

## Classics in Greece

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It is not without some hesitation that I offer this contribution. For, I will have in effect to comment on a system that largely accounts for my own education, yet a system I have long left behind me (and I do not mean this in a dismissive way). A system which, paradoxically – and please keep this in mind – does not have one single department officially named “Department of Classical Studies,” “Classics,” or something similar. My paper will be to a large extent descriptive and rather superficial and it has to be preceded by a lengthy introduction.

The Kingdom of Greece, the predecessor of the Hellenic Republic, was founded in 1832, following the Greek Revolution against the Ottoman Empire. As happened with most European nation-states that emerged following the French Revolution, the identity of the young nation was constantly negotiated. I think I would not err in claiming that as a result of a fierce ideological and political struggle the victorious tenet was the one that saw the modern Greeks as the direct descendants of the creators of classical Greek civilization. Continuity, most visible in aspects of the language, was sought everywhere and had even to be invented where it was actually absent. Thus, from the very beginning Greece was exceptional in that the classical past was appropriated as an intrinsic element, a vital component of the official ideology, rather than as a distant source of cultural and political norms as happened in the case of other European countries and even of the US. And this scheme is crucial for an appraisal of the *status quo* of classical studies in Greece.

When the first Greek university, the University of Athens, was founded in 1837, the teaching of Greek and Latin became an essential component of the syllabus. It is worth noting that some of the first professors were German academics who followed to Greece the Bavarian Prince Otto, first monarch of the Greek Kingdom. The first ever lecture given at the University of Athens was by Ludwig Ross on Aristophanes’ *Acharnians* and *Knights*. In the same semester, the Fall of 1837, Ross taught two courses: one on the Topography of Attica, and another course on Horace’s *Ars Poetica* and on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*.<sup>1</sup> This German coloring of classical studies in Greece was to leave a lasting legacy which has only withered in my lifetime. Greece had to wait for almost a century before the foundation of its second University. 1926 saw the opening of the Aristotelian University of Thessaloniki in what was the capital of the so-called “New Countries” (new because until 1912-3 they were territory of the Ottoman Empire). The first university faculty to open in Thessaloniki was that of Philosophy, with two divisions, the Division of Philosophy and that of History and Archaeology. It had a very strong classical component, and at least three of the fifteen professors that comprised the original faculty of the University were classical archaeologists. Similarly, the first two presidents were both trained classicists, the

linguist G. Hatzidakis and the archaeologist Christos Tsountas. What I am getting at here is that Classics was never neglected in Greek academia. As the Greek university system kept expanding after the Second World War and in particular after the fall of the Greek junta in 1974, so did also the teaching of classical subjects with the foundation of new Departments with strong classical components, at the Universities of Ioannina, Crete, Thrace, Patras, Thessaly, and more recently at the Universities of the Aegean and of the Peloponnese.

Today, Greece has a total of twenty-four universities, the major ones amongst which have departments of a classical orientation, usually Departments of Philology (founded on the premise of the continuity of Greek language since Homer) and of History and Archaeology, but no Classics Departments as such. This peculiarity poses serious difficulties for any attempt at quantifying classical studies in the context of Greek universities. I will use, however, two case studies in order to provide an indication of the numbers involved.

The Department of Philology of the University of Patras has an annual intake of three hundred students. Traditionally about eighty of them will decide to study Greek and Latin, whereas the rest will study medieval Greek, modern Greek, or linguistics. But apparently (according to Professor Karakantza of the University of Patras, to whom I am indebted for all these figures), the number of those opting for Classics fell to *ca.* fifty students in the academic year 2009-10. And instead of ten new graduate students the Department admitted five: far from being a coincidence, this sudden decrease may be an indication of the problems to come.

My second case study is the Department of History and Archaeology of the University of Athens. It has an intake of four hundred students per year; an approximate 70% will study History and 30% will opt for archaeology and history of art (but I would like to note that twenty years ago, the trends were the exact opposite, with most students aiming at studying archaeology). Here again, it is hard to know how many amongst the historians will decide to specialize in Graeco-Roman history, as opposed to some later period. Apparently the ancient historians are a minority, albeit a large one. But all in all, it seems that some 40–50% of the undergraduate students of the Department will complete their studies with a degree that we would call a Classics degree. (And even those, I should add, who will choose to specialize in, say, the Late Ottoman Empire are obliged to take courses in ancient Greek and Latin as well as classical archaeology.) One can add to this number some seventy M.A. and Ph.D. students admitted every year. All in all, a minimum of eight hundred students pursue some form of a Classics degree within the Department of History and Archaeology of the University of Athens. But we have to add to them those studying Greek and Latin in the Philology Department of the same university and the numbers will skyrocket to some sixteen hundred to two thousand students. The numbers are impressive, to say the least.

