Among Greeks and Romans: history and literature in the classical world

Entre griegos y romanos: la historia y la literatura en el mundo clásico

Chez les Grecs et les Romains: l'histoire et la littérature dans le monde classique

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ABSTRACT

The writing of history was also studied by the ancient authors. The relationship between history and literature, discussed in many contemporary researches, can be analyzed from different angles when you add the reflections of classical authors, Greek and Roman, who produced works in which we perceive the concern for the art of good writing. Persuasion, beauty, and verisimilitude were characteristics that defined the writing of prose and poetry in Classical Antiquity and remain important in the current discussion about the historical knowledge, as we seek to show in this article.

Key words: history; literature; Antiquity

RESUMEN

La escritura de la historia también fue estudiada por los autores antiguos. La relación entre la historia y la literatura, abordada en muchas obras contemporáneas, gana nuevas perspectivas de análisis cuando se agregan las reflexiones de los autores clásicos, griegos y romanos, que escribieron obras en las que percibimos la preocupación por el arte de la buena escritura. La persuasión, la belleza y la verosimilitud fueron características que definieron la escritura de prosa y poesía en la Antigüedad clásica y siguen siendo importantes en la discusión actual acerca del conocimiento histórico, lo que intentaremos exponer en este artículo.

Palabras-clave: historia; literatura; Antigüedad

ABSTRACT

Les anciens auteurs ont aussi pensé à comment écrire l'histoire. La relation entre l'histoire et la littérature, abordée dans nombreuses études contemporaines, ont gagné nouvelles perspectives avec des réflexions d'auteurs classiques, grecs et romains qui ont produit d'œuvres où on voit la préoccupation avec l’art de bien écrire. la persuasion, la beauté et de vraisemblance ont marqué la production en prose et en poésie dans l'antiquité classique, et restent importantes dans les discussions actuelles sur le savoir historique, idée que nous défendons dans cette article.
Seeking to communicate with their contemporaries and with posterity, men in the Antiquity produced several archaeological and textual traces that allow us to know some things about their way of life, their beliefs, their fears, their feelings, their sensitivities, their ways of reporting experiences, and their projections. Much of this information can be found in texts that we began to identify as integrated to the historical genre. In this article, we focus on the multiple ways in which the writing of history, which was both an art and a technique in the Ancient world and represented an eternal making and remaking of literary imprint, was studied by some classic authors and how this textual and rhetoric elaboration is being continually reviewed by current authors.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus was an author who lived in Rome in the 1st century BC. He was part of a famous literary circle, which had developed around the families of Tbrerlo and Elio. He was also a rhetoric teacher in the capital city, where he taught Greek and wrote works that had a dual purpose: to show how the Romans once became the masters of the world, and to promote the achievements of these people among Greek readers. In the words of Julio Bonet Pallí, from these two premises comes the interest of Dionysus in:

Showing the Greek people that the development of the Roman power was achieved through virtue, and not luck, and suggesting that, in the glory of Rome, the Greek man could celebrate his own glory, because, as he describes in Antiguidades Romanas [I.89], Rome could consider itself a Greek city.

To his role as historian of the great Roman conquests, Dionysus added the writing of works on the teaching of rhetoric and the so-called literary criticism, in other words, the formulation of manuals dedicated to the art of producing good literary works, which should be read as well as heard in public and/or private declamations.

Dionysius seems to be an ideal character to start with, because, in his work, he shows that history and literature were entirely amalgamated fields of knowledge in the classical ancient world. Recapturing the work of iconic Greek public speakers, such as Lysias, Demosthenes, and Isocrates, Dionysius says, in the treatise Sobre a Composição Estilística, dedicated to his disciple Rufus Metello, that everything that is written and/or spoken shall be done by following the rules of peithós, of persuasion, and of exhortation. And, in order to achieve that, the speaker should worry primarily about the language, the arrangement of words, their different possible combinations, the sentence structure and rhythm, in what will be defined as the “music of language”.

