

THE CLASSICS IN COIMBRA: A PAST WITH A FUTURE

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Abstract

This reflection aims to summarise the life of the Classical Studies Group at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Coimbra over the last eighty years, combining an objective summary with a testimony of experience. It includes elements such as the characteristics of the course offered by the Classics of Coimbra and its interaction with other courses at the Faculty, the main lines of the research carried out over the decades and the multiple para-scholastic activities that make up its day-to-day activities.

Keywords

Multidisciplinarity, course plan, research projects, para-school activities.

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Resumo

Esta reflexão pretende sintetizar a vida do Grupo de Estudos Clássicos da Faculdade de Letras de Coimbra nos últimos oitenta anos, combinando uma síntese objetiva com um testemunho feito de experiência. Dela fazem parte elementos como as características do curso que as Clássicas de Coimbra oferecem e a sua interação com outros cursos da Faculdade, as linhas mestras da investigação desenvolvida ao longo de décadas e as múltiplas atividades paraescolares que constituem o seu dia-a-dia.

Palavras-chave

Multidisciplinaridade; plano do curso; projetos de investigação; atividades paraescolares.

Introduction

For those who travelled to Coimbra in the mid-20th century in search of a degree in Classical Studies, the Faculty of Arts and Humanities provided a place to stay and study: the Institute of Classical Studies. Formally, this was "an interdisciplinary scientific and pedagogical unit, founded on 10 May 1944, endowed with teaching and technical staff as well as material assets, the allocation of which depends on the Faculty's Scientific and Directive Councils, within the scope of their respective competences". This was how the Faculty was organised at the time, by 'Institutes', assigned to each of the disciplinary areas that made up the School. But for the new students, the Institute of Classical Studies was much more than that; it was a friendly, welcoming place that received warmly new students – always relatively few in proportion to those captivated by the other courses offered by the Faculty.

The first impression was of being in a place of work, which at the time had a well-stocked library, good facilities and also – it should be emphasised – an atmosphere conducive to socialising and establishing solid bonds between teachers and students. And it has to be said that the adventure was 'risky', because the candidates' previous training – even so, those were auspicious times when everyone had already had two years of Greek and as many of Latin – was not enough to consolidate the relevance of the choice. Perhaps this very unfamiliarity, which was not lacking in 'exoticism', was one of the main motivating factors.

That was a time when the offer of the Faculty of Letters of Coimbra was aimed above all at national expectations. Located in a geographic area that has always been sparsely populated – the centre of the country – a large part of the contingent of students who sought it out – and Classics was no exception – came from the north, at that time much less well endowed with higher education institutions than it is today. Moreover, by tradition, the Classics course was only offered by the Faculties of Letters in Coimbra and Lisbon; hence a natural geographical division between north and south in the distribution of candidates.

Over the decades that bring us to the present day, the changes have been profound. The Faculty was restructured into larger units – the Departments – which led to the integration of Classics into the so-called Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures, although its specific identity was respected through its status as a 'Section', along with other Sections related to Modern Languages, Literatures and Cultures. This reorganisation was nonetheless fruitful, fostering a permeability in character with what the word 'University' implies.

The number of Classics students remained small, although higher than it had been in the 1950s, like the university population as a whole. But their characteristics have changed. Firstly, after the number of public university institutions in the country increased enormously – from the original four (Coimbra, Lisbon, Oporto and Évora) to thirteen – Coimbra no longer welcomed a contingent with a specific origin and began to bring together students from all geographical areas of the continent and islands. The number of foreign students, Europeans, Brazilians, Africans and Chinese (to mention just the most significant communities) who came to Coimbra was also very significant. Classics was no stranger to all these changes. In their case, an important factor also had repercussions: the two previous years of Greek and Latin that, in the middle of the 20th century, were required of students studying Classics, Romanic Languages and History, went into decline with their new status as optional subjects and created a more sensitive obstacle to the search for Classical Studies. New applicants became beginners in these essential subjects and feared opting for a course about which they were completely unfamiliar.