But the teaching of Classics in Greece was not and is not restricted to tertiary education. Ancient Greek and to a lesser extent Latin are also taught in all the public secondary-education institutions. And especially during certain ideologically dubious periods, ancient Greek was even taught in primary schools. But if nine-year-olds struggling with the inflection of ancient Greek is a thing of the past, the average high school kid in Greece is still expected to read a couple of

tragedies in the original, extensive extracts from epic and lyric poetry, Thucydides' funeral oration, other historiographical passages, and few extracts from Latin, mainly Republican, prose.

Yet, despite this prominent position of classical civilization in the official ideology of the Greek state, as manifested in the public education system, Greece cannot be said to have been at the forefront of classical studies. One will struggle to name prominent Greek classicists of the distant past. One possible exception is Korais, one of the main representatives of the Greek Enlightenment, and indeed one of the important philologists of the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century. There is also Johannes Sykoutris, a student of Willamowitz and Jaeger, who in his short life produced critical editions of Plato's *Symposium* and Aristotle's *Poetics*. But Sykoutris committed suicide in 1937 at the age of 36, and he left no successors.

When we move to the field of ancient history things are even worse, for it has long been noticed that Greece never managed to create a distinct, let alone distinguished, historiographical school. This strange phenomenon has been attributed, probably rightly, to the nineteenth-century Greek intelligentsia's obsession with establishing continuity from antiquity to modern times: this obsession led to a relative boom in Byzantine studies (a field that is considered rather obscure in most of the world), to a surprising neglect of Greek history – which, it was probably felt, was being served well by European and American scholars – and to an almost complete disregard for the Roman period, which was thought to be an era of decline and misery for the Greek nation. (Tellingly, what is universally known as the Roman Imperial period is described in modern Greek with the neologism Ρωμαϊοκρατία, “the Roman Occupation.”)<sup>2</sup>

But if classical literature never really took off in Greece, and if high-level classical history had been nonexistent for a long period, the third main axis of classical studies really flourished in Greece: and, of course, I am referring to classical archaeology. One could start with the heroic figure of Kyriakos Pittakys, the first Greek archaeologist and Greece's first General Keeper of Antiquities; recall Stephanos Koumanoudes, eminent epigraphist and Secretary General of the Greek Archaeological Society (who, strikingly, was Professor of Latin at the University of Athens); and also remember, more recently, Manolis Andronikos, Professor of Archaeology at the University of Thessaloniki, who brought to light the royal Macedonian tomb he attributed to Philip II.

Today the Greek Archaeological Service consists of thirty-nine local departments (or, to use the technical term, *ephorates*) of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities and twenty-eight *ephorates* of Byzantine Antiquities that annually conduct hundreds of mainly rescue excavations. It also has a handful of archaeological institutes of a research orientation. Thus a total of eight hundred people are employed as archaeologists by the state. But undoubtedly, the main body conducting full-scale systematic excavations is the Archaeological Society at Athens, which was founded in 1837 and publishes annually three periodicals, the *Archaiologike Ephemeris*, the *Praktika*, and the *Ergon*, as well as several monographs, increasingly often in languages other than Greek (think, for instance, of K. Clinton's monumental corpus of Eleusinian inscriptions). And I think I am entitled to include in this paper the seventeen or so Foreign Archaeological Schools, the cumulative resources of which (the Blegen Library, the libraries of the British,

French, and German Schools, and so on) have rendered Athens one of the best centers for Classics-related research in the world.

Last but not least, I have to mention the National Hellenic Research Foundation (the Greek equivalent of the French CNRS) with its Institute of Greek and Roman Antiquity, which under the vigorous direction of Dr. Hatzopoulos for almost three decades has produced a series of first-class publications (primarily in the series *MELETEMATATA*) on linguistics, ancient history, epigraphy, and numismatics, mainly of Macedonia and the Peloponnese and secondarily of the Cyclades.

