

WESTERN CLASSICS

Newsletter from staff and students in Classics at the
National University of Ireland, Galway



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Cover Image: *Combat of Achilles and Memnon, Side A of the Volute Krater by the Berlin Painter, housed at the British Museum, CC BY-NC-SA 4.0*

War and heroism in 2022

Making sense of it all: by Michael J. Clarke

For nearly thirty years I have taught a course on heroic epic, trying to tiptoe between rigour and relevance. Sometimes it works well, sometimes less well, but each September I feel the need to tinker only slightly with the content. The *Iliad*, inevitably, is always the central text, and my chief aim is to draw out a sense of its cultural seriousness, to argue that the poem is exploring timeless questions about why men fight and die in war. The strategy, then, is to put all purely literary questions on the long finger—the students hear little or nothing about similes or narratology or oral poetics—and to focus on the fictive but vividly believable personalities of the chief warriors on either side in the conflict, Achilles among the Greeks and Hector among the Trojans. Both of them belong in the half-imagined, half-remembered world of the ancestors of the Greek people: men closer to the gods than are we later mortals, yet bound by the same mortality, and facing death with the same certainty as we do, with all the more bitterness because they, being ‘half gods’, *hēmitheoi*, must . . . It goes on and on.

Twenty-four contact hours is never enough, so I cut corners to make it fit. Because

the story of Achilles is the central narrative thread that binds the whole poem together, I always centre on his personality and his errors: the god-like ‘greatness of soul’ that makes him respond to a public insult by bringing about the deaths of thousands of his own comrades, the mysterious twist of chance or fate by which he brings about his beloved friend’s death, and the answering twist when he embraces his own self-destruction as the price of vengeance. Presented in this way, Achilles is hovering somewhere between excellence and madness; the poem’s evocation of his ever-expanding spirit (*menos*) becomes an exploration of the misery of war and the futility of the search for glory; in such ways Achilles becomes an image of a heroic ideal gone astray, an undermining of warrior ethics and even a paradigm of the horrors of toxic masculinity in the brutalised miniature society of an armed camp. Such a reading dovetails snugly with the ethical and even spiritual concerns of a classroom in the early twenty-first century.

But every year, the same awkward question returns: Will I have time for a couple of Hector lectures, and how can I put a spark into them? Two will certainly be enough: compared to Achilles, Hector always seems so much less subtle, so much less relevant to our intellectual concerns.



He is less a demigod than an ordinary man, a man capable of fear and doubt, but with a wife and child whom he loves: a man tasked with leading the defence of his city even when he knows

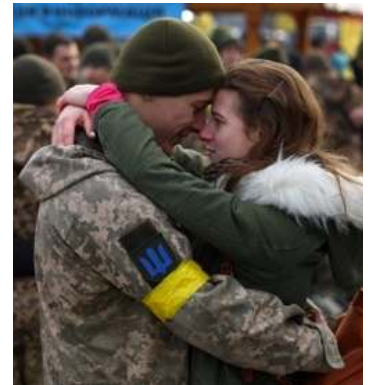
that he is fated to fall and die there, and that his family will be dragged away to slavery or worse. If the heroic ethical code demands that a man should risk death in battle for such ideals, then Hector puts that into practice obediently and without nuance:

...I have learnt to be valorous
always, and to fight among the foremost Trojans,
defending my father’s great fame and my own.
(Iliad 6.444-6)

For the same reason, the modern or ‘real-life’ resonances of Hector are best found not in the students’ own world but in that of their five-times great grandparents and beyond: Pearse in the Post Office, the Old Contemptibles on the retreat from Mons, or further back the warriors w-

ho martyred themselves against the Russian conquest of central Asia, or the last stand of the Greek patriots at Missolonghi. Certainly, Hector can tug at the emotions—is it just me, or do one or two students get teary every year when he lifts up his baby son on the battlements and prays for the happy life that he knows the boy will never have?—but the ideal itself, the willingness to stand till death in defence of one’s country, seems remote, alien, even quaint or irrelevant.

Or so it seemed until the 24 of February. It seems strange now that three months ago we barely knew Zelenskiy’s name: but he and his people have done something that has changed our whole understanding of



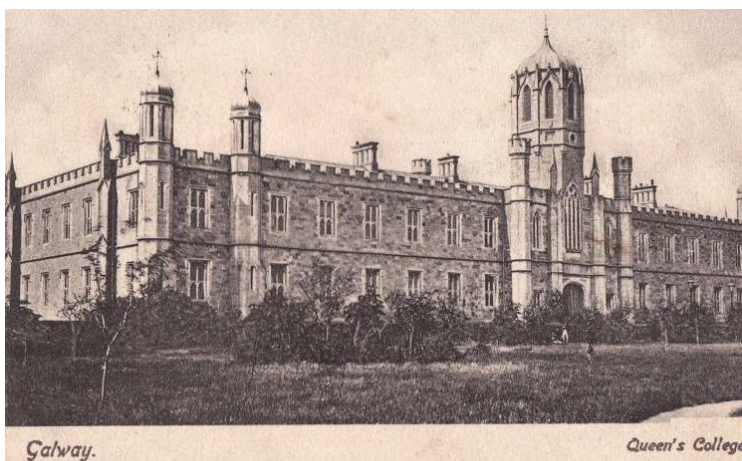
militant patriotism—and our understanding, above all, of the virtue of defiance in the face of aggression, including defiance that chooses death in preference to cowardice or capitulation. Eventually, when this war has slipped into the past, all this may seem baroque in its strangeness: the comedy actor who saved his country by his refusal to leave Kyiv, the old lady who gave the invading soldiers sunflower seeds so that something beautiful would grow in Ukraine from their corpses, or the queues that waited to buy the new postage stamp commemorating that sailor’s message to the Russian battleship. But I will never be able to tame or domesticate the picture of the officer from the Ukrainian 36th Marine Brigade in the ruins of the steel plant at Mariupol, refusing to yield or surrender, telling the world without a quaver in his voice that ‘we are facing our last days, if not hours’. Yes, it is bizarre that today’s technology allows that man’s agony to be shared by anyone and everyone in the comfort of our sitting-rooms; yes, this war is perhaps unique in modern history, if only because the freedom for which the Ukrainians are fighting and dying is (roughly stated) the freedom to become, like ourselves in Ireland, another ordinary post-modern state absorbed into the sameness of federal Europe. Soaring over all that is the disquieting sense that here and now the old heroic ideal is being acted out in deadly earnest, and that the ensuing chain of consequences just might save Ukraine and its freedom, and might heal the world in a way that had lost its meaning to us for so long.

What's in a name— (Ancient) Classics?

by Pádraic Moran

In 2020, we changed the name of our undergraduate subject from 'Classics' to 'Ancient Classics'. Our motivation was not to promote ourselves to the top of the alphabetical subject list (purely fortuitous). Instead, we felt the need to provide some clearer indication to potential students about what our subject entails. The term 'Classics' seems to be increasingly remote to incoming students. Visit the Classics section in Easons and you will find Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, Lewis Carroll, and so on—Classics of modern literature, in other words. So, the prefix 'Ancient' is not just a qualifier; it signals the essential characteristic that sets us apart from most other Arts subjects.