In the face of all these fluctuations, in preparation, demand, supply, and the path between secondary and higher education, the physical existence of the Institute of Classical Studies has remained constant, and although it has been altered according to new administrative standards, it is still a haven for those who make this option.

Course - interaction with other courses

For as long as Classical Studies has existed in Coimbra, there has been a permanent structure: the association of the areas of Greek and Latin, divided into language, literature and culture subjects in equal proportions. In the 1960s, the degree programme comprised five years, with five teaching units per year, with the exception of the last one, which was shorter due to the Seminar aimed at initiation into scientific research. This unit was supposed to produce a 'graduate's thesis', something that would later be replaced by a master's thesis.

Another permanent feature of the Classics programme has always been its permeability and interaction with the various courses offered by the Faculty. At a time when the inclusion of options in the syllabus was still incipient, the list of obligatory subjects included, alongside the specific units, others that always came mainly from the area of Portuguese Studies and History. While Classics students were not exempt from obtaining competences in Portuguese Literature and Linguistics, or in the History of

Rome or Greek Civilisation, all of which were taught by other Groups in the Faculty at the time, their colleagues in these same areas were also obliged to study Latin or what became the most transversal of all subjects in the Faculty for decades, the History of Classical Culture, taught on all courses (Languages and Literatures, History and Philosophy) with the exception of Geography.

Postgraduate studies, then reduced to doctorates, required resources, especially bibliographical resources, which the Faculty of Letters did not yet have. That's why some generations experienced a period of study at a foreign university, within limits that had nothing to do with the dimension that the ERASMUS Programme, which had been accepted and practised by the universities of the countries belonging to the European community since the end of the 1980s, had promoted in the meantime. Even so, they were important experiences in terms of contact with other university institutions. On the other hand, Coimbra was also a host institution for students of other nationalities, especially Brazilians, attracted by the offer of specialised support for the preparation of theses that some lecturers provided.

From the point of view of academic training, the passage of time has produced profound changes. With the widespread standardisation of the so-called 'Bologna model' throughout Europe, the undergraduate course, already confined to four years, was further reduced to three years, which naturally affected the solidity of the previous proposal with the inevitable reduction, or even elimination, of some subjects.

For its part, the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of Coimbra, like many others in Portugal and Europe in general, undertook several wide-ranging internal reforms, such as the one that is still in operation today. The structure of the courses was profoundly remodelled with the semesterisation of subjects, divided into three academic years, five per semester. As a basic principle, the courses were divided into specific, introductory and general subjects. The elective model was imposed, giving students a choice that will always be more than half of the set of subjects that make up the total of 30 undergraduate units. The very priority given to the optional model required the Faculty to offer a much more diversified programme, pushing students towards a path that, from a specific stem, branches out into a wider web, which can even be coordinated under the notion of a *minor*, as secondary education.

In terms of postgraduate programmes, an attempt has been made to compensate for the new model, which shortens specific training at undergraduate level, with a wide range of master's degrees, ideally

completing a five-year curriculum. But at this level too, an open option, tolerant from the outset of the students' origins and backgrounds, somewhat conditions the sense of a postgraduate course as a specialized extension of the area chosen at undergraduate level.

In Classics, as in any other course at the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, there is now a mixture of students from different disciplinary backgrounds in all the subjects and in any of its degrees – Undergraduate, Master's and PhD – with many advantages and some disadvantages, some of which are easily perceptible. The asymmetry of those enrolled in each subject is both an opportunity and a challenge: certainly in line with the resizing that computerised means have brought to knowledge, they open up the possibility for all students to have access to a broad spectrum of training, while at the same time requiring the teacher to be able to reduce asymmetries so that the end product results in an advantage for the course as a whole.

Doctoral programmes multiplied to an equivalent extent, also accessible to a diversified demand. That's why the Classics, which now have access to undergraduates with no previous specific training, which is missing at secondary school level, and access to postgraduates with candidates with different degrees, had to reformulate their offer to meet a different reality and new expectations.

