

2021 VCE Ancient History external assessment report

General comments

The 2021 VCE Units 3 and 4 Ancient History examination was based on the VCE History Study Design (2016–2021), which was accredited until 2021.

The 2021 VCE Ancient History examination was divided into three sections on three civilisations, with two parts for each civilisation. Students were required to select two civilisations and answer both parts for each one.

Specific information

This report provides sample answers or an indication of what answers may have included. Unless otherwise stated, these are not intended to be exemplary or complete responses.

The statistics in this report may be subject to rounding resulting in a total more or less than 100 per cent.

Part 1

Question 1a.

Section A – Egypt

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	1	2	12	27	58	3.4

Section B – Greece

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	1	1	9	26	64	3.6

Section C – Rome

Mark	0	1	2	3	4	Average
%	1	3	16	29	51	3.3

Question 1a. was a comprehension question and the majority of students achieved full marks for each of the three civilisations.

The question required students to ‘outline’ by giving an overview of the main features from the source (e.g. ‘the successes of Thutmosis III’s military campaigns’, ‘how young Spartiates were raised’ or ‘the methods used by Rome to consolidate its power in Latium’). Students only had to draw on material in the source provided, and quoting directly from the source (or describing specific visual elements) was the clearest way to make links to the source. The question did not ask for any additional knowledge, so including anything outside the source was not required or rewarded (very few students went outside the source in this way).

Almost all students organised their response into a coherent paragraph and the highest-scoring responses identified at least three distinct points, with each of those points supported by at least one relevant quotation. Responses that scored highly condensed the source around these three points using well-chosen quotations rather than summarising the whole source in the student’s own words.

Some students made references to the source but chose elements that tended to reinforce one main point rather than providing a range of separate points. For example, in the Greece question about how young Spartiates were raised, a student might say that ‘boyish training’ was to practise ‘obedience’, which they showed by ‘obeying’ the captain ‘and submitting to his punishments’. Although a range of quotations were provided, they all linked to the one main point – the importance of obedience – rather than a range of points.

Question 1b.

Section A – Egypt

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	6	3	15	28	25	16	6	3.4

Section B – Greece

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	1	1	4	33	34	19	10	4.0

Section C – Rome

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	Average
%	2	2	10	34	28	19	6	3.7

In Question 1b., students were required to explain some historical event or situation, using the sources provided as the starting point but then developing beyond the sources with additional knowledge. The question required a detailed account of the causes and effects and their relationship (i.e. presenting reasons why things happened the way they did and what the outcomes of these things were).

Students tended to answer this question as if it were an ‘outline’ question. They showed comprehension of the source but often relied on just summarising the information. It may be useful for students to ask themselves, ‘What would I have to say in response to this question if there were no source provided?’. The highest-scoring responses included meaningful additional historical details knowledge. Historical knowledge may include dates, names, people, places, events, statistics and other numbers. A response that did not go beyond summarising the source could not score full marks. In order to do so, the students needed to discuss more causal relationships and bring in more external detail.

Students often did not fully address the specific key words and phrases in the question (which were taken from the study design). For Egypt, for example, students often did not fully engage with the issues of commerce and trade in Thebes specifically. Many responses made general comments about trade in Egypt,

relied on claims that the abundance of goods shown in the source proved the importance of trade or, in some cases, made very generic descriptions about trade with no particular links to the Egyptian context. For Rome, many students did not demonstrate an understanding of 'militarism' beyond what was stated in the source; they tended to equate militarism with warfare.

In the Egypt question, for example, a response that scored highly and went beyond the source might include 'own knowledge' such as:

- Egypt traded an annual surplus of grain with countries throughout the ancient eastern Mediterranean and Near East in exchange for valuable and often exotic commodities.
- Pharaohs staged regular expeditions to Nubia (a rich source of gold) and Punt (a rich source of exotic commodities such as frankincense and myrrh) in which they acquired large quantities of commodities that could then be traded to other countries throughout the ancient Near East.
- The wealth generated by trade and commerce was used for royal building projects (such as the extensive monuments and temples found in Thebes itself) as well as for military campaigns to enlarge and fortify Egypt's borders.

