



Reconsidering the relationship between *Geography and the Classics*: lessons from a British report from the 1920s

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Reading essays and conference reports dating back to more than a century ago, as happens with most historical sources, produces a “mirror effect”. Opening a window on our ancestors’ words, thoughts and problems inevitably brings us to compare the distance that separates our times from theirs. At the same time, though, it often induces a sudden feeling of proximity, of fraternal closeness, despite the historical gap produced by the years that have passed. Reading the short *Précis of evidence* (the very words bring to our eyes the flavor of an elegant language coming from the past) written by four representatives of the Geographical Association, who were answering a specific request posed by the Prime Minister’s Committee on Classics, surely produces the second effect. It is indeed surprising to see how many of the issues brought up in the report could usefully be applied to our times. Since the text refers to the importance, for a discipline but also for a sound cultural growth at large, of looking back at the past, it is particularly valuable to read the following pages taking into consideration the three different temporal layers that are thus intertwined: the classic age of antiquity, the time when the report

was written (early twentieth century) and the current time in which we are reading it.

The report was published in 1920, as part of the Summer issue of *The Geographical Teacher*, the first journal published by the Geographical Association. The association was founded in Oxford in 1893 in opposition to the Royal Geographical Society (the main issues of dispute being the access of women to the association and the didactic use of lantern slides) by Halford Mackinder (whose paper *Geography as a pivotal subject in education* was commented a few years ago in this very section of *J-READING*), Douglas Freshfield (Honorary Secretary of the Royal Geographical Society) and others. *The Geographical Teacher* started its publication in October 1901 and served as the main means of diffusion of the Society’s ideas and projects. Later, in 1927, the journal was renamed *Geography*, the same name with which it is still published today.

The authors of the *Précis* are four members of the Geographical Association. Sir William Mitchell Ramsay (1851-1939) was a Scottish archaeologist who received the Victoria Medal of the Royal Geographical Society in 1906 for his research. In 1919, just one year before the publication of the report, he had been appointed President of the Geographical Association. Sir Alfred Eckhard Zimmern (1879-1957) a prominent scholar, political scientist and politician, was professor of international relations at the University College of Wales at the time of the publication of the report. Herbert John Fleure (1877-1969) was professor of Anthropology and Geography in 1920 at the

University of Aberystwyth. Later on in his life he received a Daly Medal from the American Geographical Society in 1939 and a Victoria Medal from the Royal Geographical Society in 1946. In 1948, he served as President of the Geographical Association. These three professors are the authors of the first part of the report, where they list, with British conciseness and understatement, the merits of geography and the merits of the Geographical Association in promoting the discipline. It is interesting to note the emphasis on the relational nature of geography (“while man adapts his activities to his environment, he also adapts his environment to suit his needs”, p. 236), on the importance of history, the utility of merging geographical and classical studies, on the centrality of the Mediterranean as a laboratory of study (“nowhere are the mutual influences of man and environment more important for the understanding of human problems than in the Mediterranean”, p. 236), on the methodology of interdisciplinary teaching (“the facts of the two subjects [geography and classical studies] should be presented each from its own point of view, because in this way the student is led to see the facts of each subject in new relations, which will help to develop his critical faculties, and to bring into view problems apt to be obscured when only one point of view is developed”).

The second part of the report is a statement by Professor John Linton Myres (1869-1954), who “was, unfortunately, prevented from joining the Geographical Association’s deputation” (p. 236), but offered a written contribution to the Prime Minister’s Committee on Classics. Myres was Wykeham professor of ancient history at Oxford University from 1910 to 1939. In his interesting contribution, Myres reflects upon the importance of giving literary texts a geographical background, in order to better understand their context. In his bibliographic suggestions about the different ways to improve geographical knowledge in students and scholars of classical studies, he mentions the *Nouvelle Géographie Universelle* by the French geographer Elisée Reclus as well as the *Mediterranean Pilot* by the British Admiralty and the Baedeker travel guides. Drawing from a variety of sources, the knowledge of geography is central in enriching the understanding of classical literary texts.

