to the fall of Constantinople in 1453.

Other projects aimed at digitizing the Classical World followed. Among them is the Perseus Project ([www.perseus.tufts.edu](http://www.perseus.tufts.edu)), which has brought dictionaries, texts in Greek and Latin and in translation, grammatical tools, atlases, and catalogues of vases, coins and sculpture into a state-of-the-art digital library. Another project, Diotima ([www.stoa.org/diotima](http://www.stoa.org/diotima)), is an on-line center for ancient texts and secondary sources having to do with gender in the Greek and Roman world. And there are others.

These projects aim to help classicists pursue their own research, but they also serve to bring the ancient world to a wider audience than ever before. Ten years ago only those with access to a good library could expect to read the speeches that Demosthenes made in the fourth century BCE against Alexander the Great. Only those with access to a college library could

expect to find them in the original Greek, and only those with access to the library of a major research university could hope to find the summaries and notes to those speeches written by the scholar Libanius in the fifth century CE. Today, however, all of these things are available to anyone with interest and Internet access.

Over the past several years, undergraduate students of the Classics at Furman have had the opportunity to contribute to a project that takes advantage of all the potential afforded by the information revolution. In doing so they have assumed their place in a three-thousand-year succession of scholars.

The project is the Suda On Line ([www.stoa.org/sol](http://www.stoa.org/sol)). Its goal is to produce an annotated translation of the Suda, a massive historical encyclopedia of the ancient Mediterranean world that is the product of classical scholars in Constantinople during the 10th century CE.

Each entry in this encyclopedia is based on even earlier works of literature and history, and the work of even earlier scholars. The Suda contains 30,000 headings and accompanying articles, all written in Greek, on topics as diverse as Greek mythology, the comedies of Aristophanes, orthodox Christian theology, Roman emperors, notable heretics of the first millennium CE, botany, law and music.

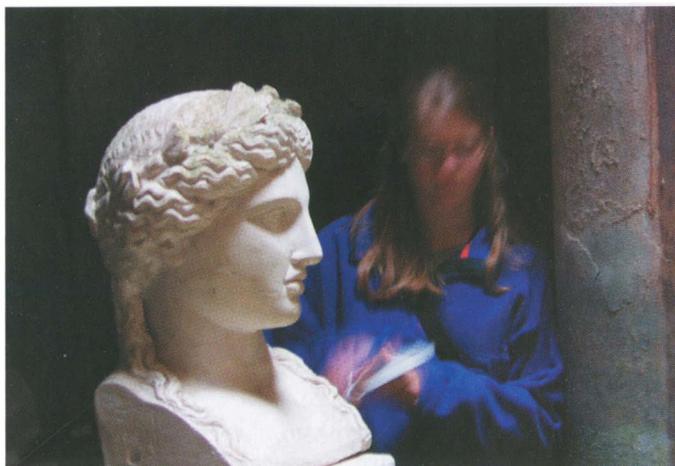
The scholar Paul Lamerle describes the Suda as “a succession of some thousands of items, their extent varying from a single word to a page or more. In it we find the explanation of a difficult form . . . or of a rare word . . . a grammatical point . . . elucidations of words with several meanings . . . as well as notes on people, places and institutions and on concepts (kosmos, nous, physis). It is essentially an historical and literary encyclopedia, but it is also a collection of proverbs and a kind of dictionary of quotations. We might say that it is a ‘dictionary of conversation’ for the use of ‘cultured’ people: in this respect it is a reflection of the culture and of the ideal of culture for an era.”

Not only is the Suda a fascinating text in its own right, but it is a treasure-trove of knowledge otherwise lost. Many of the entries in the encyclopedia include quotations from classical literature, and many of those quotations are from works that do not survive intact today. In the pages of the Suda are fragments of poetic,

dramatic, historical and theological works that would be gone were it not for this encyclopedia.

**T**he Suda itself has been, for all practical purposes, a “lost” text. For one thing, it has never been translated into English, because the task of translating and annotating so many entries on so many diverse topics would be too much for even the most productive scholar. Even the Greek text of the Suda is hard to come by. The standard edition, by Ada Adler, dates from the 19th century and has been out of print for decades, so only scholars with access to the largest libraries could expect to read the Suda in Greek.

This is a shame; the Suda would be of interest to people beyond the field of Classics. Scholars of mythology, linguistics and literature, and historians of law, music, science and medicine, and theology could profit from access to the material of the Suda, especially if it were translated with good notes and cross-references.



In 1998, a group of classicists — Raphael Finkel, William Hutton, Catharine Roth, Patrick Rourke, Ross Scaife and Elizabeth Vandiver — decided to bring technology to bear on the problem of the Suda. First, they persuaded the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae project to grant them permission to take the TLG’s Greek text of the Suda and put it on-line. Then they set up a Web-based infrastructure that allows the task of translating and editing to be shared across the academy and across the world.

Anyone who knows ancient Greek can apply to be a translator for the Suda On Line. New translators are assigned entries to translate and can enter their translations and annotations on a Web-based form. All entered translations are immediately visible to the world but are clearly labeled as “draft.” The editors of the Suda On Line then review the translations, making whatever changes seem necessary, and can raise the status of entries from “draft” to “low” or “high.”

“Low” status indicates that the editors consider the translation to be sound, but make no claims to the completeness of the notes. “High” status indicates that the entry meets the highest standards of scholarship.

The Suda On Line allows interested parties to see scholarship happening before their very eyes. All work is immediately available, with an honest statement of its reliability. Translators can search the Greek text and request particular entries that match their interests or areas of expertise. Today more than 11,000 entries from the Suda are available to the world, in English, with copious notes and cross-references, and more translations are being added all the time.

For three years, Furman students enrolled in upper-level Greek courses have registered as Suda translators and have contributed their work to this international research project. They have translated entries describing the procedures of jury selection in classical Athens, relating strange anecdotes about the emperor Nero, equating the biblical figure of Job with the heroes of Homeric Epic, and discussing how variant forms of certain words change their meaning as their accent changes.

The Greek that these students have translated is difficult to read and understand, both because it is written in dense Byzantine Greek prose and because, in the context of an all-encompassing encyclopedia, there is no way to predict what a given entry might say. With the Suda, literally anything goes. The process of commenting on the entries requires that students uncover the sources for obscure quotations, find related entries in the Suda and earlier lexica, and note the non-standard grammar and spelling that the 10th-century authors often slipped into their writing.

The managing editors of the Suda On Line have welcomed the contributions of these Furman students. Instead of writing a term paper that will be read by their professor and no one else, the students are able to make an immediate, meaningful and entirely original contribution to the body of the world’s knowledge.

In turn, they join the long line of esteemed scholars who serve as custodians of the ancient past — and who strive to make it accessible to current and future generations. ●

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