For the Greece question, 'own knowledge' could include some of the following points:

- Young women expected to contribute to the state by producing healthy male children who would become soldiers; they had to conform to the rigid social expectations about their usefulness to Spartan society
- Physical training to develop healthy bodies – running, wrestling, discus and javelin throwing.
- Girls were educated; interacted freely with boys. Exemplified by Source 3, which depicted a young Spartan girl running. Her exposed breast and short skirt signified Spartan social attitudes towards girls.
- Nudity was not considered immoral but a celebration of a healthy body. Girls exercised and competed in scant clothing and paraded naked with boys in processions.
- Free from legal, social and political restrictions; could not hold public office or vote; did not engage in domestic duties like weaving and spinning (done by helots).
- Over time became wealthy landowners due to high mortality rate among men.
- The role of queens in Sparta could also be mentioned.

For the Rome question, 'own knowledge' could include some of the following points:

- Roman individuals whose career or prestige was defined by their militarism (such as Coriolanus, Cincinnatus or Scipio Africanus and his descendants).
- Some specific conflicts (especially the Punic Wars) and the way these conflicts enhanced the reputation of the senatorial class generally.
- The link between military achievements and the specific features of the *cursus honorum*.
- How Roman militarism brought the Republic into conflict with its neighbours, which in turn led to expansion of Republic's provincial territory (throughout Italy at first, then into Sicily, Sardinia and Corsica, followed by North Africa and Spain).
- How militarism affected the citizen soldiers with obligations more than opportunities. This could include a mention of the shift from seasonal, amateur fighting to regular, long-term professionalism as well as the economic and social consequences of this shift (traditionally connected to the growth of the *latifundia*, the appearance of the urban mob and the reliance of soldiers on their generals to secure land after their term of service).

Question 1c.

Section A – Egypt

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	20	7	7	11	10	11	11	11	7	4	1	3.9

Section B – Greece

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	5	3	7	7	12	15	19	14	11	5	3	5.3

Section C – Rome

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	Average
%	18	7	9	8	11	12	9	11	8	6	1	4.1

This question required making some kind of judgement or assessment of the factors given in the question, and supporting that evaluation with knowledge and evidence.

For Egypt, few students showed a clear understanding of what was meant by ‘the ancient Near East’, which undermined the cohesion of their responses. Students also tended to pick fairly disparate elements of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties, again limiting cohesion. Students also did not for the most part consider continuity as well as change in these dynasties.

The Greece question explicitly outlined what was to be evaluated (Sparta and Athens in terms of politics and economy); this provided a clear framework for students, and many responded well to this question as long as they were able to provide political and economic information for both Sparta and Athens.

For Rome, many students approached the question by providing a narrative of the Punic Wars down to 146 BCE. This worked well in many cases, although the highest-scoring responses also included expansion in Italy and in the eastern Mediterranean as well as considering limits or challenges to Rome’s supremacy (such as continuing threats from piracy).

It is important to remember that this is a study of broad ranges of time. Responses that scored highly recognised this – events that are hundreds of years apart are the products of different cultural forces even within the same civilisation. Responses that did not score well tended to present the civilisation as if everything was happening at once. For this question, thoughtful planning could be the key to presenting a meaningful way of showing how things change (or stay the same) over time. This is true for all the questions, but the ‘evaluate’ question presented additional challenges, requiring some nuanced discussion of the civilisation, yet lacking the time and length that would be possible in an essay.

The three main problems that limited a student’s score for this question were understanding what was meant by ‘evaluation’, understanding what was meant by ‘significance’ and not using sufficient ‘evidence’. Without a meaningful attempt at evaluation supported by evidence, responses tended to be generalised, descriptive narratives that could not receive full marks.

Evaluation

Evaluation requires a student to make a judgement and then to support that judgement with knowledge and evidence. Responses that scored highly started with statements that acknowledged the premise of the question and provided an outline of how the answer would be structured (although no introduction was

necessary in these responses). Such opening statements could be phrased as ‘Sparta and Athens were similar in some ways but also had fundamental differences’ or ‘By 146 BCE, Rome had established control over almost all of the Mediterranean’. Some students interpreted ‘evaluation’ as defending the claim implied in the question (i.e. arguing that Rome did indeed have complete supremacy of the Mediterranean). Such an approach could be high scoring if it comprehensively showed the significance of the event or situation. However, most high-scoring responses considered both change and continuity in a more nuanced way.