The issues raised by the prominent British scholars at the end of the second decade of the last century are still valid today. How is it possible to revitalize the study of the classics at both school and university levels? What role can geographical studies assume in embracing the understanding of classical societies and literatures? Recent research (such as Cordano, 2002; Molina, 2010; Dueck, 2012) reinforce the idea that geography is central in the understanding of the Classics. It is a useful interdisciplinary encounter that can be of mutual advantage for both the disciplines. Another lesson that can be learned from the past.

References

1. Cordano F., *La geografia degli antichi*, Bari-Rome, Laterza, 2002.
2. Dueck D., *Geography in Classical Antiquity*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.
3. Molina M., *Geographica: Ciencia del espacio y tradición narrative de Homero a Cosmas Indicopleustes*, Murcia, Universidad de Murcia, 2010.

Geography and the Classics

William Mitchell Ramsay, Alfred Echarid Zimmern, Herbert John Fleure and John Linton Myres

Précis of evidence submitted in response to a request from the Prime Minister's Committee on Classics by Sir W. M. Ramsay and Professors Zimmern and Fleure, on behalf of the Geographical Association.

(1) The Geographical Association encourages the study of inter-relations between man and his environment. It emphasises the fact that while man adapts his activities to his environment, he also adapts his environment to suit his needs.

(2) It, therefore, promotes the study of inter-relations between man and his environment in the past as well as the present, and consequently endeavours to assist, from the geographical point of view, in building up a picture of the evolution of civilisations.

(3) Teachers of the Classics can encourage concurrent teaching of Geography, especially to university students and older pupils in schools, by geographical specialists, and geographers can in their turn help the development of classical education in many ways, especially as nowhere are the mutual influences of man and environment more important for the understanding of human problems than in the Mediterranean. An appreciation of the geographical interest of the Mediterranean may well furnish incentives to classical study.

(4) Geography can supplement classical study, which is necessarily documentary in the first instance, by developing intellectual discipline related to physical facts, thus linking classical and scientific studies to mutual advantage. It can at the same time help classical students to visualise the great civilisations they are studying in their world-setting, along side of other civilisations related to other regions, coping with other circumstances and problems.

(5) The geographer studies methods of mappings of distributions and their correlation with physical, climatic, vegetational, communicational, and other facts. Students, therefore, suitably trained in Classics and Geography, both continued to a sufficiently late stage of education, are thus doubly equipped for entry

upon some forms of archaeological and other research of special value for interpretation of the problems of classical and earlier times.

(6) The Association welcomes the prospect of development and improvement of classical studies, and hopes that it may contribute in some measure to the success of that movement of humanist education by a parallel development of geographical education. It believes that the facts of the two subjects should be presented each from its own point of view, because in this way the student is led to see the facts of each subject in new relations, which will help to develop his critical faculties, and to bring into view problems apt to be obscured when only one point of view is developed.

Professor J. Linton Myres was, unfortunately, prevented from join the Geographical Association's deputation, but he sent the subjoined statement, which is so valuable that we give it in full. Need we say that to list of books on the Mediterranean which he gives should be added his "Dawn of History" (Home University Library)?

«Over and above the disciplinary value of classical languages as a training in formal grammar, and in accurate writing and thinking, the study of ancient literatures is valuable educationally as an introduction to certain well-marked and highly developed types of society, in all their essential aspects. At every stage in classical education, and especially before the higher literary and philological studies can be carried very far, we should therefore give systematic instruction in the physique and general geographical condition of the Mediterranean world within which the classical civilization of Greece and Rome grew up. This appears to me to be as essential to sound appreciation of the higher thought and ideals of ancient "classical writers" as the corresponding study of the conditions of life in Palestine are to the full appreciation of Jewish literature. That literature already, in spite of its obvious difficulties, is well established in most schools; the literature being studied in translations first, with the necessary historical and geographical commentary; and the original languages being studied only at a comparatively late stage, if at all.