In Chapters 21-24 of the book, Dionysus even indicates a line of discourse that associates and distinguishes prose and poetry at the same time. Quoting Homer, Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato, Sappho, Pindar, Euripides, and Simonides, he assembles several styles to show that the textual production is first a result of the application of an art (in Latin, ars; in Greek, thnkrn), that is, a set of skills that must always be used and practiced.

It seems to me that the two fundamental goals that authors should pursue in verse or in prose are delight and beauty. The ear demands one and the other, and the same happens with the eyes […] I do not think that anyone will consider it incoherent to propose two goals and distinguish beauty from delight, nor will be surprised if a passage is pleasantly composed, but has no beauty, or contains beauty, but no delight […] Thucydides and Antiphon of Ramunte have achieved, through Zeus, more than any other men, the beauty of stylistic composition […], but they are not particularly delightful. The historian Ctesias of Cnido and Xenophon, the Socratic, put all the possible delight in their style, but not the necessary beauty […] However, in Herodotus, the composition has these two qualities: delight and beauty. To achieve pleasure and beauty in style, the four most general and most powerful factors are melody, rhythm, variety, and adequacy or convenience, which comes along with the other three. I place on pleasure the splendor, the grace, the euphony, the sweetness, the persuasion and other similar qualities; whereas the grandeur, the gravity, the nobility of speech, the dignity, the emotion and other similar qualities rely on beauty […] These are, thus, the purposes that serious writers pursue, authors of epic poems, lyrical poetry or works in the so-called prose.

Therefore, according to Dionysus, the writer who chooses to do historical accounts should submit to the same goals as any other author in Antiquity: the attempt to write a text that is pleasant to the eyes and the ears. The convenience of what is said is important, but linked to the three other factors governing the art of writing. One should look for the rhythm, the melody, and the variety to secure the attention of the listeners and/or readers. The search for what really happened, typical of the historical genre, as Aristotle stressed in Poética, would not only be the outcome of the narrative style chosen by the writer, but should also submit to the broader rules of rhetoric. Let us recall the famous Aristotelian passage on the different purposes of poetry and history:

By the previous considerations, it can be observed that it is not a poet's craft to narrate what has happened; it is rather to represent what could happen, that is, what is possible according to likelihood and necessity. Indeed, the historian and the poet do not differ for writing in verse or prose [because the works of Herodotus might as well be put into verse, and by no means would cease to be history, if they are in verse what they were in prose], but they differ in the fact that one tells some things that had happened, and the other says things that could happen. Hence, poetry is somewhat more philosophical [indications of applicable ways to live] and more serious than history, because the first one narrates primarily the universal and the latter tells the particular. By referring to the universal, I understand assigning to an individual of a specific nature certain thoughts and actions that, by the bond of necessity and likelihood, agree to such nature; and poetry, in that sense, tends to the universal, yet giving names to its characters; the particular, on the contrary, is what Alcibiades did or what happened to him.

Thereby, the historical genre, like any other form of narrative that should meet the prerogatives of the art of writing, would have to seek beauty and delight in form and content. By sticking to the verisimilitude, to what could have possibly occurred, to what the imagination could capture, history would go from the particular to the general. It would report specific cases, aiming to shape exempla. It would bring together, in an atavistic way, the past, the present, and the future, in a causal chain that would guide the reader/listener through the interesting account of what happened in the past. Likewise, it would be up to the historian, as the master of language, to choose a good topic, to pick out the best words, and to resort to his image repertoire to create the most appropriate narrative.

The ancient man knew perfectly well that, when reading and/or listening to a text, of any genre, images would be created in his mind, allowing the read passages to form contours and meanings. That is why the processes of aemulatio or imitatio (in Greek, mimicia), that is, the inspiration in models of proven effectiveness, were always so dear to the artistic formation in Antiquity. As Donald A.
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The authorship and citation were practices defined by canons very different from ours. As Claude Calame reminds us, to attribute a poetic product to an authority designated by a given name would depend on a declarative procedure. In other words, the author would declare himself responsible for that speech and face the consequences arising from its enunciation. To include a particular passage by another author in a work was a demonstration of knowledge, respect for tradition, a tribute to the past, where the best canons to be followed came from, and a mnemonic retrieval, because the constant repetition was considered the main weapon of the memory.

