

De natura rerum Asnacorum

(On the Nature of all Things ASNaC)

The following notes, advice and general waffle were written to provide a student's eye view of studying Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, which we hope will be an antidote to the official stuff found elsewhere.

As you'll find out pretty quickly doing ASNaC at Cambridge, never trust a single writer on a subject. For all you know I could have copied all this from an ancient manuscript, interpolating the odd story about a dragon, a wizard or a resurrection. Slightly more probable is that this is just one person's view: everyone has different experiences and opinions of the subject and things associated with it, and if you can it's a good idea to talk to someone already doing the course, or better yet, come along to the open day.

Anyway, I hope this proves useful, and apologies for starting off with all the scary work-related stuff! Enjoy, and we hope to see you in Cambridge sometime soon!

R

De labore (Work!)

Academic year

In Cambridge, the academic year is divided up into three terms: Michaelmas, Lent and Easter. Each term consists of eight weeks. Terms are fairly straightforward, but things get more confusing when you come to the Cambridge week. On the banks of the Cam, life begins on a Thursday. Lectures, exams, everything related to academia start on a Thursday and end on a Wednesday. No-one's ever told me why; someone's probably published a learned footnote on it somewhere.

Directors of Studies and Laura

There are various people whose job it is to help you reach and sail through your exams and generally do well. Prime amongst them are your Director of Studies (DoS) and Laura, the very wonderful departmental secretary.

The DoS is a senior member of the department who'll meet you once or twice per term to go over reports, talk about your progress and discuss any problems. They're all very helpful and are especially valuable when you first arrive and need to find your feet. If there's an ASNaC fellow in your college then they'll be your DoS; if there isn't an ASNaC fellow, then your DoS will be based in one of the other colleges. This isn't too much trouble, and at least gives you a chance to wander all over town and visit different colleges.

Laura Hill the departmental secretary lives in a magical cave in the depths of 9 West Road, from whence she dispenses words of wisdom and useful pieces of paper. Like everyone else in the department, she's extremely approachable and ready to help. Every now and then you'll have to go and visit her for some reason, and even if you don't see her then, she's a regular at ASNaC Society gatherings.

Papers

ASNaC scores quite highly in the amount of freedom granted in terms of choosing papers. From the start the choice is yours, within a few general limits: you need to choose six papers to do over your first two years, and you also need to choose three of those six to be examined on at the end of the first year ('Prelims', whilst the second year exams on all papers are known, rather unimaginatively, as 'Part I'). In the third year (by which time you'll probably have a strong idea of what you do and don't want to do) you need to choose another four papers from a new selection ('Part II'), and there's a compulsory dissertation to get your teeth into as well. This seems daunting to some people, but in the long run it's great being able to select the right mix of things for you.

Broadly speaking, the papers are divided up into language/literature papers and history papers, along with palaeography and borrowed papers. I won't go into too much detail on these as information on all of them can be found very easily elsewhere. In fact, expect to be bombarded with options by excitable academics during your first few days in Cambridge.

Aside from the history and lang/lit papers and palaeography, there's a dissertation and borrowed papers to keep in mind. The Part I dissertation is relatively unusual in Cambridge, most subjects reserving it for the third year. It provides an opportunity to do some in-depth work on a subject you find particularly interesting, to really plumb the deepest, darkest depths of Cambridge's many libraries in search of something especially weird and obscure. If you're keen you can even indulge in some original research, and it's not unknown for both Part I and Part II dissertations to be published in academic journals.

Borrowed papers are a mixed bag, and are often structured differently to ASNaC papers. You don't study them until the second year, which is useful in that if you decide you don't want to do one of the papers you first choose then you can wait and take a one year borrowed paper. Don't expect your DoS to know too much about them, though they should be able to put you in contact with someone who can tell you more.

What I would recommend above all is that you read the basic course descriptions and see what takes your interest. It's a good idea to have some idea of what you want to do before arriving in Cambridge, and a little preliminary reading before coming up wouldn't go amiss. It's also a very good idea, if you're unsure about what to do or just want some general advice, to talk to other students, perhaps to those in years above you who've been through it all before. Nearly all ASNaCs are friendly and willing to help, if sometimes a little eccentric.

Exams

These take place at the end of the Easter term, normally in seventh week (about the start of June) for ASNaCs, though some unfortunates studying other subjects begin in fifth week. When it comes down to it, these really are the focus of your studies and the main reason you're here. As with most exams, they tend not to be too bad if you've done your work, but can be quite scary if you haven't. Nearly everyone does alright in the end, however – virtually no-one fails in ASNaC, there's a high rate of firsts and lower than a 2:2 is rare – and the whole university has to do them too, so please don't be put off.