I may have drawn a pretty bleak picture of certain aspects of Classics in Greece, especially with regard to the study of classical literature, but I have now to rectify this claim. For the situation has improved enormously, almost beyond recognition, over the last thirty years. I could mention several Greek classicists with distinguished careers abroad, an unimaginable thing in the past: I will only mention Angelos Chaniotis, a senior fellow of the Center for Hellenic Studies, and now a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton. Within Greece, pride of place probably goes to the University of Thessaloniki, which has long had the reputation of being at the forefront of classical literature within Greece. Many professors at the Aristotelian University now publish their work in internationally acclaimed publishing houses. But good work is being produced in other Greek universities as well (e.g., Patras, Rethymnon, and Thrace). What accounts for this sudden improvement? There are several factors.

1. One constant is the fact that Greek and Latin are taught in schools. This creates job opportunities for Classics graduates that are not in large part available to their colleagues in other countries, and explains the relative success of Classics-related university programs. The downside is, however, that this is a vicious cycle: it is my humble opinion that high numbers do not mean high quality, and there is no need for so many Classics graduates after all. What is more, this close link between secondary and university education does not really explain the recent flourishing of classical studies in Greece.

2. Another more plausible explanation has to do with the gradual dissolution of the old clientele university system, in which the chairs wielded almost tyrannical power, could nominate their successors, and were not held accountable for their work or lack thereof.

3. In recent years numerous Greek classicists received their postgraduate education abroad: my impression is that right now a large number, if not the majority, of Greek university teachers of Classics have a Ph.D. from a non-Greek university: Germany and France were the preferred destinations in the past, but today most choose either the UK or the US. This more cosmopolitan attitude has enabled Greek classicists to get acquainted with the main contemporary trends in Classics and to move away from the old-fashioned and, occasionally, sterile textual interpretation school that dominated Greek Classics for decades. (Conversely, this text-based education has allowed many Greek classicists to avoid some of the pitfalls of over-theorizing.) But upon their return to Greece, these scholars instilled the know-how they had acquired abroad in their own universities and the level of graduate studies in Greece itself rose considerably as a result.

4. A critical reappraisal of the national identity allowed many to break free from the old, uncritical, and eventually counterproductive admiration of ancient Greece. With regard to classical philology, this shift materialized as a quantitative and qualitative increase in the study of Latin literature and philology. Also, Greek archaeologists have become more perceptible to the idea of investigating the non-Greek material remains, be they Roman, Slavic, Jewish, or Ottoman.

5. A fifth factor conducive to the recent progress of Classics: simply material wealth. Similarly to many post-war countries of the Western World, Greece experienced financial growth that was accompanied by social changes, not least democratization of education. This enabled many more students to pursue university studies, including, of course, Classics. Now, one specific aspect of economic growth in Greece has an even closer connection with Classics. Tourism has been justifiably called the “heavy industry” of Greece, with 15% of the Gross Domestic Product generated in the touristic sector. And of course classical ruins constitute one of the archetypical public images of Greece. This has long inspired successive Greek governments and local authorities to embrace archaeological projects with the aim of promoting their public image and thus increasing revenues coming from mainly foreign visitors.

All in all, I would say that the 1990s and the 2000s marked the peak of Classics in Greece. Alas, I also think that this peak is a thing of the past and that we have already entered the period of decline. The financial crisis that Greece is currently undergoing, a crisis with no end in the foreseeable future, will no doubt affect the field of Classics. There are already rumors of university departments being axed. The hiring of new archaeologists has been frozen. The Minister of Education recently announced sweeping changes in secondary education. This is all bad news. But the crisis may provide an incentive for innovation. Digitization and Classics is still a sector in which Greece lags behind other countries. Finally, there is, it seems, a new public that has started discovering modern Greece and has shown its eagerness to discover and understand the Graeco-Roman world as well. I am thinking of the new economic giant, China, collaboration with whom could not only boost Classics as such but also remind the increasingly forgetful societies in Europe, in the Americas, and in Australia, that classical civilization still has the potential to inspire.

## Notes

1. See Olga Palagia, “Λουδοβίκος Ροσς, πρώτος καθηγητής αρχαιολογίας του Πανεπιστημίου Αθηνών (1837–1843),” in *Ludwig Ross und Griechenland. Akten des internationalen kolloquiums, Athen, 2.–3. Oktober 2002*, eds. Hans Rupprecht Goette and Olga Palagia (Rahden: Marie Leidorf, 2005), 263–7.
2. A very useful presentation of these and related issues can be found in Dimitris J. Kyrtatas, *Κατακτώντας την αρχαιότητα: ιστοριογραφικές διαδρομές* (Athens: Polis, 2002), *passim*, esp. 91–132.