Because of their effect on the education of the young people who chose Classics, it is important to remember some of the para-scholastic activities, such as colloquia, lectures, study visits and theatre festivals, which have always enlivened the Group's academic experience.

In particular, the trips to Italy and Greece, which took place in successive years, especially at the beginning of the 1970s, were an experience whose effects cannot be overemphasised. With the support of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities and the Greek and Italian Embassies in Lisbon, it was possible to repeat and diversify routes that are essential in the formation of a classicist. Rome, Naples, Florence, Sicily, on the one hand, Athens, Delphi, Mycenae, Olympia and some Greek islands on the other, visited under the guidance of Walter de Medeiros, were a complement to the training and motivation that will certainly be unforgettable for all those who had the privilege of taking part in this initiative.

Equally important was the creation of an academic theatre group, Thíasos, dedicated to putting on plays, both tragic and comic, from Greek-Latin production. What was initially thought of as a means of mobilising attention to theatrical pragmatics, in addition to the great tradition that the

study of theatre had always maintained in the research promoted by the Classical Studies Group, took on a wider dimension with the creation of a small festival held every year. Over time, the festival attracted the attention of primary and secondary schools, which became a large audience; and, as part of the same process, the festival interacted with parallel initiatives in other countries, especially in Spain due to its geographical location. This exchange allowed the festivals organised in Portugal by FESTEIA, in close collaboration with Thíasos, to bring together academic groups from different countries, while the Coimbra group's productions began to circulate in Iberia. This initiative also promoted the knowledge and use of archaeological areas within this space.

Teaching staff

The team that ran the Classical Studies course in the 1960s was small, naturally balanced by the always small number of students. Six was the number of professors who taught the course for years. It was a team of excellence, trained in the most prestigious schools – Oxford, New York University, La Sapienza, Louvain – just to name a few examples. On the other hand, the Classical Studies group has always maintained a fruitful dialogue with public institutions that support science and technology; firstly, with the Institute of High Culture, followed by the National Institute for Scientific Research, the National Board for Scientific and Technological Research and the Foundation for Science and Technology; and also, as an institution of major public utility, with the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. In any of these instances, the IEC has always found an interlocutor and funder for the training and internationalisation of its teaching staff, for the promotion of different scientific activities and for the development of a policy of academic publications.

The preferences of this team decisively determined what the Section of Classical Studies has remained to this day in terms of areas of specialisation. Two top Hellenists were in charge of the area of Greek, Maria Helena da Rocha Pereira (1925-2017) and Manuel de Oliveira Pulquério (1928-2011) and we can say that, in addition to the variety of subjects they both taught, Greek theatre dominated their interests. It's therefore not surprising that the generation they formed followed this same priority, creating a significant team of translators and scholars in this area of Greek Literature. In Latin, the names of Américo da Costa Ramalho (1921-2013), Walter de Medeiros (1923-2012) and José Galdes Freire (1928-2017) guaranteed the areas of Classical, Medieval and Renaissance Latin. Within this group, the vigour obtained by Renaissance Studies in

particular was equally marked in the formation of subsequent generations. Finally, it would be unfair to omit the name of Carlos Alberto Louro Fonseca, a teacher who played an important role in the teaching of classical languages, which was still incipient at the time, and, through this, in motivating students, especially beginners.

Other generations brought inevitable reformulations and innovations to this embryo. In terms of scientific research, perhaps the two lines of action that underwent the most obvious renewal were the area of Reception Studies – which had already been started by M. H. da Rocha Pereira, but over time expanded and deepened – and the area of Didactics and Teacher Training, which became a professionalising component of the utmost importance for the guidance of young graduates.