The large majority of ASNaC exams are based on essays, usually with between forty minutes and an hour for each, with two, three or four required of each paper. Every paper lasts three hours.

In most cases there's something else to do as well: essays alone would be too dull and predictable. In history papers you have to do 'gobbets': brief sections

from primary sources focusing on one or more important historical themes or issues. I don't want to know who came up with the name. Occasionally you might get a pretty picture of the Sutton Hoo helmet or a coin or something, but whatever the gobbet is you've got to write a bit about it to show how much you know: what is its significance, and anything you can say about the writer. Two or three gobbets are required of you.

Not surprisingly, language papers ask you to show some knowledge of whatever language you've been studying, so you have to do a number of translations into modern English from verse and prose (at least one passage of each). These are taken from a series of set texts studied in class over the course. There's no way of knowing exactly which texts will come up, so you need to have a good knowledge of everything you've done. Some papers also throw in an unseen passage, though usually with unusual words translated in a glossary. Others might ask contextual questions about the passage, or get you to parse (explain in grammatical terms) certain words in a passage.

The most unusual paper in the tripos in terms of exams is palaeography. If you take palaeography then it's compulsory to do it as one of your three Prelim exams at the end of the first year. The palaeography exam involves no essays at all: instead, in something like 'the Antiques Roadshow', you have to choose five from twelve single-page manuscript facsimiles and then transcribe a marked section, expanding all abbreviations and getting everything as correct as you can. Having done that, you then have to say where and when you think the manuscript was made and what kind of script it is. This probably sounds a bit scary, and it is certainly very different from any exam you're likely to have sat before. On the other hand, you'll have a year of early medieval palaeography under your belt by the time it comes round (and the department isn't cruel enough to examine you on things you haven't been taught yet), and because palaeography is more objective than the other papers it is possible to do very well indeed if you get everything right: full marks are not unknown. There's also a mock exam at the end of the Lent term so you have some idea what to expect.

At Part I the codicology bit of the 'Palaeography and Codicology' paper title comes into play, as you have to write an essay each on script history, codicology and library history in addition to transcribing and identifying two of four single-page facsimiles.

Coursework isn't a big thing in Cambridge, and aside from the dissertation and a few little things (like the project you get to do if studying a borrowed archaeology paper) there's not much of it on offer.

Supervisions, Lectures & Essays

Although they do decide your final grade, exams are only the culmination of a year (or, at Part I, two years) of work that should hopefully have prepared you for the big day reasonably well.

The bulk of the work before the exams is founded on two things: essays and lectures/classes. You'll get one essay a week (usually), in addition to perhaps ten or twelve hours of lectures, classes and seminars per week. This may sound onerous, but in general it's manageable, especially compared to the amount scientists have to do.

Supervisions are at the heart of Cambridge's system and are much vaunted in every publication the university churns out. They are weekly sessions in which you and your supervisor (an expert in the field, often the person who's lecturing you) meet to go over that week's essay. This meeting might take place anywhere in the university, either in the supervisor's rooms or elsewhere, and whilst the supervisor sets a time, they're usually open to negotiation if you can't make it for some reason. Supervisions are good in that you have an opportunity to sit for an hour with

someone who knows the subject inside out and, in some cases, has written many of the key works on your reading list. Like your DoS, your supervisor's job is to help and encourage you in your studies, to explain any points of difficulty and provide further information.

Presenting your essay to a supervisor can be a bit nervewracking: they always know the subject a lot better than you do, having studied it for longer than most students have been around in some cases, and it's nigh-on impossible to get up to the same level as them given a week's work. They know this, and don't expect you to set the academic world alight on your first attempt: what they want is to see that you've grasped the key aspects of the topic and explained and assessed them well. If you can overturn previous scholarship or offer some new insight, fantastic: your supervisor will probably buy you a drink! But it doesn't happen very often.

Libraries

As you might have guessed, libraries will form an important part of your academic life in Cambridge, and there is a whole host of august repositories of knowledge out there to plunder. First port of call will probably be the college library. The quality of college libraries in terms of ASNaC material varies considerably. Some are very well stocked indeed, though they often reflect the interests of any ASNaC fellows past and present and are weighted towards one field or another.