This way, besides the concern with the narrative form, the ancient historian would focus on the object that was supposed to be described. Demetrius of Falero, in the work Sobre o Estilo, emphasizes the importance of choosing the theme to be addressed:

The elevation of the style also depends on the themes addressed. For instance, if the topic is a great and famous battle by land or by sea, it is either about the sky or the ground. For he who hears an elevated theme thinks, mistakenly, that the speaker also speaks with elevation. It is necessary, thus, to consider not only the things that are said, but also how they are said. That is due to the fact that someone who narrates great themes in an inexpressive way can respond inappropriately to the importance of the subject.

There are vehement writers, as Theopompus, who narrate very poorly admirable themes. The painter Nicias was fond of saying that a not so small part of the pictorial art relied on choosing a very important topic and not cutting out your art in small pieces, like small birds or flowers, but in cavalry fights and naval battles, where one has the possibility to show images of horses, running, others rearing, others falling to the ground, and innumerable archers and knights unhorsed from their mounts. He believed that the theme was itself part of the pictorial art, like the myths are part of the poetic art. Thus, it is no wonder that, in discourses, the elevation emerges from elevated themes.

In this perspective of the ancient authors that study the art of writing in the Antiquity, choosing a good topic would allow the author to show all his stylistic potential and win over the audience. This conception has remained so constant in literary art that it reappears in the work Sobre o sublime, of Cassius Longinus, in the 1st century AC. However, this author adds essential information: after choosing the theme and the best words to report it, according to the chosen genre, it was up to the writer to present the arguments in order of importance, transforming the account into a superposition of interconnected elements presented in a safe, selective, linear, and chronological manner. Longinus says:

Since all things are by nature associated with certain elements that are inherent to the substance of each one, for us, the cause of the sublime power would necessarily be the ability of choosing the most important among the inherent elements and making them constitute, through successive juxtaposition, one body. This procedure allows the author to attract the listener with the choice of ideas, and then with the accumulation of those that have been selected. Thus, Sappho points out in every case the emotions that come with the love madness, starting from the symptoms and from the own truth of the passion. But how does she demonstrate her skill in writing? In her power to first elect the factors that stand out and the most important ones, in order to associate them with each other [...] Likewise, the poet, when describing the storms, chooses, among the phenomena that follow the storms, the most violent ones.

Thereby, it would be up to the authors to choose the most important arguments, the images they aim to provoke in the public, the emotions they need to arouse from the disposition of topics. It would be more important to convince the public using the good performance of the speaker and the predisposition of the audience than to give credit to the material used in the preparation of the text. Again, Aristotle is the one who observes that in the work Sobre a retórica:

What was expected was: with which arguments should someone, therefore, persuade and dissuade, praise and censure, accuse and defend himself, and what opinions and assumptions are useful to the respective evidence, because around these arguments and from them are formed the enthymemes, which specifically relate, so to speak, to every genre of discourse [...] It matters a lot for persuasion, especially in the deliberations, and then in the processes, that the speaker shows himself under a certain appearance and makes the audience assume that he finds himself in certain dispositions in respect to the listeners and, furthermore, that they find themselves in similar dispositions in respect to the author [...] In fact, for people who love, things do not seem the same as for those who hate, nor for the ones dominated by anger, nor for the serene ones; but they are either completely different or of different importance; he who loves is sure that the person on trial does not practice an unfair act or commits only minor offenses, and he who hates thinks the opposite [...] The passions are all those feelings that, causing change in people, make their judgments vary, and are followed by sorrow and pleasure, such as anger, pity, fear and all other similar passions, as well as their opposites.