APEC – Portuguese Association of Classical Studies

Among the initiatives taken by the Institute of Classical Studies was the creation and promotion of APEC – Associação Portuguesa de Estudos Clássicos (Portuguese Association of Classical Studies), whose aim was to bring together teachers and students in the field, from different levels of education, from a national perspective. Through APEC's membership of international federations such as Euroclassica and FIEC, the Portuguese nucleus for Classical Studies began to share difficulties, strategies and solutions in a multinational space.

APEC's activities include all the initiatives designed to promote this area of study – lectures, conferences, study visits, theatre performances. But perhaps the element that best embodies APEC's aims and intervention is the publication, which began in 1984, of the *Bulletin of Classical Studies*, edited in conjunction with the Institute of Classical Studies and the Centre for Classical and Humanistic Studies, which will reach its 69th issue in 2024. It is a publication open to different levels of contributors, with both a didactic and informative focus. Proposing suggestions for teaching activities and reporting on news related to the world of Classics have always been its priority objectives.

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Figure 01: *Boletim de Estudos Clássicos*, APEC publication.

Research in Classical Studies - the Centre for Classical and Humanistic Studies



Figure 02: Research in Classical Studies - the Centre for Classical and Humanistic Studies

Any university structure has to have well-structured research and, to this end, the Coimbra Classical Studies Group is part of the Foundation for Science and Technology, the public organisation under the Ministry of Science that governs national scientific research. In general terms, the objectives of CECH - Centre for Classical and Humanistic Studies (founded in 1967) are as follows:

- a) to produce and promote excellent research in the scientific fields of Classical and Humanistic Studies (from Antiquity to Contemporaneity);
- b) to produce and promote both essential research and applied knowledge aimed at civil society;
- c) to contribute to the strengthening and visibility of Portuguese culture and science, guiding research by internationally competitive standards;
- d) to project internationally academic production characterised by a Lusophone matrix;
- e) to become a "scientific hub", bringing together generations of national and foreign researchers of the highest calibre in the field of Classical and Humanistic Studies;
- f) to increase the levels of democratisation of knowledge, providing a public service for the dissemination of a culture which, due to the specific nature of its material and immaterial universes, runs serious risks of increasing elitism and the erasure of collective memory;

g) to carry out community outreach activities, contributing to the dissemination of Classical and Humanistic Studies;

h) to collaborate with Organic Teaching Units (including the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Coimbra) to offer advanced studies (doctoral and master's degrees), as well as other specialised or free courses, in the research areas in which it operates;

i) to align its research activities, in particular its projects (general and complementary), with national, European and global public policies for Research, Development and Innovation, as well as with the Strategic Plan of the Higher Education Institution in which it operates (the University of Coimbra).

In fulfilment of these aims, the CECH carries out intense activity, subject to periodic evaluations by international teams, which takes the form of activities aimed at the training and constant updating of its members and a dialogue with the university community – national and international – and with society as a whole. It is with pride that CECH has just been honoured with an Excellent rating in its latest evaluation.

Within this structure, there are different areas of knowledge that branch out from what are its essential foundations: Greek and Latin Languages, Literatures and Cultures. In its current configuration, CECH includes the following complementary projects:

a) Artes docendi - research and training in Didactics;

b) BioRom - Rome our home: (auto)biographical tradition and the consolidation of identity(ies);

c) Classics & Open Science;

d) Crises (Staseis) and Changes (Metabolai): Athenian democracy in contemporary times;

e) Cursus aristotelicus conimbricenses;

f) Diaita heritage: Food, environment and well-being;

g) Worlds and backgrounds. Methodological and interpretative worlds of musical backgrounds;

h) Hermeneutic rationality, focussed on the philosophical side of Classical Studies;

i) Rewriting the myth.

If we add up the different models of participation – Integrated Researchers, Collaborating Researchers and Visiting Researchers – CECH involves close to a hundred and a half members, both Portuguese and foreign.

If it is impossible to mention, even by sampling, the variety of free courses, seminars and open classes, conferences, workshops and other activities that multiply in CECH's daily activity, we can mention some of its editorial lines as emblematic.