The change of name is, in a way, a return to our origins. Ancient Classics was the title of our department when Queen's College, Galway, first opened in 1849. At that time, it was not a subject as such, however. Students enrolled instead in courses of Greek and/or Latin, and it was not until 1973, after a long decline in the numbers of students taking ancient languages (not just in Ireland), that a new subject was created, Classical Civilisation, involving the study of the ancient world through sources in translation. In 2008, all three streams were eventually merged into one flexible programme under the general title Classics.



Classics is still the conventional name in most English-speaking universities for the discipline, even though the connotations of the term are now very outmoded. The word implies selection. Its basic meaning is 'belonging to a particular class', but strongly implying the first class, the best class. Classics is therefore a name that asserts its own

importance. The superiority of Greek and Latin writers was long enshrined in education, in an unbroken tradition going back all the way to the Roman period. In the earliest Calendars of this University, for example, the Professors of Greek and Latin always took first place in the rolls of academic staff. By the 1960s, however, the status of the discipline had fallen dramatically. As access to education expanded exponentially, the curriculum was broadened, with much more emphasis on scientific and practical subjects. And in society at large at this time, traditional models of authority were increasingly being challenged and re-evaluated.

Ironically, despite the international fall in student numbers, the challenge to the discipline was enormously enriching intellectually. Classical Civilisation allowed the focus of study to expand from a small canon of Greek and Latin writers to consideration of ancient life and culture more generally. New approaches were absorbed from other fields: history, archaeology, art history, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and others. Ancient sources were re-interrogated for their treatment of power, identity, race, gender and sexuality, and proper acknowledgement given to the cruelties of slavery, misogyny, colonialism, violence and exploitation.

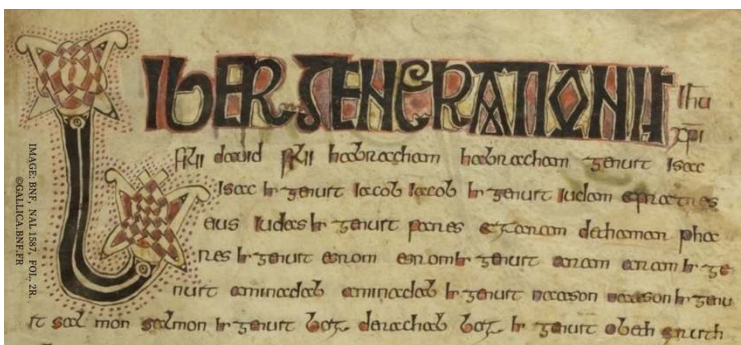
The boundaries of the field were also extended. *The World of Late Antiquity*, published by the Irish historian Peter Brown in 1971, was a ground-breaking survey of Graeco-Roman culture in the period between the third and eighth centuries CE, straddling the fall of the Western Roman Empire. Brown presented a vision of continuity and transformation across a vast, multi-ethnic world, in which Christianity was the agent of a renewed intellectual vitality, rather than the catalyst of decay, as often traditionally presented. Reception studies opened up essential new reflections on the discipline, recognising how generations down to the present have not only drawn on the ancient world as a source of influence and inspiration, but have also actively re-created ancient culture according to their contemporary imagination and concerns.

That is not to say that traditional complacencies have vanished completely. The idealising, celebratory approach to the ancient world may be rarer now in academic settings at least, but it still lingers on in popular communications. One really wonders at recent books that

purport to survey the history of Rome for general readers, but stop at the moment when citizenship was extended to all inhabitants of the Empire (in CE 212) or at the first Christian emperor, Constantine (died CE 337). These were not end points by any means, but instead the transformative moments that made Roman culture universal. Ignoring that, and reinforcing traditional boundaries instead, seems already fifty years out of date.

There has been some debate recently in universities, particularly in North America, over dropping the name Classics altogether, in favour of one that better communicates contemporary values. Unfortunately, there seems to be no tidy alternative. And re-naming is not by itself a solution. Fundamentally, it is the curriculum that has to promote critical self-reflection and openness to new ideas.

In Ancient Classics at NUI Galway, we are very fortunate that students come to us with few preconceptions about the discipline. This allows students and teachers alike to evaluate the sources with fresh eyes. We continue to teach topics that have always been central—Homer and Virgil, Greek and Roman art and architecture, Athenian democracy and Augustan Rome—recognising the literary, intellectual and aesthetic achievements, while also setting these into broader critical perspectives. But we can also push creatively at the boundaries of the discipline—whether we are exploring the Middle Eastern sources of Greek culture or Latin manuscripts in early medieval Ireland—and the receptiveness of our students is immensely refreshing.



Our recent change of name has been a small one. But perhaps restoring 'Ancient' to 'Ancient Classics' might better signal our interest in the ancient world generally, in all of its remarkable breadth and diversity. It is hugely rewarding to study societies and cultures so different from our own since the insights that arise provide context and perspective to the world around us today.

Talking the talk: Gilgamesh in Conversation

by Sarah Corrigan

As the promotional blurb describes, *Gilgamesh in Conversation* was 'a round-table interview with Marina Carr (writer, *Macnas presents Gilgamesh*), Michael Clarke (author, *Achilles Beside Gilgamesh: Mortality and Wisdom in Early Epic Poetry*), and Noeline Kavanagh (director, *Macnas presents Gilgamesh*), three individuals who have delved into the ancient Mesopotamian epic of Gilgamesh and found new meaning in its narrative'.



The event is one part of a programme of academic outreach by Ancient Classics at NUIG, and its final format came about as a result of numerous twists and turns in circumstance (I'll say that planning started in January 2020 and leave it at that). As its co-ordinator, what astonished me most was the way the event's success changed my perspective on the nature of academic outreach. In particular, it has led me to think that outreach can take two forms: one that delivers academia to an interested public and another that responds to the public's interests. Both are integral to maintaining a strong connection between researchers and the wider world, but the latter is something that I have encountered far less frequently, a standout example being the eminently successful RTÉ Brainstorm series.* This is also what *Gilgamesh in Conversation* turned out to be.

In the beginning it was a response to several elements of the Galway European Capital of Culture 2020 programming. Discovering that the programme included events such as the Macnas *Gilgamesh* production and the

Arts Over Borders reading of Emily Wilson’s English translation of Homer’s *Odyssey*, members of the department responded with numerous ideas on how their expertise and recent research could be shared in a complementary way, feeding into the interest that was aroused by these events and amplified by the momentous nature of Galway 2020. Consequently, ideas proposed and developed by Pádraic Moran, Michael Clarke, Grace Attwood, Mary Sweeney, and others in the department, were formalised and funded as an ‘Ancient Classics in Modern Galway’ series.



