GCSE

Ancient History

General Certificate of Secondary Education **GCSE J151**

General Certificate of Secondary Education (Short Course) **GCSE J051**

Reports on the Units

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General Certificate of Secondary Education Ancient History (J151)

General Certificate of Secondary Education (Short Course)
Ancient History (J051)

REPORTS ON THE UNITS

Chief Examiner's Report

General Comments

This year marked the first series for the new GCSE Ancient History. It was particularly pleasing for the examiners to see candidates who had clearly enjoyed the study of Ancient History at this level, and, in many cases, clearly gained an excellent understanding of how the subject works. The first two units were the most popular, and the papers seemed to be well received by candidates.

In general, teachers should remind their students of the importance of going back to the original sources, and referring to them whenever possible. They should also encourage them to think carefully about the sources – whether they are reliable and what they really tell us. It is always useful when candidates know something about the authors, but they should not over-use such information at the expense of considering the detail of the sources which they have been given.

On a specific matter in the examination papers, candidates should ensure across all the units that they make full use of the bullet points in the essay questions, and that they critically consider the sources, when required.

Most candidates presented their work clearly and straightforwardly, though there were a few whose handwriting challenged the examiners. Candidates are also advised to leave empty lines after a completed answer, in case they wish to return to add anything extra. If they decide they wish to add an extra paragraph, they should make very clear where the extra material is, so that is obvious to examiners. A very few candidates numbered their questions wrongly or left out question numbers altogether; this imposes an extra burden on examiners, as they then have to make a judgment about where answers begin and end.

The examiners felt that the responses to the paper showed that this new specification had worked well in the classroom and engaged the interest of candidates. Their answers reflected a real engagement with the material and provided evidence of some very good teaching.

A031 The Greeks at war

General comments

The candidates were split fairly evenly between the two options. Most completed the paper in the time allowed, though there were some who answered questions 1 and 2 at greater length than is required, which put them under pressure when they came to the essay, which almost everybody attempted last. The exam was designed so that question 1 provides a straightforward opening, while question 2 focuses on a short passage with three questions across the three assessment objectives. Most candidates responded well to question 1, and dealt well with questions 2(a) and 2(b). Question 2(c) proved a little more challenging, as not all candidates focused on the accuracy of the source, so making it more difficult to award marks under Assessment Objective 3. In all the sub-questions in question 2 it was important to use the details of the passage, something some candidates may need reminding of as they prepare for the examination.

Question 3 proved quite challenging, as both the (a) and (b) questions were marked across the three assessment objectives. Some candidates did not engage as effectively as they could with the passage or with the other sources studied (in (b)), and a number failed to evaluate the source. This makes it more difficult for examiners to award marks under AO3. There were some very well-structured responses to both questions as well, which scored correspondingly high marks. The paper is structured so that there is a distinct progression from question 1 to question 2, then from question 2 to question 3; a candidate who has responded to the questions as set should be well prepared for the final choice of essay.

Candidates may find that they need to cover the same ground as they respond to different questions; the evaluation of the source may take similar forms, though in the best responses it was tied closely to the question set. A number of candidates made rather vague and generalised comments about the value of Plutarch or Herodotus, whereas the best responses organised the material effectively as a response to the particular question.

The questions in Section B allowed the candidates greater freedom in selecting material to argue a case: the more popular essay on Alexander, for example, showed an interesting range of selections from Alexander's battles, and there was some excellent recall of detail and argument. The best answers did not allow the narrative to dominate the discussion in response to the question, but some good answers could have been improved by greater concentration on the demands of the question set. Many candidates were able to demonstrate a good understanding of the material they had studied, and could confidently move from example to example. The very best answers covered the suggestions made in the bullet points, but allowed the structure of their essay to develop fluently and clearly. Answers which used the bullet points to impose a structure could read rather awkwardly; in particular, the discussion of the reliability of the sources could become divorced from the examples chosen by the candidate.

Some candidates allowed too much time for Section A (in both options), and so were pushed for time when writing the essay. A small number attempted both essays. However this clearly restricted what the candidates could achieve, as they spent time on a further essay which they could have devoted to developing what they had to say in one. A very few candidates who had been taught Option B attempted the questions on Option A, perhaps because the first question contained a reference to Darius. The majority of these recognised their error, crossed out the answers completed and moved on to the correct section. This did impose a time penalty. Those teaching the Alexander option may wish to make very clear the structure of the paper in future.

