

The ancient Greek novel

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In the first century BC a totally new genre appeared in ancient Greek literature: the romantic novel of love and adventure. It made generous use of the features and motives typical of classic literature. It was influenced by epic as well as by drama, historiography, travellers' tales and folktales. As a whole it was, however, literature of a new kind, with such obvious resemblance to the modern novel that it can well be called by the same name regardless of the fact that in its own time there was no special term for this literary genre.

The leading roles in Greek novels are played by a handsome couple who are in love with each other. When moving around the Mediterranean world, they usually meet with exciting and incredible adventures. They may be buried alive, sold as slaves, robbed by pirates and brigands or harassed by jealous suitors. They experience wars, apparent deaths, legal proceedings, imprisonment and death penalties. Miraculously, however, they survive and stay faithful to each other – in theory, at least – to be finally united by a happy marriage.

These novels were obviously written with a wide and variable public in mind. When read aloud – which used to be done in antiquity - they could also be enjoyed by uneducated listeners, but it was the educated reader who was able to appreciate their skilful style and narrative art.

Many of these novels survive in fragments only, but the following five exist as a whole:

Chariton: Callirhoe (Finnish translation M. Kaimio, WSOY 1983)

Xenophon of Ephesus: Habrocomes and Anthia

Achilles Tatius: Clitophon and Leucippe (Finnish translation under preparation, M. Kaimio)

Longus: Daphnis and Chloe (Finnish translation M. Kaimio, WSOY 1990)

Heliodorus: Theagenes and Chariclea