From left to right: Marina Carr, Dan Carey (chair), Noeline Kavanagh, Michael Clarke

Returning to 2022, it was Macnas’s *Gilgamesh* production that emerged as the most prominent cultural event to respond to. Furthermore, with in-person attendance still considerably limited at the time of planning, the early idea to have our response to *Gilgamesh* be a group conversation rather than an individual talk suddenly became even more essential when conceiving an online event. Two key creators behind the Macnas *Gilgamesh* production were, of course, its writer and its director: the playwright Marina Carr, perhaps best known for *By the Bog of Cats* (Faber, 2004), currently working on *Girl on an Altar* (Kiln Theatre), and Noeline Kavanagh, the artistic director of Macnas since 2008. As was discovered in the course of the event itself, since the launch of the *Gilgamesh* short film in September 2021, both are still actively engaged in the project: the film itself is on international tour at film festivals and Marina Carr revealed that there is a full-length play in the works too. Since the publication of his monograph *Achilles Beside Gilgamesh: Mortality and Wisdom in Early Epic Poetry* (Cambridge, 2019), Michael Clarke has continued to work on and teach the area of intertextualities in ancient epic. As a result, all of the participants came to the table invested and enthusiastic in

their discussion of the topic, and it showed. Chaired by Dan Carey, professor in English at NUI Galway and director of the Moore Institute for Research in the Humanities and Social Studies, the contributions by writer, director, and academic not only flowed forth but wove together in a truly complementary and entirely engaging way. It was also clear from the feedback that people had attended for very different reasons, some interested in an individual, some in the topic, others in the event as a whole, and most seemed to go away with an increased interest in the work of the participants.

To be clear, this isn’t intended as a criticism of the ‘offering academia to the public’ type of outreach: I’ll be the first in line to attend a good talk by an expert in an area I know little about but am intrigued by, and I certainly hope to give a few. Perhaps it’s a call not to be afraid to engage with others drawing from the same source material in entirely different and creative ways, and a demonstration of what wonderful things can come from remaining on the look out for opportunities to speak to existing cultural (and social, and even political) goings-on and making the most of that occasion when possible.

If you missed it, watch the conversation unfold for yourself: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W6o1xWDTD6Y>



*Recent contributions from NUI Galway Classics which respond to the Brexit disruptions and the Pandemic include:

- <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2021/0216/1197381-medieval-ireland-france-francia-links-ideas-texts/>
- <https://www.rte.ie/brainstorm/2020/0422/1134087-ancient-ireland-plagues-pandemics-history/>

Virgil and Hungarian war poetry

The Seventh Eclogue of Miklós Radnóti:

by Noémi Farkas-Hussey



Bewildered by the Spanish Civil War, Hungarian poet and teacher Miklós Radnóti decided to document the terrors of the conflict in a cycle of poems. Inspired by Virgil's *Eclogues*, written at

the time of the disintegration of the Roman Republic, Radnóti embarked on composing ten eclogues, each resembling its Virgilian counterpart either in content or form. His undertaking, however, was interrupted by the introduction of anti-Jewish laws, and the German occupation of Hungary. As a convert to Christianity from Judaism, Radnóti was forced out of his profession and was ordered to serve in labour camps in Serbia and Hungary. The focus of his eclogues shifted to the hardships of his own life in the camp, where he was murdered by soldiers of the fascist Hungarian Arrow Cross Party (*Nyilasok*) in November 1944. Radnóti's final works, including the seventh and eighth eclogues, survived in his diary, *The Bor Notebook* (*Bori notesz*), which was discovered during the 1946 exhumation of mass graves near Abda, Hungary.

Radnóti composed *The Seventh Eclogue* (*Hetedik Ecloga*) in the Heidenau camp in Serbia four months before his death. Contrary to many prison camp poems that recount the ferocity of war, his depicts the uneasy calmness of the nocturnal camp:

Evening approaches the barracks, and the ferocious oak
fence
braided with barbed wire, look, dissolves in the twilight.
Slowly the eye thus abandons the bounds of our captivity
and only the mind, the mind is aware of the wire's tension.
Even fantasy finds no other path towards freedom.

(Translated by Thomas Ország-Land)

The opening words of the poet are reminiscent of a demolished pastoral landscape: Virgil's 'whispering ilex' is replaced with a 'ferocious oak' that is transformed into a barbed-wire fence. While the tree offers shelter to Virgil's character Meliboeus, for Radnóti it now withholds freedo-

m from the dispossessed prisoner. As the fence 'dissolves' in the dark, the poet's mind wanders home to his wife, Fanni Gyarmati:

Look, my beloved, dream, that lovely liberator,
releases our aching bodies. The captives set out for home.
Clad in rags and snoring, with shaven heads, the prisoners
fly from Serbia's blinded peaks to their fugitive
homelands.

Radnóti addresses Fanni, conjuring the tone of a love letter, hoping to receive good news from home, but Fanni doesn't reply. Their dialogue is replaced by the poet's inner monologue of memories past and present:



Fugitive homeland! Oh – is there still such a place?
Still unharmed by bombs? As on the day we enlisted?
And will the groaning men to my right and my left
return safely?
And is there a home where hexameters are appreciated?

Visions of the homeland paired with the harsh reality of the crowded camp convey little hope of returning safely to a world unaffected by war. Writing his eclogue in perfect hexameters, the poet's final question alludes to his fears over whether his previous eclogues—sent on postcards from the prison camp—reached their recipients, and whether his loved ones are still alive to read his poems:

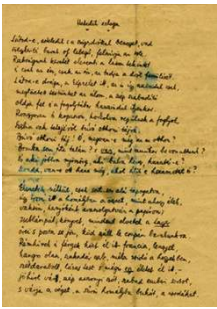
Dimly groping line after line without punctuation,
here I write this poem as I live in the twilight, inching
like a bleary-eyed caterpillar, my way on the paper –
everything, torches and books, all has been seized by the
Lager
guard, our mail has stopped and the barracks are muffled
by fog.

A dichotomy between reality and vision runs through the eclogue: while Corydon and Thyrsis are singing under the sun with Meliboeus overseeing their contest from the shade, Radnóti is struggling to take down his lines on a piece of paper in the dark with prison guards watching his every move. Accepting his fate, the poet proceeds to describe the camp calmly:

Riddled with insects and rumours, Frenchmen, Poles, loud

Italians
 separatist Serbs and dreamy Jews live here in the
 mountains-
 fevered, a dismembered body, we lead a single existence,
 waiting for news, a sweet word from a woman, and
 decency, freedom,
 guessing the end still obscured by the darkness, dreaming
 of miracles.

Lying on boards, I am a captive beast among vermin,
 the fleas renew their siege but the flies have at last retired.
 Evening has come; my captivity, behold, is curtailed
 by a day and so is my life. The camp is asleep. The
 moonshine
 lights up the land and highlights the taut barbed wire
 fence,
 it draws the shadow of armed prison guards, seen through
 the window,
 walking, projected on walls, as they spy the night's early
 noises.



Like a prophet, Radnóti predicts his future. The remainder of his days is inseparable from his confinement. In another poem, written in August 1944, he accurately foretells his own death: ‘shot in the back of the head. / “This is how you’ll end too: just lie quietly here”, / I

whispered to myself, patience blossoming from dread.’