Comments on Individual Questions

Section A

1   Most candidates were able to identify two reasons for the attack, and some identified more; a few identified one in great detail. A small number of candidates were confused by the reference to Darius and so began to answer as if the question were from Section B.

2(a)   Strong candidates were able to select detail from the passage and make a coherent answer. Some answers did not use the passage but gave detail from either before this passage or of the battle itself and its aftermath.

2(b)   Not all candidates kept the focus on the question, but the best answers explained the significance of Miltiades' role.

2(c)   There were some well-focused responses, but not all candidates approached this as a question requiring an AO3 answer on Herodotus as a source. Some also wrote very generally about why Herodotus was (or was not) an accurate source, without using the details from the passage itself, such as the reference to the 'four-yearly festival', which suggests a continuing tradition which Herodotus encountered while he was in Athens.

3(a)   There were some strong answers to this question, but some candidates did not make sufficient use of the passage, and not all phrased their response to cover all three Assessment Objectives (AO3 was least well addressed). Candidates need to both interpret and evaluate evidence under AO3.

3(b)   As in Q. 3(a), there were some very strong responses, but some candidates did not follow the question format: some focused solely on the passage quoted, and some looked only at other reasons for the attack, and there were some responses that said very little about Herodotus at all, thus making the awarding of marks under AO3 difficult.

4   This was a popular question. There were some excellent responses to this question which showed a good understanding of Herodotus' narrative and the Spartan background. A number challenged the assumptions behind the question very effectively. Weaker responses revealed an uncertainty about Greek strategy and tended towards a narrative of the Battle of Thermopylae. Many candidates showed a pleasing grasp of detail, but a number did not address Assessment Objective 3 sufficiently: they often interpreted evidence, but did not offer much evaluation of its reliability.

5   This proved less popular than Q. 4. There were some strong responses, which showed a good understanding of the Persian invasion, and Herodotus' account of Xerxes' role in the planning. Most candidates were able to give a reasonable account of the campaign of 480 BC, and there were also some good discussions of what Herodotus wrote about specific incidents; the better candidates were able to evaluate the reliability of different aspects of his narrative, particularly where he presents an account of the Persian high command. Many drew attention to Herodotus' background, though there was less clarity about his possible sources for information on Persia. A number of candidates were critical of his understanding of what happened at Thermopylae, Artemisium and Salamis, and argued that this made it much more difficult to judge the quality of Xerxes' planning.

Section B

1   Most candidates were able to give appropriate examples to illustrate the influence of Alexander's parents, though a number focused only on Philip or Olympias. Examiners accepted a range of possible responses.

2(a) Most candidates made good use of the passage in answering this question, though some were unclear about the meaning of the word 'sophist'.

2(b) Weaker responses did not focus on the issue of status and were unclear about why he did not wish to take part. Better responses were able to contrast father with son.

2(c) Candidates had a good deal to say about Alexander's character, but in some cases they needed to make more use of the passage ('this account'). The best answers were able to compare other incidents from Alexander's life (eg the killing of Cleitus in 328 BC) and some had clear views about Plutarch's approach to biography. Weaker responses in some cases presented a narrative of incidents, without explaining how the detail was relevant to the question.

3(a) There were some very strong answers which showed a good grasp of the content of the passage. These were able to explain the significance of the union between Macedonian men and Persian women; many also commented on the use of 'Persian custom' in the ceremony. The majority of candidates were able to interpret the passage, though fewer attempted to evaluate it.

3(b) This question proved demanding for candidates, though there were some excellent and well-judged responses. Many candidates were able to point to the areas of agreement between the two sources studied, but some presented a largely narrative answer of events after the death of Darius, and made little or no attempt to evaluate either this particular passage or the two named authors more generally. There was some uncertainty about chronology. The better candidates were able to address the difficulty of recovering Alexander's intentions from the later works that have survived, and some were very well versed on the detail of the sources used by Arrian and Plutarch.