Next is the faculty library, currently located at the far end of the English faculty library. This has a copy of most texts and books regularly required by ASNaCs, along with the main academic journals. Problems arise when several people receive the same essay title, resulting in either a race for the books or some sort of swapping arrangement. There's a photocopier in the library, which many ASNaCs come to know and love.

From time to time you may find other faculty libraries contain things you need: Classics has a good palaeography section, for instance, and Divinity contains a number of useful books that are often absent from the ASNaC library. Other libraries vary in their attitude towards students from other subjects borrowing their books: some can be very protective of their books, perhaps afraid that this is all part of an ASNaC master plan to take over the libraries of Cambridge.

But it's hard to beat the UL (University Library) in terms of size and stark 1930s architecture. A real monster of a library, it contains seven million or so books, and is a copyright library, so in theory should have a copy of everything published in this country. With few exceptions, you can find what you want in here no matter how obscure, though it may involve a trek to some dark and dusty corridor where no-one seems to have been for years, probably in the North Wing. It is very frustrating, however, when you find a book you desperately need has been borrowed or is not on the shelves: but since the UL is a lending library this can happen. Some books must be brought out to you from I know not where by filling in a form and handing it to the librarians. There's also a rare books room with lots of early printed books and suchlike, and a manuscripts room with many useful palaeographical books gathered together in plush, leather-lined comfort (although undergraduates are no longer allowed to call up manuscripts, unfortunately). The UL tearoom also deserves an honourable mention, and ASNaC stars of stage and screen are often to be seen there tucking into a cheese scone.

JAC

The 'Joint Academic Committee' is a group of all-powerful illuminati who meet in secret conclave to decide our futures once per term. At this meeting (which isn't quite as sinister as I may have suggested) senior members of the department discuss issues within ASNaC, and each year is required to elect a representative to go along and raise any points brought to them by others.

The JAC is useful, and it's good to know it's there. Its existence isn't usually that obvious, though I'm sure it does a lot of stuff behind the scenes that those on the outside never hear about.

Departmental events

Aside from everything above, there are a few other events organised by the department and people within it. For instance, each term the senior members of department organise a series of departmental lectures by visiting academics. They try to provide a balance between Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic. These lectures are open to anyone in the department, students and lecturers alike, though it's by no means compulsory for undergraduates to attend and (it has to be said) some of the departmental lectures are a darned sight more interesting than others, depending on the topic and the lecturer.

Two other, slightly higher-profile events in the ASNaC calendar include the Chadwick lecture and the Quiggin lecture. The Chadwick lecture comes towards the end of Lent term and is usually by a very prestigious academic at whose name people bow down in awe. In general it's very good and interesting, and if nothing else it's worth going to for the drinks that are always laid on afterwards. The Quiggin lecture is similar, dragging in some very big names, but is always on a Celtic subject and takes place in the middle of Michaelmas term (around November).

In addition these events organised by the senior members of the department, there is the 'Cambridge Colloquium in ASNaC', run by postgraduate students, those strange beings with whom you'll generally have limited contact. This is a chance to find out exactly what strange topic your supervisor is doing for their PhD, and to hear a series of speakers talk about what they've been studying recently. Most if not all sides of ASNaC are covered, and in general this is a fun and interesting way to spend a day in Lent term.

An event dear to the heart of the ASNaC department is the Clemoes reading prize. This is a rather unusual affair, in which students take to the floor to read out a bit of ASNaC literature (in the original of course). The idea is to remind everyone about how important the spoken delivery of early literature was, and once every entrant has read out their selected passage, a select body of experts retires for a little walk and returns a few minutes later to declare the winner (based on a combination of technical and dramatic criteria, or so we're told) and present the prize money. More often than not, everyone then decamps to the nearest pub where the festivities and reciting of ancient languages go on long into the night!

Last but not least is the ASNaC open day. Many ASNaCs have very fond memories of their open day, which includes a free lunch and culminates in a trip to the Wren library at Trinity to look at some manuscripts. It's traditional for the ASNaC president to stand up and tell the potential future ASNaCs about the ASNaC Society in as coherent and/or amusing a way as possible. There are always a few students lingering after the end of term who can come along and talk to the students about the subject and life in Cambridge in general.

De societate Asnacorum (The ASNaC Society)

Who are we?

The ASNaC Society is, in official terms, the social arm of the department, which exists to provide educational, enriching and enjoyable activities for one and all. This sounds a bit pretentious and long-winded, but is in essence true: we exist to make sure that ASNaCs aren't just a gang of people who go to the same lectures and then drift off without another word. Being such a small subject, with most people having a lot in common, there are great opportunities to mix and meet outside lectures, and whilst many people do that anyway without the ASNaC Society, the Society acts as a focus for events and formal and informal meetings. It makes the whole ASNaC operation seem like slightly more than just something you study once in a while, and adds a sense of community that you don't get with most other subjects.