Swish go the dreams, behold my beloved, the camp is
 asleep,
 the odd man who wakes with a snort turns about in his
 little space
 and resumes his sleep at once, with a glowing face. Alone
 I sit up awake with the lingering taste of a cigarette butt
 in my mouth instead of your kiss, and I get no merciful
 sleep,
 for neither can I live nor die without you, my love, any
 longer.

Radnóti’s thoughts return to his wife, and to his everlasting love for her. He quotes the closing lines of Horace’s ode, *Reconciliation* (*Odes*, III.9): *tecum vivere amem, tecum obeam libens* (‘I would love to live with you, and with you I would gladly die’). Despite the calm tone, Radnóti’s frustration is palpable as he concludes the eclogue with his interpretation of Horace: ‘for neither can I love nor die without you, my love, any longer’.

Ekphrasis: Visualizing the verbal in ancient and contemporary poetry

by Peter Kelly

Ekphrasis when applied to contemporary literature typically refers to the description of an artistic object or artefact within a poem or other piece of writing, or in James Heffernan’s often requoted words, ekphrasis is ‘the literary representation of visual representation’. Ekphrasis in ancient Greek and Latin literature, however, attracts a much broader field of reference. Where it is defined, by the rhetoricians, especially in the Imperial Greek *Progymnasmata* (‘preliminary exercises’), it is referred to as the ability for a piece of literature to make vivid or manifest that which is not there, almost to a point where it becomes an aspect of reality, while nevertheless dwelling upon this sense of almost, whereby absence speaks through the act of vivification. Aelius Theon’s (first century CE) definition is as follows: ekphrasis is a ‘descriptive speech which brings the subject shown before the eyes with visual vividness’. This results in a literal and virtual apparition, as through the force of *enargeia* it appears directly ‘before the eyes’.

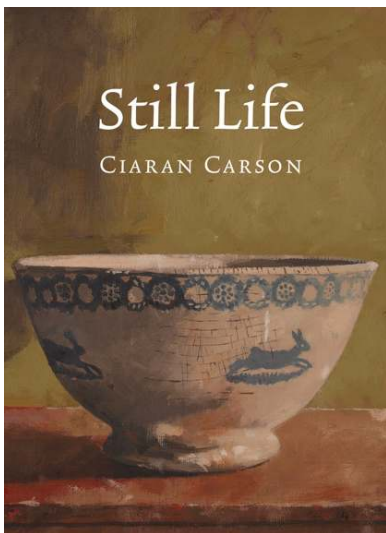


Homer’s ekphrastic description of Achilles’ shield has led to numerous artistic interpretations, such as A. Monticelli, 1820 (left) and R. Bridge, 1822 (right)

There has been something of an ‘ekphrastic turn’ in contemporary Irish poetry. In a 2007 interview, the Irish poet Derek Mahon, responding to his use of ekphrasis, said ‘we are not supposed to write poems about painting anymore; it’s supposed to be old fashioned and disgraceful, possibly even elitist’, while another Irish poet Vona Groarke has recently called ekphrasis ‘a second-hand art, an easy way of short-circuiting essential deci-

on by simply piggybacking on pre-prepared art'. Despite their apparent criticisms, both Mahon and Groarke demonstrate that, despite the contemporary obsession with ekphrasis, a significant amount of suspicion remains for why we keep returning to what many consider to be an outmoded poetic trope that some argue reached its zenith in Homer's shield of Achilles. Is the contemporary use of ekphrasis simply an extension of our ongoing obsession with Ancient Classics or does ekphrasis offer us a unique way of understanding how we construct and represent our realities and negotiate our places within the world? When we start reading ancient and contemporary ekphrases next to each other, we begin to see that ekphrasis is not so much tied to visual art but is an expression of the power of verbal art to make visual worlds come to life in a moment of metamorphosis.

Perhaps the greatest indication of the ekphrastic turn in contemporary Irish literature can be seen in Ciaran Carson's *Still Life* published in the weeks following his



death in October 2019. Carson's collection is a virtual gallery, with each poem, titled after a painting, from the opening 'Claude Monet, Artist's Garden at Vétheuil, 1880' to the finale called 'Jim Allen, The House with Palm Trees, c.1979'. Each title names the place as well as the painting, pointing

to both the lived and artificial spaces, which Carson can no longer access physically, given his failing health. Carson frequently and poignantly highlights that he can only view these paintings through gallery websites and books. Not since Philostratus, in the Second Sophistic, has there been such a concentration on the medium of ekphrasis and an attempt to remake a virtual gallery out of words. For Carson, ekphrasis has become a means of meditating upon his own imminent absence, and the *almost nature* of the means by which he might retain presence through his work. The title *Still Life* strikes out a call to remain; there is still life here yet. In the opening poem, Carson finds himself recalling James Elkins' book *What Painting Is*, noting 'I have it before me, open at this

colour plate, jotting notes'. Matching Elkins he states that 'everything gets into the painting, wood-smoke from the studio stove, / The high pollen count of a high summer's day en plein air by the Seine'. Here the ekphrasis does not so much elide a distinction between artifice and reality, but points to the real materiality of the artefact, as an object that is as part of reality as anything else in its surroundings, and yet which might also retain some substantial trace, a hair or particle of skin, of its maker.

In an earlier book *Fishing for Amber*, Carson, describing Han van Meegeren's process of forging a painting by Vermeer, states 'he saw the picture vividly in the mind's eye, and knew which colours to deploy', repeating word for word Theon's definition from the *Progymnasmata*. Carson shows a clear awareness of the long history of ekphrasis as part of a



Ciaran Carson, 1948-2019

'Classical tradition', and yet despite this, ekphrasis becomes a touchstone for re-imagining, resisting and revitalizing this tradition, by doing what we are not supposed to do; it is hard to imagine another recent literature more steeped in the ancient world, where a transgressive appropriation of the Classics functions as a catalyst for transforming the here and now.

If you would like to hear more about the interconnection between ancient and contemporary ekphrasis, we will be hosting a series of events on the theme of ekphrasis across Durham University and NUI Galway from the 21 to the 25 of June, which will bring together contemporary poets, leading researchers in ancient literature, and experts in modern British and Irish poetry. The goal is not only to deepen our understanding of the use of ekphrasis across these contexts, but to build new pathways between the Academic and Arts sectors, which will explore whether ekphrasis can offer a model for future innovation by integrating creative practices in research and teaching that utilize the symbiotic relationship of the literary and the visual. More details can be found here:

<https://www.nuigalway.ie/classics/events/ekphrasis2022/>

The repercussions of a horse

A Classical insight into the human impact on nature:
by Yiannis Doukas

Few locations are as charged and as associated with a mythical tradition as the slopes of Mount Ida, which surround the stories of the Trojan War. This is where Paris herds his flocks when Hera, Athene, and Aphrodite, accompanied by Hermes, visit him and request his famous judgment. This is where, soon afterwards, Phereclus, a Trojan craftsman, obtains the timber required to build the ships, *νήας ἀρχεκάκους* (Il. 5.62-3), which will take Paris to Sparta and Helen. And this is where the Achaeans, after ten long years of a fruitless, frustrating siege, go to gather the raw materials for the construction of the Wooden Horse.