4 This was the more popular question. There were some very effective answers and some very different approaches to the question. Even weaker responses were usually able to include a range of detail from two or more battles, though there were often confusions in weaker scripts. Candidates were generally well-versed on the battles of Granicus and Gaugamela, though the siege of Tyre and the battle of Issus were also popular. Candidates were often able to pick specific incidents out of battles, place them in context, show awareness of any problems in interpretation and present an argument: for example, the attack over the River Granicus was often well analysed, and the lengthy siege of Tyre was used by many candidates to illustrate a different aspect of Alexander's military genius. There were some answers that made very little reference to the sources, and presented limited, if any, evaluation.

5 This was less popular than Q. 4. Most candidates were well versed in the narrative of the last months of Alexander's life, and were able to present the information clearly. The best answers showed knowledge of the sources consulted by Plutarch and Arrian, and there was some discussion of the reliability of information to be found in the so-called court journals. The best candidates were also aware of the intense competition that ensued after Alexander's death as his companions jockeyed for position amongst themselves. Relatively few answers argued for a conspiracy, and many discussed the signs of paranoia and alcohol abuse recorded by Plutarch and Arrian.

A032 The rise of Rome

General comments

The level of response in this unit was generally high, with a good number of candidates being able to achieve high marks. It was pleasing to observe that most candidates managed their timing in the examination very efficiently with some impressive performances in the longer response questions towards the end of the paper. All candidates had been effectively prepared for the new examination and there were no rubric errors. Most candidates were able to display a sound of knowledge of the prescribed sources, although there were occasions where good factual responses were undermined by insufficient reference to and/or discussion of sources and their reliability.

Specific questions

Option 1

1   Generally very well done – on occasion candidates need to be more precise about the two different events.

2(a) Some candidates need to be reminded that this is, in effect, a comprehension exercise: there were some answers that merely borrowed phrases from the passage, without developing them at all.

2(b) Generally well done: candidates produced some very good answers.

2(c) Candidates need to make reference to the passage in their answers/explanation to access the higher marks. General evaluations of the author will be credited, but the highest marks are reserved for those who evaluate the passage as requested in the question.

3   For both the (a) and (b) questions, stronger responses were confident in explaining the details of the Aeneas story, the nature of the myth and links with the Augustan context within which Livy was writing and the extent to which poetry can be used as historical evidence.

Essay questions

Some very strong responses to this question, with candidates tending to be more confidence on the factual details rather than the details of and reasons for their selection from the sources. The contexts in which both Livy and Virgil were writing and issues of reliability were well treated by some candidates. It is important that candidates look carefully at what is asked of them in the question, and deal with all the bullet points fully.

Option 2

1   Generally very well done.

2(a) This question presented few difficulties.

2(b) Some good explanation from candidates but marks were lost because precise reference to points in the passage was lacking.

2(c)   As in Option A, precise reference to the passage is needed for the higher marks.

3(a)   Some very good answers to this question, although a number of candidates sometimes lost sight of the specific focus of the question, which was Hannibal's character.

3(b)   There were many good answers, although a number of candidates assumed that Polybius was a Roman.

4   Generally candidates' answers were more focused on the strengths rather than the weaknesses. Some very good knowledge of both Livy and Polybius was shown in many answers, particularly in relation to the military events.

5   The best answers recognised the focus of the question and were able to argue both sides of the premise: very few candidates made reference to Plutarch.

A033 Women in ancient politics

General comments

The entry on this option was smaller than the others, but there were still a pleasing number of excellent answers. A number of students were calling Roman emperors 'kings'. On option 2, a number of students also thought wrongly that Nero was Agrippina's adopted son, when they meant that he was Claudius' adopted son. There were a number of rubric errors with students not answering some of the questions on the paper.

Option 1: Cleopatra and her impact on Roman politics 69-30BC

1   No problems with this question - all candidates were able to identify at least two aspects of Cleopatra's death, and there was opportunity for differentiation through the amount of detail candidates were able to give on both aspects.