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Thus, every human being, when reading or hearing a story, would imagine it in a different way, depending on the passion that stirred them. In the Aristotelian view, rhetorical arguments of a good speaker must emerge from the passions of the public. The words provoke feelings and awaken emotions since the Antiquity. Therefore, the authors should carefully choose the terms that they wish to use in their writing, to generate a particular response among readers/listeners. As Paul Ricoeur recalls, from the analysis of the Platonic and Aristotelian works, every report should follow an order of understanding and, at the same time, use the recall and collection of the inclusion of what is narrated in the memory. The use and creation of memories is a field of the imagination, in the sense of the eidolon, of the double, of the image formed in the mind and remembered at the moment of writing. In most cases, the citations were made on the basis of memory, without resorting directly to a copy of the work cited. Similarly, the direct speeches included in the narrative, which supposedly have been uttered by the characters portrayed, were built as works of rhetorical peroration. That is, the author created the discourse from a theme, an idea-force that must have guided the speech of the character and, from it, created what the character must have said, without any loss of discursive objectivity within the ancient canons, since the beauty and delight continued to drive the narrative production.

Let us remember the insistence of Thucydides, in História da Guerra do Peloponeso, to state that he would not reproduce the spoken words, as the speeches were made in meetings without reporter or secretary. As Jeanne-Marie Gagnéebin defines, Thucydides stresses this point because he wanted to emphasize a more essential impossibility: one could not fully rely in the memory to ensure the fidelity of the account to reality. In contrast to the previous tradition, the memory, in Thucydides' view, did not
Such speeches are, therefore, reproduced with the words that, in my understanding, are the ones that the different speakers must have used, considering the respective themes and sentiments that were more pertinent to the occasion in which they were pronounced.20

Thereby, the creative imitation remained in action. In our view, this means that Thucydides wrote his numerous and famous speeches following the order of historical reasons, not as a chronicler relying on his memories. His text was built from the convenience, from the prior choice of a material that is not even mentioned, from the coherence and the interpretation. Thus, language has always been the main tool of a scholar, a writer, an author, and a historian. Plato already knew that; in Cratüle, he built the following dialogue:

Socrates: Let us see, Cratylus, if there is a way to understand each other. Do you not admit that the name is one thing, and that the object to which the name belongs is something else?

Cratylus: Yes.

Socrates: The correctness of a name, according to us, consists in exposing the nature of the thing. Do we find this definition sufficient?

Cratylus: In my opinion, it is perfectly so, Socrates.21

To Plato, all the words were, therefore, fair and would proceed solely from the mixture of letters, each one having a semantic value set by convention and culture.22 It would be up to the author to use them meaningfully, appropriately, respecting conventions, cultural practices, and social habits. In the ancient societies, writing had a very different purpose from that attributed to it by the modern world. Today, we write to forget; in the past, one would write to remember. It is sufficient to observe the Homeric works and their multiple mnemonic resources to make them easier for the bards and the rhapsodists to sing. One would write for constant reinterpretation, to withhold information until it could be reproduced without the aid of the rolls and the codices.23

As Jeanne-Marie Gagnébin also reminds us, in the book Lembrar, Escrever, Esquecer,24 in the ancient world, people would write to remember, to insert an achievement in the social memory, whereas in the contemporary world writing is done to forget. The act of writing today enables us to switch to another subject so that we can save a thought for later. In Antiquity, the writing wished:

To perpetuate the living, keeping its memory for future generations, but could only save it in systematizing and retaining it, transforming its plasticity in stiffness, affirming and confirming its absence […] The memory of men is formed between two poles: the living oral transmission, but fragile and ephemeral, and the conservation through writing, inscription which may last longer, but that draws the figure of absence […] The appeal of the present, of life in the present, also requires that the thought learns to forget.25

To Eric A. Havelock, the oral composition that came to us in literary media should not be thought of as matter of improvisation. It was, by definition, a rhythmic composition, therefore, poetic. The terms “poetic” and “poetry” are equivalent in Greek to “scholar” and “the art of writing”, respectively. One would write, memorize, and pronounce. Poetry would be the name of an ideal language use, superior in some respects to the expressive powers of prose, used as a language to disseminate information and instructions, typical of genres such as history and law.26

Greg Woolf, in an article entitled “Literacy or Literacies in Rome?”, advocates the use of the plural to describe the act of producing written works due to its diversity, purpose, and various genres. The uses of writing were multiple. Considering only the Roman Empire, we realize the existence of various media featuring social literacy: papyrus, tablets of bronze and copper, ritual inscriptions on stone and wood, stamps, signatures and messages in ceramic pots, ostraka, graffiti, among other epigraphic shapes.27 In terms of stylistic genres, letters, panegyrics, historical works, philosophical works, apologetic works, treaties, homilies, seduction manuals, military manuals, agriculture manuals, autobiographies, several biographies, breviers, and epigrams were left behind, among many other forms of communication.