Current committee

President - Rory Naismith (Trinity) rn242
Vice-Presidents - Hayley Gullen (Peterhouse) hcg25,
Levi Roach (Trinity) lnr22 Treasurer
Edmund Hunt (Peterhouse) ewph2
Secretary - Erik Niblaeus (Sidney Sussex) egn21
Social Secretary - Caroline Blake (Queens') csb44
Gesta Editors - Phil Howard (Robinson) pjh73,
Sian Hogan (Peterhouse) spfh2,
Erik Niblaeus (Sidney Sussex) egn21
Fox-Hall Memorial Post - Levi Roach (Trinity) lnr22
Peredur Glyn Davies Memorial Post - Bryn Jones (King's) bj217
MPhil Liaison Officer - Peredur Glyn Davies (Queens') pgcd2
PhD Liaison Officer - Lizzie White (Corpus Christi) elw37

Recent presidents

2003-4: Ben 'Prince of Prittlewell' Snook (Girton)
2002-3: Natalie Russell (Newnham)
2001-2: 'Scary' Beth Fox (Emmanuel)

De otio (Having a good time!)

Pub

ASNaCs like to have a good time. For all that we have chosen to study a slightly odd and obscure subject, we are still capable of going out for a day – or a night – and enjoying ourselves. Very capable.

Much of this enjoyment takes place in pubs. In best Anglo-Saxon mead-hall tradition, the ASNaCs gather every Friday evening (and sometimes on other nights as well) in the pub. ASNaC pub is a venerable institution that has seen many a shift and change in its time, moving from The Red Bull near Newnham College to The Castle on Castle Mound, in the shadow of a Norman castle – which has seen more than one ASNaC assault!

A good time is had by all, and it is far from unknown for lecturers to drop in as well as both undergraduate and postgraduate students. There are also occasional

visits from legendary ASNaCs of bygone days and their friends, come back to enthrall us with wondrous tales of the world beyond Cambridge. And conversation doesn't grind to an awkward silence and a flurry of fearful glances as soon as anyone mentions events after 1066; most people welcome the opportunity to get away from work for an evening.

Trips

Over the last few years it has become traditional for there to be a weekend trip to somewhere especially interesting for ASNaCs far away from Cambridge: recent excursions have been to Tintagel in Cornwall and Bede's World at Jarrow near Sunderland (a cross between a farm and a theme park celebrating the life and works of the most venerable of venerables, Bede). Getting away from Cambridge and work for a weekend is always a relief, and spending a day or two looking at the buildings and artefacts relevant to the subject reminds you it's not just a matter of books and photos.

That said, we don't spend the entire duration of the trip being studious: going out to eat and enjoying the evening with everyone gathered together is the ideal way to cap a day looking at ancient monuments you've spent weeks reading about.

In addition to this big weekend outing, there are usually one or two other day trips to more local sites, such as Ely and Sutton Hoo. These are also a great opportunity (or excuse, depending on how you look at it) to do work outside a library for change.

Other events

As you might expect for a society squarely based on medieval culture and history there are a few other proud traditions observed by the ASNaCs. One of the most enjoyable is the annual ASNaC dinner. Despite the dubious standard of usual college fare, if you put in a bit of time and effort (and a little money) it's not too much trouble to get a really quite tasty meal organised.

There's also an ASNaC garden party in May Week (which, in typical archaic Cambridge fashion, is in June) once exams are all done, which normally takes place in the gardens of Trinity College. Free wine, ice cream and a ceilidh band make for a most elegant afternoon!

In addition to all this there are occasional ASNaC punt trips and, when the weather is less clement, parties held in people's rooms across the university. But there's one more important aspect of the ASNaC Society that must not go unmentioned...

Gesta Asnacorum

'Deeds of the ASNaCs' (Gesta Asnacorum) is a magazine/newsletter put together by members of the ASNaC Society committee containing articles, take-offs and pictures, some of them amusing, some just downright odd. Described as 'scurrilous' in the official bit of this website, its ultimate aim is to advance to 'salacious' or even 'scandalous'.

Anyone is free to submit their efforts to Gesta, and in addition to articles and pictures there is always the dreaded selection of quotations: utterly out of context, utterly hilarious.