As soon as the wood has been cut, Quintus of Smyrna, in his epic poem the *Posthomerica*, momentarily diverts his poetic attention away from the Achaeans, who are busying themselves with the preparations. Instead, he focuses on the resulting landscape:

δολιχαὶ δὲ κατ' οὐρα μακρὰ κολῶναι
δεύοντ' ἐκ ξυλόχοιο· νάπη δ' ἀνεφαίνετο πᾶσα
θήρεσιν οὐκέτι τόσσον ἐπήρατος ὡς τὸ πάροιθε·
πρέμνα δ' ἀπαυαίνοντο βίην ποθέοντ' ἀνέμοιο.
(QS 12.126-9)

*The extensive ridges of the lofty mountains
Were stripped of their forest. Every valley was opened to view,
Its former attractiveness to animals now lost.
The trunks of trees lay drying, nostalgic for powerful winds.*
(translated by Alan James 2004: 192)

Even in our contemporary context of critical climate change, it still strikes us that, as the plot reaches its culmination, a poet of the Imperial Period pauses—even for a few lines—to consider the devastating effect that human activity has on nature.

Judging from this, we could argue that the discontents of our own era go back a very long way. A distant past, usually considered to be free of such issues, seems to chime with our preoccupations and mirror our sensibilities. As we read these lines, we witness a radical change of focus, one that not only acknowledges explicitly the emotions felt by non-human beings, but al-

so stresses the importance of their well-being. It also expresses an understanding of how disastrous an imbalance might be, and how big a threat it poses, as it is brought about by humans fighting each other and recklessly exploiting natural resources.

Facing the issues that we do today, such a perspective is more than necessary. Let us look, for example, at the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the immediate consequences for the country and the people under invasion, but also for the whole world, in terms of energy and food crises, and in terms of our unending anxiety for the precarious future ahead. In all this, it is urgent to bear in mind that the things at stake are much larger than ourselves and transcend our specific existence. We need to comprehend the world surrounding us as a complicated system. Humans dominate it only seemingly; their transgressions do not go unpunished.



The wood, cut and transferred back to the camp, is appropriately processed, and used for the building of the Wooden Horse. The ploy is set in motion and the Trojans ignore Laocoon's and Cassandra's impassioned pleas. As it was destined to, Troy falls. But as the Achaeans set sail for home, most of them fall victims to their own *hubris*. If we read those four lines in the *Posthomerica* through the lens of our current struggle for ecological survival, we might even interpret them to imply that the Horse's construction is an unacceptable, unsustainable endeavour, a *hubris* in itself, for the disaster it brings to all beings, human and non-human alike.

To pause, as we should, to allow this image to resonate with our condition, to recentre ourselves, to come to terms with what surrounds us, not to lose sight of the landscape and of ourselves within the landscape. To pause, to see.

Absence and voids in times of disease

Lucretius' Plague of Athens: by Charles Doyle

Nihil ex nihilo. Nothing will come from nothing. This core tenet of Epicurean physics is simple. Things which exist can never decay into non-being. They just simply are. And yet they are not all that exists. Somewhat paradoxically, the ancient atomists asserted the reality of non-being. Matter is solid and indivisible, while the void is intangible and infinite. It provides a rather elegant and yet confusing dualism. How can non-being in any meaningful sense exist? For one (less ontologically minded) possibility, I turn to Lucretius' poem which addressed such questions some two-thousand years ago.

At the end of the sixth book *On the Nature of Things*, having guided the reader through the principles of Epicurean philosophy, Lucretius draws his work to a close with an account of the plague of Athens of 430 BCE. His description, largely based on that of Thucydides, paints a gruesome picture of the progression of the disease and the breakdown of society under the external pressures of plague and warfare. When compared with the grandiose and optimistic hymn to Venus Genetrix at the beginning of the first book, the conclusion has left many a reader pondering the depressing and abrupt end. As Lucretius' wordplay sees compound nouns dissolve into the elements, the reader is left to ponder not just the dissolution of human lives but potentially of the cosmos itself. Why end the work on such a pessimistic note? His reasons are of course his own, but we can speculate on the function which this serves in the overall text. Is this the promised bitter wormwood served by the doctor to the patient, hidden by the honeyed rim? Is our endurance of these horrors a test of our newfound Epicurean sagehood? Or is the work, as St. Jerome claimed, unfinished following the author's death by his own hand?

It is a sobering description. Amid the progression of the disease and the suffering it brought on the Athenians, we are given an account of the origin of disease which comes tantalizingly close to germ theory. Lucretius asserts that disease, like all other physical phenomena, must have a material cause. Just as there are seeds of things which are needed to support life (e.g. the atoms of water, air, fire,

etc.), the things which damage and end life also have their origin in material things, so small as to be beneath the limits of our perception. And while these seeds of illness are thought of as airborne, his account shows a keen knowledge of contagion; diseases can be spread by contact with the infection. To think that some two millennia later these are still contentious claims in some circles is perhaps the most depressing conclusion of all.

Reading this text while experiencing a pandemic has naturally put it in a new light. At first, the nature of the plague itself raised many questions, the sort of questions asked by nineteenth-century gentleman scholars who read medicine, penned historical treatises, and tinkered around in lepidoptery for good measure. Was it the bubonic plague? Perhaps it was a virulent strain of measles? Ah! Lucretius said it came from the south of Egypt; so close to the tropics it could well have been ebola! As we perhaps near the far side of our current pandemic, such questions now seem quaint to me. Diagnosing an illness from so many centuries ago based on textual sources is scientifically dubious; any such theory would not be falsifiable. Even if we could pursue this to a stage beyond the hypothetical, there is still the matter that the disease could well have been, like the coronavirus, novel.

Some three centuries separate Lucretius' life from the events he described, and one cannot help wonder, three hundred years from now, how this pandemic will be viewed. We will not know the full consequences of an event of this magnitude for years or indeed decades after it has ended. What follows from death and illness on a mass scale often manifests not as something concrete but rather as absence; intangible and infinite as the void, but nevertheless real. An empty seat at the table; the struggle to recall the appearance of missing faces; or the brief moments between sleeping and waking when dream-borne phantoms feel present and real as flesh and blood. The Epicurean contention that non-being exists seems a difficult pill to swallow, and yet during moments of bereavement and loss it feels just as real and as solid as the earth beneath your feet. Reading the conclusion to Lucretius' poem in light of our current circumstances ought to give us pause for thought on the reality of non-being. Absence—of loved ones, security, and home—is present in the world today, from Ukraine to Yemen and beyond, just as it was there in Attica during that fateful year of the Peloponnesian war.

Res gestae

Reports from staff on recent work

JACOPO BISAGNI: Despite the challenges and difficulties (some global, some local) brought upon us all by 2021, my work for the IRC-funded project *Ireland and Carolingian Brittany: Texts and Transmission* (IrCaBriTT) has been progressing steadily. June 2021 saw the publication of a major output of this project (which had been announced as forthcoming in the latest issue of *Western Classics*): our *Descriptive Handlist of Breton Manuscripts: c. AD 780-1100* (DHBM) is now freely available online (<https://ircabritt.nuigalway.ie/>). Although I wrote the bulk of the DHBM's contents, several important entries were provided by Dr Sarah Corrigan; moreover, the digital infrastructure was curated entirely by Mr David Kelly (Moore Institute). This resource offers for the first-time up-to-date descriptions, bibliographies, links, statistical tools, and data visualisations for 225 manuscripts which over time scholars have associated, rightly or wrongly, with medieval Brittany.