Ruth Webb, in her work Elphrasis. Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical: Theory and Practice, shows how a very rich and diverse rhetorical culture emerged during the Roman period as a result of the growing interest in aesthetics and the constant practice of persuasion. The primacy of the visual would stimulate the necessity among the authors to create reports with plenty of images using, therefore, all feasible aspects of imagination and emotions. A good report should have enargeia, vibrancy, a quality of the adopted language that appealed primarily to the audience's imagination,28 to attract and hold the attention and the interest of the public who consumed the ideas presented. The diegesis, description, had to inspire the listener/reader and produce effects in any chosen genre to mediate the development of the narrative.29

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Thus, the rhetoric was an art, a set of techniques of content disposition and memory restructuring. The created discourse sought to invade and settle in the field of the understandable and memorable, including details and stimulating the viewer. It was up to the writer to mediate between material and factual reality and the language available. More than ornamental beauty, one should opt for the accuracy of what is said, in what could be retrieved by contemporaries and by posterity. Let us consider the works of Averil Cameron. In two different texts, in the chapter “History and the individuality of the historian: the interpretation of late Antiquity “, of the book The past before us: the challenge of historiographies of late Antiquity , edited by Carole Straw and Richard Lim, and in the anthology History as text: the writing of ancient history , which she edited in 1990, Averil suggests the authorial intentions that model the genres from the relationship between history and rhetoric, questioning the application of the terms "literary works" and "historical works" in the study of ancient works. Relying on the concept of textuality, Cameron emphasizes the aspect of the religious belief as seminal to the understanding of the works, for example, of late Antiquity, but highlights that individual elements appear in the reports in a more constant way than established rules, which may be assured more indelibly in literary production. Ancient historians start from facts, but use their imagination and investigation to describe them. They mix imagination, emotion, and memory in their narratives.30

George A. Kennedy bequeathed us a new classic work on the rearrangement and the reapropriation of the rules of ancient pagan rhetoric by Christian authors. This is Classical Rhetoric and its Christian and secular tradition from ancient to modern times , from 1998. In this work, Kennedy talks about the Progymnasmata, that is, the preliminary exercises that were supposedly characteristic of the Greek and Roman education. Thus, the rhetoric was a daughter and a debtor of the paideia. The authors would apply the rhetorical rules from what they have learnt from their teachers and rhetors.31
me smiling, “Although I am a god, I have learnt to submit to the times. Oh Trilunar that guards us from the evils and never was defeated, today you fell”. But, at night, at the foot of the bed, Heracles told underneath it. Why toil in vain if the end is only nakedness?”

Today I want to be happy; nobody knows anything of tomorrow”;

moment of pleasure. Hurts, go away. If the existence of men is so brief, let Bacchus come with his dances, wreaths, and women.

grave? Accumulating it, you have spent your lifetime; you could not pay a more exorbitant price for it”;

and the lip”

The uselessness of the man worrying about his own fate invades his words, as in, for example: “A lot can happen between the cup and the lip” or “You enrich, and so what? When you die, the wealth, by any chance, will follow when you are dragged into the grave? Accumulating it, you have spent your lifetime; you could not pay a more exorbitant price for it” or even: “Life is only this: a moment of pleasure. Hurts, go away. If the existence of men is so brief, let Bacchus come with his dances, wreaths, and women.

Today I want to be happy; nobody knows anything of tomorrow” and also, “I came naked into the Earth and naked I will go underneath it. Why toil in vain if the end is only nakedness?”