In the study of Greek and Roman literature, as of Jewish, a great part of the educational value

arises from the fact that in these writings the same great questions and subjects, as are fundamental to any civilization of the higher sort, are being approached by people whose initial outfit of experiences, and whose own social and political history is so differently conditioned from our own. Much is thus lost, not only in the deeper appreciation of their message to the modern world, but in the mere apprehension of what they are trying to describe or to commend, if this difference of environment and physical conditions is not clearly indicated at the outset, and emphasized on all suitable occasions throughout. It is very imperfectly realized that classical writers, and their original public, were ordinary human beings engaged in working out a social order suited to the conditions of a region which is in strong contrast with our own. And this applies just as much in regard to purely literary matters, such as similes, and the pictorial background of narrative poetry, as to questions of history or manners.

Quite apart from its classical associations, the Mediterranean region is well suited for study in schools, as part of the normal geographical programme, for the very reasons which have made its early civilizations so instructive; namely, that the physical factors affecting all human activities there are exceptionally characteristic and well-defined, and present a number of conspicuous contrasts with the personal everyday experience of British students. In addition to good scientific text books, such as Philippon's "Mittelmeergebiet" (for the use of the teachers), there are excellent and very readable books of reference, such as the Mediterranean section of Réclus, "Nouvelle Géographie Universelle" (which has been translated) and the "Mediterranean Pilot" of our own Admiralty, from which schoolboys would easily collect data for themselves. Prof. Zimmern's "Greek Commonwealth" (Oxford Press, 1915) has a good geographical discussion, and will be found invaluable by Geography teachers.

There are first-class guide books (Murray, Baedeker, Guide Joanne) and an exceptionally rich and readable literature of travel and discovery, from which extracts could be made if a 'Geographical Reader' were required for the lower forms. From experiments that I have made, I am confident that quite ordinary boys

could be taken through large parts of Pausanias, Strabo, Arrian – in translations, of course – with much profit and interest, in the same way as French schoolboys are brought up on Caesar's "Gallic Wars," as an introduction to History and Geography at the same time. If the systematic teaching of Mediterranean Geography were coupled with the reading (in translations, of course) of classical essays (in every sense of the word), like Hippocrates' "Air, Water and Places," or geographical discussions like Plato's "Kritias" and Aristotle's "Politics, Book IV," the interpretation of literary texts like the "Odyssey" or the "Aeneid" would follow far more intelligent lines, when the time came; and the effect on students of Herodotus, Polybius or Livy would be very great.

Hitherto, even with quite advanced 'scholars,' on the literary and linguistic side, the level of intelligence and information on all that concerns the actual life of the ancients, is often scandalously low; and the lack of elementary training in these matters, and most of all in the outlines of Mediterranean Geography, is one of the greatest drawbacks to the intelligent teaching of ancient history at the university stage. Now that the principal obstacle to the use of translations, in the upper as well as in the lower forms of schools, has been happily removed, I would urge most strongly that the opportunity be taken of remodelling the whole scope and method of the study of Greek and Roman antiquity. The learning of the classical languages may, surely, now come in its proper place as a natural and honourable promotion from the courses which are based upon the study of translations and manuals of extracts.

It is to be foreseen that some difficulty may arise in the first few years from the lack of competent teachers; but it is the incompetence of teachers themselves, to teach classical subjects so as to bring out the human interest in them, which has been responsible for a good deal of the disrepute into which these studies have fallen among pupils, and still more among parents. I assume that this is a matter which is engaging already the serious attention of the Prime Minister's Committee. The adoption of a programme of study based on the recommendations of the Geographical Association must encourage – and indeed demand – a wider and more intelligent outlook on the part of the teachers; and a closer

inter-dependence of the scientific and literary sides of the normal school curriculum. Collaboration between the geographer, the historian and the teacher of literature is already, I believe, assumed almost as a matter of course in dealing with “English subjects,” and still more in teaching the history and literature of modern European nations; it should be as normal, and at least as intimate, in the reformed programme of classical studies».