Over the past few months, I have kept working on the transmission of rare Irish texts on *computus* (the medieval science of time-reckoning) that have survived mainly—in some cases *only*—in tenth-century Breton manuscripts, such as Paris, BnF, Lat. 6400B and Angers, Bibliothèque Municipale, 476 (which I finally had the immense pleasure of holding in my hands at the library of Angers just a few weeks ago, after many years spent studying its digital facsimile online). In particular, I have started exploring systematically the possibilities opened up by the application of Network Theory to early medieval scientific texts, as a way of gauging the level of ‘connectivity’ of a given manuscript’s contents within the wider landscape of Carolingian and post-Carolingian written culture. This method has already produced a much clearer picture of the strong intellectual links that existed between Breton scriptoria and major Carolingian foundations, especially in the Loire Valley and Northern

Francia (places like Fleury, Micy, Corbie, Péronne). The results of this research will be presented in detail in the monograph on which I am working at present (to be completed by mid-2023, *favente Deo*).

A one-month visiting fellowship at the University of Orléans / CNRS has recently allowed me to discuss my methodology and my findings with numerous French colleagues working on medieval science—always a great way to set new ideas in motion and plant the seed of future collaborations! This trip to France has also made it possible to consult some of the manuscripts at the very core of the IrCaBriTT project: not only the above-mentioned Angers 476, but also Orléans, Médiathèque, 182, a tenth-century collection of Latin biblical glosses (but containing also a few Old Breton and Old English entries); this manuscript is the focus of the project’s component managed by Dr Corrigan, who joined me in Orléans for a few days precisely in order to examine the codex in question.

At the time of writing, I am in the process of completing an application for an ERC Advanced grant, which, if successful, will allow me to deepen and expand the investigation of hitherto neglected early medieval scientific manuscripts...Fingers crossed!

MICHAEL CLARKE: I wrote a lot of articles in the past two years, and made a few small discoveries, and edited a couple of books; and I survived the isolation and distraction of the Covid times without too many bouts of despair. It was infinitely easier for middle-aged academics like me, with houses and families and home offices, than it was for students, so many of whom were stuck in isolation in their bedsits and expected to prosper as normal while living and working entirely through a screen. Napoleon is supposed to have said ‘Tell me how a man lived when he was twenty, and I will explain the man to you’. This is why I worry so much for those who were students of about that age during the pandemic: times will heal for them, but only after personal journeys that the rest of us cannot guess.

Lessons have been learned: above all, the fact that we are a social species, and that in the education business (more, perhaps, than any other) we learn and grow and create only by working together as a community. Perhaps that justifies the social and intellectual space of a university in ways that were not obvious in the past. By the same token,

it offers a challenge to our profession's long-established working habits, especially our tendency to associate deliberate self-isolation with research productivity. I am writing this from the converted attic where I now do all of my writing and most of my reading. Is this practice sustainable?

EDWARD HERRING: In my update in the last issue of *Western Classics*, I predicted that the research that I have been pursuing since my return from sabbatical leave in 2018 would appear within the next year or so. Sixteen months have passed since I made that bold prediction but, as yet, nothing has appeared. I am, however, confident that my new book will be published during the summer. *Patterns in the Production of Paestan Red-Figure Pottery* is a companion to 2018's *Patterns in the Production of Apulian Red-Figure Pottery*, which came out in paperback late in 2020. The new book uses the same methodology to identify patterns in the production of different vessel shapes and iconographic themes in the red-figured pottery produced at Paestum in the fourth century BCE. The book also examines the figurative vessels produced in Applied Red at the same site and compares the Paestan and Apulian industries.

In the summer of 2020, I took over as head of discipline for a three-year term. I must record my gratitude to Pádraic Moran not just for his excellent stewardship of the discipline during his tenure but also for his unstinting generosity with his time and advice since I took up the role.

Finally, I have recently taken up a role as Area Editor with responsibility for the Bronze and Iron Ages in the Western Mediterranean for the *Wiley Encyclopedia of Ancient History*. I join the editorial team at what is an exciting stage in the development of the project, as we take advantage of the opportunities offered by the online format of the encyclopedia to expand its coverage significantly over the next five years.

PETER KELLY: I am currently trying to overcome the drone of distraction, which has prevented me from finalizing an article on the 'liliated' voice of cicadas in antiquity, which I am jointly writing with Michael Clarke. The article, which draws on both epic and philosophical material, has become something of a pandemic/environmental piece. I am seeking for one of the footnotes an article that appeared in an online journal

al *Cultural Entomology Digest*, which published a handful of issues in the mid-1990s, and which focused on the study of insects in cultural settings, including in the imaginative lives and products of the Greeks and Romans. Recently the URL that housed this journal was taken over by a pest control company, which has subsequently succeeded in not only eradicating these insects from our homes, but also destroying part of their cultural heritage. These important yet underread studies, which sought to bridge the gap between biology and culture, like the insect themselves, must at best seek an alternative habitat to continue their existence. Writing from memory, the main goal of the journal was to draw attention to what lies at our feet, to become mindful of the micro-elements of our environment in a way that unites the culturally and biologically overlooked.

I have also been exploring the interconnections between science and classics in my History of Science course, which proved to be a teaching highlight from the last year. Much of the course was taken over by a pedagogical game, where the students retried Galileo and ultimately excused him of the charge of heresy and where the students demonstrated the necessity that scientific advancements be integrated into society as a whole. Last month, I attempted to employ another pedagogical game from the same series set at the global climate summit in Copenhagen in 2009 (Cop15) with students from the MSc in Environmental Leadership. After some hours of negotiating, a viable climate treaty was formed, demonstrating, if we needed reminding, that our fragile future needs to be put in the hands of the young. I should, however, finish this update with a note of sadness and optimism, as I will soon be leaving Galway to take up a position in Princeton. I owe my thanks to so many people here for their continued support and encouragement over the many last years.

PÁDRAIC MORAN: It was a great relief that, despite the ongoing challenges of the pandemic, we managed to hold all of our lectures in person this year. Teaching is about exchange and should be a collaborative experience. As usual, there was very stimulating engagement from our students, especially from final-year students, who tend to be the most confident. But the challenges facing students—health, accommodation, cost of living, morale—seemed especially tangible this year. I hope that 2022–23 will be an opportunity for a fresh start, and that

some of these challenges can be ameliorated.