Likewise, it is worth noting the following passage, since, in a few lines, the author emphasizes the Roman displeasure with the crisis in the Western Empire, which characterized the 4th century AC:

I wondered to see, at the crossroads, the tanned son of Zeus, so invoked once, now to the ground, and angrily I cried:

Oh Trilunar that guards us from the evils and never was defeated, today you fell”. But, at night, at the foot of the bed, Heracles told me smiling, “Although I am a god, I have learnt to submit to the times.”
Even using few resources, the epigrams condensed the feelings and beliefs of Paladas. Multiple media and genres were used by the ancients to meditate about the role of man and of nature. The passage of time, the relationship between sacred and profane, the struggles of life, and the vicissitudes of death were themes that inspired several authors. Hannah Arendt emphasizes that Herodotus, in the \textit{Histórias}, states that the purpose of his enterprise is to preserve the things that owe their existence to men, saving humans deeds from the futility that comes from oblivion.\textsuperscript{47} The historian's task would consist of making something last in remembrance, through language, through the written word:

History welcomes in its memory those mortals who, through deeds and words, proved worthy of nature, and their eternal fame means that they, despite the mortality, may remain in the company of the things that last forever.\textsuperscript{48}

The literature that is available to us, in its multiple genres and sizes, with its many gaps and conflicts, allows us to realize that Greeks and Romans considered history and literature as belonging to the same source of knowledge: human life, with all its dilemmas, joys, disappointments, successes, and failures. Humans were, are, and will be the object and the subject of ancient historical and literary production. Composed of the narratives that sought to overcome death and oblivion, the historical genre emerged from the human need to interpret and understand the meaning of existence. The human-nature, human-gods, and man-man relationships incited the curiosity of the classics. To understand and/or accomplish them, men seized all communicative potential available to them at the time. And, in this process, they have imagined, represented, and dreamt far beyond of what the constitution of the historical science and the anxieties of the so-called post modernity allow us to do today.

\textsuperscript{1}City located in the extreme south of Asia Minor.


\textsuperscript{3}Idem, ibidem, p. 14.


\textsuperscript{5}Speaker from the 5th century BC, contemporary of Gorgias, who represented in his works an austere harmony.

\textsuperscript{6}Historian and doctor at the service of the Persian king Artaxerxes, in the late 5\textsuperscript{th} century BC, who wrote \textit{História da Pérsia} in 23 books, \textit{História da Índia} and \textit{Geography}.

\textsuperscript{7}This a very interesting reference to the fact that Xenophon was a disciple of Socrates, therefore, a follower of his literary and philosophical style.

\textsuperscript{8}Dionísio de Halicarnasso, \textit{Sobre la composición estilística}, 10. 2-4; 11.1-3.

\textsuperscript{9}Aristóteles, \textit{A poética}, IX.50.1.


\textsuperscript{12}Author that lived between the 3\textsuperscript{rd} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} centuries BC.

\textsuperscript{13}Nicias of Athens was a disciple of Antidote, who painted statues to Praxiteles in the 4\textsuperscript{th} century BC.

\textsuperscript{14}Demétrio de Falero, \textit{Sobre o estilo}, II. 75-76.

\textsuperscript{15}Longino, \textit{Sobre o sublime}, X.1-4.

\textsuperscript{16}Aristóteles, \textit{Sobre a retórica}, I.1-25

\textsuperscript{17}Idem, ibidem, XI.30.

\textsuperscript{18}Paul Ricoeur, \textit{La memória, la historia, el olvido}, Madrid, Trotta, 2003, p. 21-22.


\textsuperscript{20}Tucídides, \textit{História da Guerra do Peloponeso}, I.22.

\textsuperscript{21}Platão, Crátilo, 428e; 430a.


25Idem, ibidem, p. 11-12.


29Idem, ibidem, p. 37.


38Idem, ibidem, p. 117.


40Paladas de Alexandria, Epigramas, XI.381.

41Idem, ibidem, XI.287.

42Idem, ibidem, X.32.

43Idem, ibidem, X.60

44Idem, ibidem, V.72.


46Paladas de Alexandria, Epigramas, IX.441.


48Hanna Arendt, op. cit., p. 78.

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Latin literature includes the essays, histories, poems, plays, and other writings written in the Latin language. The beginning of Latin literature dates to 240 BC, when the first stage play was performed in Rome. Latin literature would flourish for the next six centuries. The classical era of Latin literature can be roughly divided into the following periods: Early Latin literature, The Golden Age, The Imperial Period and Late Antiquity.