‘Late Achilles in the Classroom and Court’ (LACC) aims to explore the rich literary career of Achilles in both Greek and Roman late antiquity (2nd–6th centuries CE). LACC focusses on a group of largely ignored texts that feature Achilles as a student or as a model (not necessarily a positive one) for students, kings, and other members of the elite.

This project asks in what ways the complex figure of Achilles helps authors and audiences think through ethical challenges, exercise their critical thinking, and teach (or absorb) the cultural values that would allow them to become members of the late Imperial elites.

LACC examines a wide range of late antique texts written in prose and verse that focus on Achilles as the ideal subject for teaching a varied set of skills such as control of the emotions, reasoned argumentation, and how to question the authority of Homer. These late antique texts include both school exercises of a basic level and sophisticated compositions written by or for kings and statesman. We also look at the radically different fates of Achilles among the Empire’s polytheist and Christian communities.

Apart from our work on the late antique Achilles, we aim to publish on other related topics such as the role of encomium and panegyric in ancient societies and the idea of the classical tradition. We will also organize an exhibition at the National Museum of Archaeology in Lisbon and a conference on the reception of Greek heroes and heroics in late antiquity.

Above: Odysseus and Diomedes discover Achilles disguised as a woman among the daughters of King Lycomedes on the island of Skyros. Silver plate from the Seuso Treasure (Late Roman). Hungary National Museum.
ACHILLES IN THE CLASSROOM

Achilles’ questionable actions in the *Iliad* provide material for discussion in the classroom both in antiquity and today. Libanius, a fourth-century CE professor of rhetoric, wanted to train his students in critical thinking and to develop their independent judgment. Libanius’ encomium and invective of Achilles below are two model exercises that were probably used as a pair and present the same events (taken from the *Iliad*) in fundamentally contrasting ways.

*Achilles was mistreated and deprived of his prize, and though he was entitled to detain and kill those who had come to him and, in addition, the one who had sent them, he gently gave up Briseis without throwing everything into turmoil. He did not, however, remain in the alliance; instead, he showed good sense by not quarrelling over the woman, but showed that he would not tolerate being grossly abused by withdrawing from the alliance; for by his actions he wanted to teach that insolent man what sort of person he had wronged. And he was not premature in his anger.*

(Libanius, *Encomium of Achilles* 3.13–15; trans. Craig A. Gibson)

*But when Agamemnon was chastising and teaching and trying to make him better by removing the girl, he became angry and unreasonable and was overcome by wrath—then what did he not say? What did he not do? When he had abusively gone through a full list of evils, he finally attacked him with his sword in the midst of the Achaeans, and if one of the gods had not prevented him, a terrible deed would have been done. But in response to this he withdrew from the alliance, and looking toward the woman as she departed, he began to cry, and he cursed his kinsmen, did not know how to endure even this trivial slight, transferred his goodwill to the Trojans, and was completely transformed because of one captive woman.*

(Libanius, *Invective of Achilles* 1.9–10; trans. Craig A. Gibson)

ACHILLES AT THE IMPERIAL COURT

Ever since Alexander made Achilles his model, kings and their panegyrists aligned the ideal ruler with the ‘good speaker of words and doer of deeds’ that Achilles was (or should have been) in the Iliad (9.443, in the words of Phoenix).

In the sixth century CE, the emperor Justinian had his equestrian statue, which was displayed at the Augustaeum of Constantinople, made to resemble Achilles. Procopius, a critic of Justinian’s regime, describes this statue and compares its dazzling light to the Autumn Star, which in the Iliad (22.26–31) is also used in a simile that alludes to Achilles and is described there as a ‘sign of evil.’

Upon this horse is mounted a colossal bronze figure of the Emperor. And the figure is habited like Achilles, that is, the costume he wears is known by that name. He wears half-boots and his legs are not covered by greaves. Also he wears a breastplate in the heroic fashion, and a helmet covers his head and gives the impression that it moves up and down, and a dazzling light flashes forth from it. One might say, in poetic speech, that here is that star of Autumn. And he looks toward the rising sun, directing his course, I suppose, against the Persians.

(Procopius, Buildings, 1.2.7–10; trans. Henry Bronson Dewing)

Right: A model of the Column of Justinian topped by the equestrian statue of the emperor. Column erected 543 CE; demolished 1515.
A CHRISTIAN Achilles

Although Christians usually viewed Achilles as the antithesis of Christian patience and self-sacrifice, the early Christian legend of a martyr who happens to share Achilles’ name shows how the hero can be ‘converted’ and turn into a model of Christian virtue.

According to the legend, Nereus and Achilles, two soldiers from Rome, converted to Christianity, renounced their violent profession, and as a consequence were martyred. It has been suggested that the second martyr’s name was originally Acileus (perhaps a freedman of the family of the Acilius) and was later assimilated to that of the Homeric hero.

The inscription to the left below, which was written by Pope Damasus in the fourth century CE, praises the two martyrs, with an echo of Achilles’ Iliadic ‘wrath’ discernible behind the two Saints’ pagan ‘fury’.

*They had enlisted for military service and were performing their cruel duty, in like manner attentive to the tyrant’s commands, ready to obey orders, compelled by fear. Marvelous yet true! Suddenly they laid aside their fury; converted they fled; they abandoned the commander’s wicked camp. They flung away their shields, their decorations and their bloody weapons. Having confessed, they rejoiced to carry the triumphs of Christ. Believe through Damasus what the glory of Christ can achieve. (Titulus, originally at the basilica of Saints Nereus and Achilleus in the cemetery of Domitilla; trans. Dennis E. Trout)*

Above: Saints Nereus and Achilleus. Stained glass windows from the north isle of St Thomas’ Church, St. Helier, Jersey.