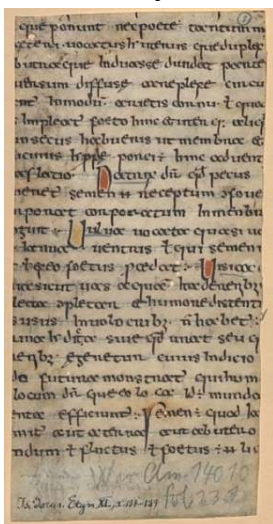
I was very proud of the publication of an article in January 2022 in the journal *Speculum*, co-written with John Whitman of Cornell University. This results directly from research trips I made to Japan to study Japanese manuscripts in 2013 and 2014. A group of us have been collaborating since then on ways in which reading practices involving glossing (annotations written between the lines and in the margins of manuscripts) were comparable in Europe and East Asia. Classical languages provide the framework. Latin and Classical Chinese were the dominant literary languages in these respective regions, but were often read by non-native speakers, who annotated their manuscripts instead in their native Old Irish or Japanese or other local languages. Our article makes a detailed comparison of these reading methods.

One outcome of this collaboration was the Network for the Study of Glossing (<http://www.glossing.org>), originally founded in 2015, which has since continued to grow. It now numbers 118 researchers from 21 countries, working on more than 20 glossing languages. It is immensely rewarding to find common ground with

researchers working in completely different fields, as it really helps you to find fresh perspectives on your own materials.

In 2021 I also launched a new online resource, *Manuscripts with Irish Associations* (<http://www.mira.ie>), a catalogue of manuscripts that provide the fundamental evidence for Latin culture in Ireland before the year 1000. At its core is a collection of 134 manuscripts

written in Ireland or in Irish script. The resource includes access to high-quality colour images for about half of these manuscripts, and they are often fascinating. The catalogue also contains about 160 other manuscripts that provide indirect evidence of various kinds—manuscripts copied from Irish exemplars now lost, for example, or containing Hiberno-Latin or Old Irish texts. This resource is still at an early stage but will form the basis of numerous projects relating to research, teaching and outreach that I am currently working on.



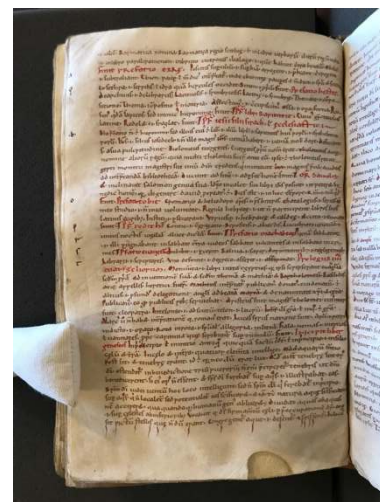
Postdoctoral Researchers

Reports on recent work

CIARÁN ARTHUR: I am working towards completing my second monograph, entitled *Ideas on Language and Biblical Heritage in Early Insular Intellectual Culture*. This book explores philosophical, philological, and theological approaches to and understandings of language itself in early medieval Europe (ca. 400–1100), particularly in English and Irish intellectual circles where vernacular study and literary composition flourished. It investigates various early medieval interpretations of biblical events concerning languages and origins, namely: the *logophatic* nature of Creation; the division of tongues and peoples at the Tower of Babel; the reunification of languages and ‘nations’ at Pentecost; and the language of the Elect in heaven.

I am also investigating how early medieval intellectuals attempted to retrospectively incorporate their own vernaculars and peoples into biblical history and to reinforce their inherited apostolic mission to evangelise to other nations in their own languages at the edges of the known world in what they believed to be the final age. Currently I am co-editing a volume with Sinéad O’Sullivan, entitled *Creating Knowledge in the Early Medieval Book: Practices of Collecting and Concealing*, which will be published in Brepols’ Publications of the Journal of Medieval Latin series.

SARAH CORRIGAN: As the *Ireland and Carolingian Brittany: Texts and Transmission* project enters its final year, I’m delighted to say that this March I was finally able to travel to France to see the manuscripts central to my research. I visited the Bibliothèque Carnegie in Reims and the Médiathèque in Orléans—one art deco, one modern, both wonderful places to work. There I consulted and collated the two witnesses to the compilation of biblical exegesis that I’m editing: Reims 395 (image above) and Orléans 182. Perha-



Current PhD research

Some reports on work in progress

ps the biggest surprise was the shock of colour that greeted me in Reims 395: until then I had been relying on the black and white microfilm images provided online and never was there a better example of why it is so critical to visit a manuscript in person.

NICOLAI ENGESLAND: I am currently working on a digital edition with analysis of *Auraicept na nÉces*. This is the earliest grammatical description of any European vernacular language. No comparable description of a vernacular is found in any European literature before we get the Icelandic *First Grammatical Treatise* towards the middle of the twelfth century and no similar defence of a vernacular is mounted before Dante Alighieri's defence of the Tuscan dialect in his *De vulgari eloquentia* at the turn of the fourteenth century. The text is therefore a crucial document for our appraisal of Irish and European vernacular activity during the Early Middle Ages.

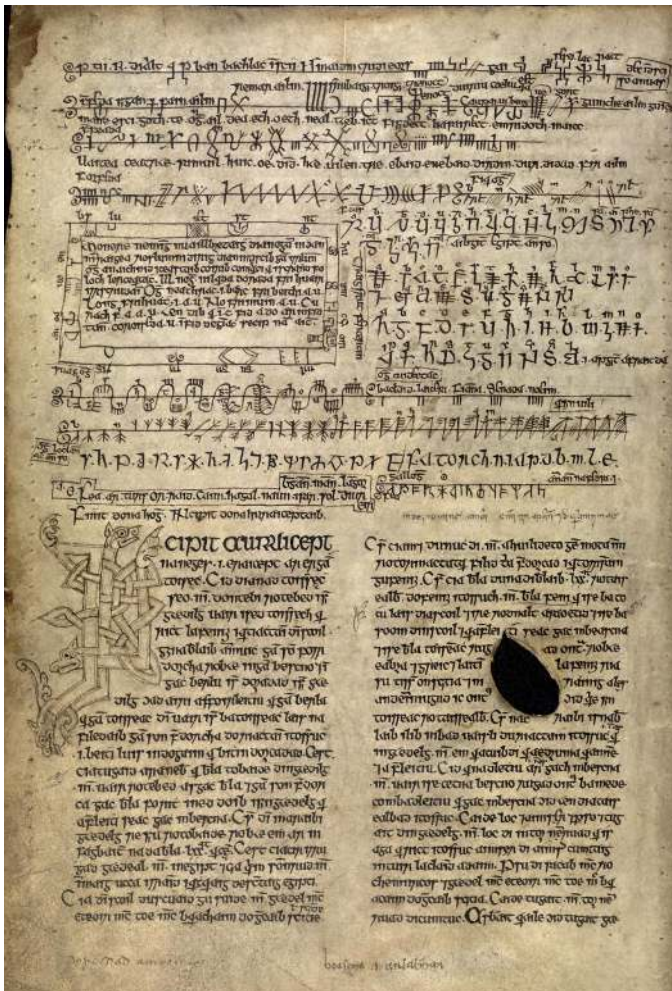


Image of *Auraicept na nÉces* from the Book of Ballymote, Royal Irish Academy, Dublin, MS 23 P 12, f. 170 v.