Firstly, the periodical *Humanitas*, which has been published regularly since its foundation in 1947. This is the oldest scientific journal in the area of Classical Studies to be published in Portugal and includes a multiplicity of research fields: History, Archaeology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, Rhetoric, Reception Studies. It is available online in open access.

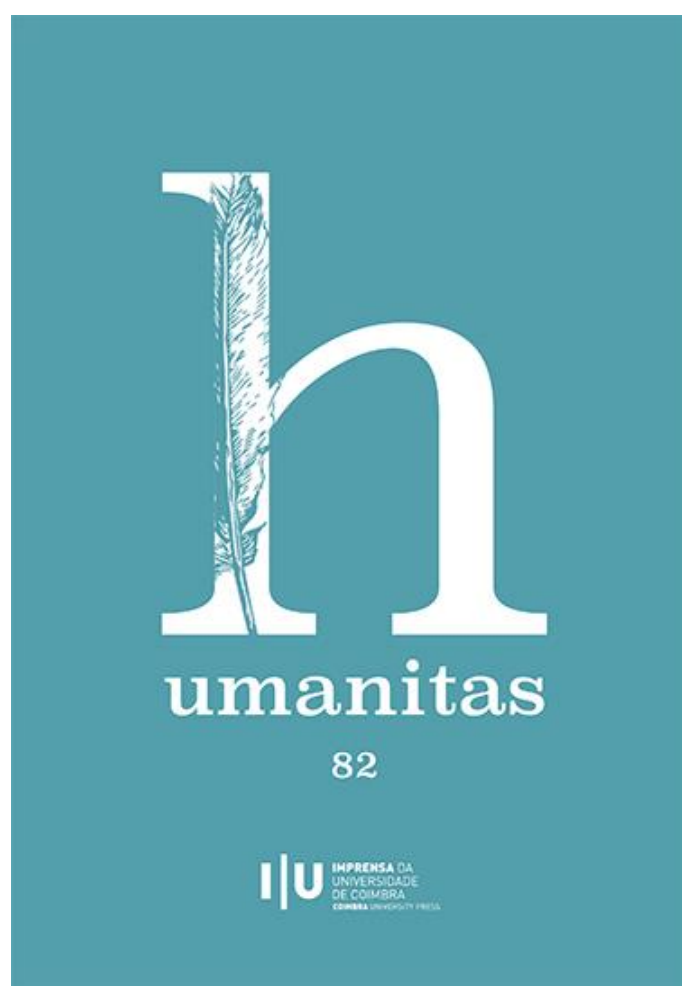


Figure 03: *Humanitas*, the Classics periodical

Secondly, the *Classica Digitalia* series, published in conjunction with the Coimbra University Press, has grown in activity and visibility. Available in open access, this editorial line is subdivided into different collections, which reflect the product of the research carried out at CECH: Greek Texts; Latin Texts; Portugaliae Monumenta Neolatina; Classica instrumenta; Diaita: Scripta & Realia; Humanitas supplementum; Short Essays; Myth and (re)writing; Idea; Ricoeuriana; Mundos e Fundos – Methodological and Interpretative Worlds of Musical Backgrounds.

In addition to the intensity of national publishing that, among other initiatives, *Classica Digitalia* documents, a final word goes to the effort that has been made to extend the results of CECH's research in various areas to leading international publishers. Brill, Routledge, Brepols, Bloomsbury, Archaeopress, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Aracne – to name but a few – have several titles in their catalogues that demonstrate this other publishing dimension.

Conclusion

This is, in broad strokes, the life of an academic group that is eighty years old this year. Several generations have sustained these decades of life and, with them, the activity that mobilises Classical Studies in Coimbra has also flowed globally. Teaching and research harmonise in the diversity and cohesion of the offer. There is no paradox in the proposal, only the aim of making the most of the talents of all those who have been part of this team and responding to the increasingly demanding expectations of the fast-paced world in which we all live.