Significance

Most students recognised that the question was asking for a judgement about the impact and importance of specific factors, events or situations (often in relation to wider circumstances). In general, a cohesive response will focus on those factors and consider a range of impacts arising from those factors (in terms of both change and continuity as noted above). Some students, however, also introduced entirely other factors and then evaluated the significance of those other factors. For example, some students discussed how religion also influenced the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties or considered the social changes and problems in the Roman Republic as well as Rome’s growing supremacy. Such an approach tended to dilute the focus on what the question was actually asking, resulting in a response that did not effectively evaluate clearly related historical factors. Careful reading of the question is important.

Evidence

Much like in Question 1b., evidence was not always included effectively. Claims made about historical circumstances could have been better supported with specific dates, names, people, places, events or statistics. That said, many students presented impressive knowledge of specific structural features of Spartan and Athenian political systems and a generally clear timeline of the Punic Wars. Quotations or paraphrasing from historical sources or historians could be used in this answer and were considered as ‘evidence’ (but it was not necessary to use quotations). When students use evidence, they should cite it. The highest-scoring responses used the sources thoughtfully – drawing on select elements to inform, shape or enhance the answer without clinging to the source. Some responses that did not score well relied on rehashing lengthy portions of the sources.

Part 2

Section A – Egypt

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	12	2	4	2	5	7	8	9	9	4	5	3	6	5	7	3	4	2	3	1	1	8.4

Section B – Greece

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	16	5	5	3	4	4	5	6	7	4	4	3	5	4	6	4	4	4	3	2	1	8.0

Section C – Rome

Marks	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Average
%	11	5	4	4	6	7	6	6	8	5	5	2	5	3	6	3	5	3	3	2	1	8.1

There were few very short essays this year – most students attempted to present a cohesive and coherent response. A conventional structure (introduction, three body paragraphs and conclusion) served most students well but there were many high-scoring essays that had two (or even four) body paragraphs.

The following comments are organised according to the essay criteria. The essay criteria should be recognised clearly; the criteria are marked holistically, which means that students need to address them all. Effective use of evidence – primary sources such as perspectives and secondary sources such as historical interpretations as evidence – was a significant challenge for many students.

Construction of a coherent and relevant historical argument that addresses the specific demands of the essay question

Responses that scored highly were consistently relevant and used the keywords of the topic throughout the essay. These responses also recognised the difference in the topics between ‘Discuss the extent to which ...’ and ‘Discuss / Discuss how ...’ and used that difference to enhance the coherence of the essay.

‘Discuss the extent to which ...’ lends itself much more readily to an approach where the key factor in the topic might be contrasted with one or two other distinct but relevant points. This was the case with the questions ‘Discuss the extent to which the restoration of traditional beliefs after Akhenaten’s reign resolved the tensions of the Amarna Period’, ‘To what extent was Pericles responsible for the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War?’ and ‘Discuss the extent to which the Civil War (49–45 BCE) contributed to the fall of the Roman Republic’.

Many of the responses to these topics did not effectively focus on the main factor in the question (‘the restoration of traditional beliefs ... resolved the tensions’, ‘Pericles’ and ‘the Civil War’ respectively).

For the Egypt question, many responses focused too much on Amenhotep III’s introduction of changes and then Akhenaten’s expansion of these changes without adequately exploring the restoration. Higher-scoring responses spent at most one paragraph summarising the changes introduced by Akhenaten and then discussed what happened afterwards, down to about the time of Ramesses II depending on what scope the student chose to explore.

For the Greece question, Pericles often received very little specific attention (many essays focused on Alcibiades or Lysander, who were of very limited relevance for this topic). In many cases, Pericles’s career was simply presented as synonymous with the development of the Athenian empire as a whole and the

outbreak of the war was not really examined. Higher-scoring responses focused on specific events attributable to Pericles in a clear timeline and explained why the war started. Some students were evidently unsure which Peloponnesian war the question was referring to; as per the study design, 'the Peloponnesian War' is the conflict from 431–404 BCE, as opposed to 'the First Peloponnesian War' (460–c.445 BCE).