2(a) and **2(b)** Candidates were able to pick out AO1 details from this passage to answer the 'describe' aspect of question 2(a). Many candidates were not so good at using the information to discuss the 'significant' aspect of the question. There seemed to be no misinterpretations of the passage or its context, although some candidates failed to mention that the passage was referring to the Battle of Actium. The passage offered opportunity to differentiate as all candidates were able to pick out elements of the extract to answer the question at their own level. In answering Question 2(b) many candidates were able to at least attempt some AO3 evaluation of Velleius Paterculus as an ancient source and discuss his background and context. However, a significant number of candidates failed to realise that this evaluation must be specifically related to what was being described in the extract (ie the Battle of Actium). The 'accuracy' aspect of the question was therefore limited to Velleius Paterculus himself, not the accuracy of the account of the battle he had given.

3(a) and **3(b)** In Question 3(a) many candidates were better at discussing what the passage could tell them about Cleopatra's character than what it could tell them about her political significance. For the higher marks candidates were expected to discuss both aspects of this question. Few candidates picked up on the tone of the extract through its first line, 'Now friends is the time to drink and to dance...'. Candidates should be careful not to generalise about Horace as an 'epic poet' when discussing the AO3 evaluation. In Question 3(b) candidates needed to make sure that they related the reliability to the portrayal of Cleopatra's character with specific details, not just the general reliability of the ancient sources.

Essay questions: There was an almost equal split between the essay questions, with candidates being able to perform well on both. Candidates should ensure that they look carefully at all the bullet points, and cover the necessary ground thoroughly in their response.

Option 2: Agrippina the Younger and her influence on Roman politics AD41-59

1   Many candidates misunderstood this question, and discussed how Agrippina got into politics, instead of how she used her influence once she got into politics.

2(a) and **2(b)** Candidates were able to pick out details of ways Nero tried to kill his mother, but many candidates were not so good at explaining the difficulties with each of them. Many candidates referred too much to other times Nero tried to kill his mother, ie collapsible boat, instead of using the passage given. In answering question 2(b) candidates were able to attempt at least some AO3 evaluation of Tacitus as an ancient source. Many candidates were not relating the 'accuracy' aspect of the question specifically to the account of Nero's plans, and instead were offering a general evaluation of Tacitus.

3(a) and **3(b)** Candidates were able to discuss details of Claudius' death, but many did not discuss how far the passage helps us 'understand Agrippina's involvement', and did not do enough evaluation of the source and issues ie difficulties with knowing the details of his death. In Question 3(b) many candidates gave a general evaluation of the ancient sources and did not relate specifically with details to Agrippina's actions.

There were no apparent difficulties with the essay questions, although a substantial number of candidates failed to answer either question.

A034 Controlled Assessment

General comments

The introduction of Controlled Assessment seemed to have worked relatively smoothly. It was apparent from candidates' work that many had enjoyed the topics which they had studied, and managed to make an excellent attempt to approach the questions, many of which are challenging for this age group. A range of topics were answered, but the most popular were Egypt, Persia and the Celts.

The number of candidates taking each option were such that it is not possible to write detailed comments on each option. However, there are a number of general lessons which centres should be aware of. In the first place, it is very important that students are clearly directed towards using primary evidence, and that they understand the importance of using materials from the ancient world. The Controlled Assessment titles are designed to assess their ability to select and interpret these sources, and without a clear basis in original, ancient source-material candidates will fail to score highly. Candidates should also be encouraged to use the sources which they have in greater detail: the use of the detail will enable them to demonstrate their ability to evaluate the material, and use it to form the basis of an historical argument.

As in the examination questions, candidates must look carefully at what is asked of them by the question. A general account of a Pharaoh's life, for example, is not the same as assessing whether the source material will enable us to reconstruct such a life fully.

On a more positive note, most centres seemed to take well to the marking grids, and were able to award appropriate marks to their students. It would be very helpful to the moderators next year if centres could ensure that their annotation is clear, and that their reasons for placing work in particular bands are apparent.

There were two centres who entered candidates for the Repository, but then sent in work for postal moderation. It is very important that centres enter for the correct option, so that the necessary paperwork in each case can be organised. A034/01 (repository) requires that centres upload their work to the Repository, whilst still sending documentation to the moderator in the post. A034/02 (postal moderation) requires centres to send their work, when requested, to the moderator in the post. The only difference between these two options is the method of submission of the work, but exams officers need to be aware of which option they are entering candidates for.

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