Image sourced from ISOS (Irish Script on Screen):

<https://www.isos.dias.ie/resources/image.html>

NOÉMI FARKAS-HUSSEY: 'Constructing the Good King: Biblical Exempla in Sedulius Scottus' *De Rectoribus Christianis*'. In the final stages of my research project, I am primarily focusing on clarifying the coherence and cohesion of the chapters of my thesis. At the moment, I am editing my third chapter (*Dux Christianus: Negotiating the Masculine Identity of the Carolingian Ruler*), which explores the ways Sedulius re-articulates biblical and Patristic references in the service of consolidating the gender identity of the ruler.

FRANCESCA GUIDO: 'De Analogia, ut ait Romanus: Recovering an embedded text in Charisius' Latin grammar'. I am currently working on the translation and commentary of chapter 1.17 of Charisius *Ars Grammatica*. This chapter represents an autonomous section within Charisius' larger grammatical compilation. It is ultimately a long list of 'problematic' words in which a contrast between use and rule is present. The doubtfulness of each entry (about 240 in total) is discussed by referring to other grammatical authorities (Caesar, Pliny the Elder and others) and literary quotes, some of which are well known (e.g. Vergil, Cicero) but many of which would have sounded quite obscure to the medieval reader, and do to the modern reader as well.

PAULA HARRISON: 'An examination of the astronomical and computistical compilation entitled *De astronomia* found in the early ninth-century manuscript Laon, Bibliothèque Municipale, 422'. This PhD research is conducted as part of the Irish Research Council funded Laureate project *Ireland and Carolingian Brittany: Texts and Transmission*. The study has focussed on an expanded version of the insular tract *De divisionibus temporum* ('Concerning the divisions of time') which is preserved in this compilation. It has been greatly expanded upon with the addition of grammatical and exegetical materials, and it features three Old Irish words embedded in the main text. Along with this, the 'augmented version' shares significant textual parallels with other Irish computistical texts, including those which have a uniquely Breton manuscript transmission.

ANN HURLEY: ‘The anonymous *Excidium Troiae*: reception and transmission in the medieval culture of the book’. The anonymous *Excidium Troiae* is a version of the Troy story, dated to the sixth century, which, alongside the better-known, counterfeit eyewitness report of Dares Phrygius, was a source for later tales on the fall of Troy. However, the *Excidium Troiae* has been largely overlooked in scholarly works on the narrative. Its importance as an educational aid has also never been fully investigated. My project examines the *Excidium Troiae* as a didactic text and explores its transmission in the historiographical tradition surrounding the Trojan narrative. I have recently completed work on the introduction to the *Excidium Troiae* found in a ninth-century manuscript housed in the Biblioteca Reale in Turin. I am now engaged in writing up my thesis for submission.

ANDREW LEVIE: ‘*The Faerie Queene* and the discourse of ethnogenesis in Elizabethan England and Ireland: Classical and medieval narratives’. My research project analyses how Edmund Spenser’s epic-romance *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596) undermines narrative historicism and then contrastingly engages in it. On one hand, it argues that Spenser, by manipulating sections and references from Classical and medieval texts, tries to debunk and subtly undermine the mystical vision that the sixteenth-century English were coming to have of themselves and their British-Trojan history. However, on the other hand, I am investigating how Spenser depicts the origins of the Irish by reworking and manipulating past texts, in an attempt to validate their ‘need’ for colonisation.

MARIA CHIARA MARZOLLA: In my project ‘Music and the Early Irish Church’, one of my main objectives is to distinguish between (1) music as a theoretical discipline and (2) music as actual performance. In my current chapter ‘Musical Instruments’, I am working to identify Hiberno-Latin texts that offer a clear distinction between music as a mere idealised component of the liberal arts, versus music as an ‘actual’ discipline with a developed theoretical background. Regarding musical performance, my research aims to identify sources showing a distinction between lay and liturgical musical practices. I am also carrying out an investigation on musical instruments in Hiberno-Latin sources, to define: (1) how their role, category (wind instruments, string instruments, etc.), and kind of sound are characterised;

(2) whether they were treated as real instruments, or whether their mentions mainly carry symbolic meanings.

ÉRIN MCKINNEY: ‘Linguistic code-switching in *Bethu Brigte*, the Old Irish Life of St Brigit’.

ELENA NORDIO: ‘Regionalism and Diversification in Seventh-Century Visigothic Latinity: A Sociolinguistic Approach’. This project seeks to contribute towards the research methodology concerning regional varieties of Latin during the Early Middle Ages, using seventh-century Visigothic Iberia as a case-study and focusing in particular on samples of manuscripts produced in that historical context. Currently, I am in the process of analysing the linguistic data collected from the manuscripts that constitute the corpus of my research. The results obtained will yield a more accurate image of the Latinity of a specific portion of the Iberian population (i.e. literate ecclesiastics) in the Early Middle Ages.

MARY SWEENEY: ‘Judean Identity in Second Century BCE Alexandria’. I am currently undertaking a philological examination of the fragmentary *Exagoge*, a Hellenistic Judean tragedy. By using *comparanda* from pagan Greek literature while simultaneously examining Hellenistic educational practices, my work highlights how Hellenistic Judean authors saw Greek texts as malleable tools, which they could call upon to display their own ideas and identities.

HARRY TANNER: ‘Greek Lexical Semantics’.

PHD COMPLETION:

YIANNIS DOUKAS & GRACE ATTWOOD

Congratulations to Yiannis Doukas who, on the 9 of February 2022, successfully passed the viva for his Digital Arts and Humanities funded project: ‘A Trojan Cycle for Late Antiquity: Intertextuality in Late Epic and its Digital Representation’.

Congratulations also to Grace Attwood who, on the 13 of May 2022, successfully passed the viva for her Irish Research Council funded project: ‘Describing the Indescribable: Lexical Obscurity and Biblical Exegesis in Early Medieval Ireland’.

Parting images from Rome

Pictures of Classically themed contemporary and street Art taken by Francesca Guido

Time is Out of Joint (below image) in the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome, where time is fluid, and artworks interact, making visitors feel part of that dialogue.



Canova's Hercules and Lica are immersed in a new frame and given a new life. The dialogue between the ancient myth, statuary models, and contemporary art finds a path in this neo-classical statue. Find out more at: <https://lagallerianazionale.com/mostra/time-is-out-of-joint>



Quousque tandem abutere [Catilina] patientia nostra?
(For how much longer will you abuse our patience, [Catalina]?) Via delle Terme di Diocleziano, Rome, 23 September 2022.



Will we make it? – Stairs between Via Cavour and Via Leonina, Rome, 23 September 2021.

Mateo Maté's *Venus Nera*

National Gallery of Modern And Contemporary Art, Rome.

Within the public program 'De-canon-izing, 2021'.

The *Venus nera* belong to Maté's project 'Canon' (2016), in which the Spanish artist explores the Classical canon in order to create a modern one that is able to reflect a new 'diffuse and disperse reality'.



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- (2) If you would like to receive occasional e-mails about news and upcoming events, send a blank e-mail to: nuig-classics+subscribe@groups.google.com
- (3) Social media junkies can also follow us on Twitter (@NUIGClassics)

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