For Rome, some students did not seem to have a clear understanding of the events of the Civil War and focused much more on earlier actions of the First Triumvirate or quickly moved on to some combination of the Gracchi, Marius and Sulla and Octavian/Augustus. Such survey essays of these men and their actions leading to the fall of the Roman Republic are often entirely appropriate, but the best of these essays at least identified common themes that linked these events together. Additionally, most of the essays about Rome did not present a clear understanding of what was meant by 'fall of the Roman Republic'. This is not an uncontentious or unambiguous phrase and only very few students explored what is meant by 'fall' – what fell, what did Rome fall from and what did it fall into?

In a 'Discuss / Discuss how ...' topic, the focus should be much more on the key factor in the topic. Any contrast or comparison with other factors needs to be very strongly argued to be relevant. 'Nefertiti's portrayal as Akhenaten's wife and counterpart shows that she had a role as co-regent', 'The events of the Archidamian War contributed more to the defeat of Athens by 403 BCE than the events of the Decelean (Ionian) War' and 'Cleopatra VII contributed to the fall of the Roman Republic not through her reign but through her relationships with Julius Caesar and Mark Antony' were all of this type. Most students recognised that these topics had a more specific focus and wrote essays that sustained that focus.

For Egypt, students needed to be able to name and describe a range of specific portrayals to substantiate their argument. Most references were vague or inaccurate.

For Greece, the comparison indicated in the question provided a clear structure for many students. Some students accepted the premise too readily and did not always have the evidence to support such a contention. The highest-scoring essays identified systemic problems in Athenian politics, such as demagoguery, that were apparent from the Archidamian War (and remained problematic) while also acknowledging additional complicating factors that emerged during the Peace of Nicias (such as the Sicilian Expedition) and the Decelean War (such as the role of Lysander).

Conversely, for Rome, many students rejected the premise and focused on the relationships rather than the reign. While this was a valid approach, few students presented detailed knowledge of Cleopatra's reign and many instead relied on a rather melodramatic retelling of the relationships.

Demonstration of historical knowledge that is accurate and appropriate for the essay question

When it came to showing historical knowledge, many essays were quite detailed. Many students showed a strong knowledge of events of 5th century Greece and the century or so leading up to the ascension of Augustus. That said, this knowledge was not consistently organised to support a clear contention. More dates in particular could be used to help organise and clarify the points.

Use of historical thinking concepts

The criteria about 'historical thinking' refers to concepts such as the significance of an event or person; continuity and change; causes and consequences; the perspectives of historical actors; and beliefs, values and attitudes of people in the past.

Students were best able to address these concepts (although often only implicitly) when discussing change (such as in Rome due to the Civil War), representation (such as in the portrayal of Nefertiti) or causation of major events (such as the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War). Few students explicitly signposted the historical thinking concepts in their writing.

Students should avoid counterfactuals when arguing for the significance of a person or event. A number of students wrote things such as 'If Pericles had not died of the plague, Athens would not have been defeated'. This is not good practice for history writing and could undermine the strength of an argument.

Use sources as evidence (primary sources and secondary sources)

Essay questions require the use of evidence (e.g. primary sources such as historical perspectives and secondary sources such as historical interpretations). However, this criterion continues to be a weakness, with many students providing no evidence of this kind. To be explicit, a student must provide quotations or paraphrase by citing the author from relevant sources in order to address this criterion or questions that require the use of evidence. The Egypt question on Nefertiti also explicitly required a discussion of 'portrayals', which would also have provided primary source evidence. There is no precise number as to how many sources of evidence are expected (one per paragraph would be a good starting point). High-scoring responses used the evidence to develop and to support their argument. Students should avoid inserting evidence that is irrelevant or not incorporated into the development of the argument.

As noted above, because these criteria are applied holistically, students should not approach the essay thinking that if they do well in the other criteria that will compensate for disregarding this criterion. All the criteria are equally important and if a student did not use evidence at all, that was a full quarter of the criteria that they missed out on.