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Swords, sandals, and toasted panini: delivering cine-antiquity to sixth form students

Edward Bragg

Teacher of Classics, Peter Symonds College, Winchester, Hampshire, UK.

Abstract

Teachers of Classics in sixth form colleges and secondary schools regularly provide extra-curricular activities alongside their bread-and-butter classes in Latin, Classical Civilisation, Ancient History, and Greek. With the on-going squeeze on the provision of these four classical subjects, it is inevitable that teachers of Classics look to other areas within their schools and colleges both to maintain and to promote the face of Classics. The purpose of this paper is to explain the delivery and the thinking behind a weekly extra-curricular activity called 'Classics on Film' that was set up at Peter Symonds College in 2018 and which has now continued for four years. This activity encompasses cine-antiquity; in other words, a class that focuses on films depicting the ancient world. By breaking down this project and some of its results, this paper aims to give teachers of Classics and others awareness of the methods, resources, and challenges when delivering an extra-curricular activity on cine-antiquity. Furthermore, it aims to provide a model that other teachers might adapt or use as a springboard for their own bespoke cine-antiquity activity.[1]

Key words: cine-antiquity, extra-curricular, enrichment, inter-disciplinary, A level Classical Civilisation

Nature of Peter Symonds student timetable

Peter Symonds is a sixth form college of around 4200 students based in Winchester, Hampshire. At the college an individual student normally takes 3 A levels, which in total entails15 55-minute lessons a week (from September 2022 as we return to our pre-Covid timetable), two 30-minute tutorials a week, a 45-minute lecture per fortnight and a single weekly enrichment activity. The thinking behind the weekly enrichment activity programme at Peter Symonds is to provide as broad as possible range of extra-curricular opportunities that cater to the diverse needs and tastes of 4200 sixth form students. During the academic year of 2021–2022 the college provided around 170 different enrichment activities across a wide range of disciplines. Some activities result in qualifications such as First Aid, Duke of Edinburgh, and Sports Leaders. Some involve team and individual sports, such as volleyball, tennis, and cheerleading. Some activities are specifically academic, such as Robotics, Sociology Documentaries, and Creative Writing, whilst some others are more focused on post-college plans such as Future Medics, First Aid training and Public Speaking. Several activities are fundamentally about providing an environment where the students can relax and socialise such as Colour Therapy, Chess Club, and Knit and Natter. When the students are considering their activity choices, these are the five aims cited within the fresher fair brochure:

Author for correspondence: Edward Bragg, E-mail: ebragg@psc.ac.uk

1) Participate in different activities throughout the year, 2) Learn new skills, 3) Be involved and connect with college life, 4) Meet new friends, and 5) Explore new ideas.

The teaching staff are regularly asked by the Enrichment Department to contribute to the extensive activities programme and in September 2018 when an hour became free in my timetable, the Head of Classics at Peter Symonds, Graham Gardner, suggested that we come up with a Classics activity that would appeal to a range of students and that is how in part the enrichment activity 'Classics on Film' originated.

Why set up an extra-curricular activity on cine-antiquity?

First of all, a major reason why many sixth form students pick up A level Classical Civilisation is because they have watched a cinematic or a televisual depiction of the ancient world. Three films that are frequently cited by students taking Classical Civilisation at Peter Symonds are Disney's *Hercules*, *The 300*, and Ridley Scott's *Gladiator*. Each year we teach A level Classical Civilisation to between 140 to 160 students and many of these students are direct with the reasons why they chose this A level.[2] So, we thought that an activity that plays on what triggered their interest would strengthen the students' passion for Classics and perhaps encourage new students to consider picking up the subject at A level. In addition, we are very conscious that much of the information about Classical Civilisation and Latin at Peter Symonds occurs by word of mouth through Classics students in their other A level classes, via friendship groups, and back home through parents, siblings, and

even cousins. By feeding these indirect means of dissemination with a lively intellectual activity we hoped that it would widen the recognition of Classics as a discipline both amongst the student body of the college and hopefully further afield. Boiling it down, there is clearly a marketing aim behind this activity.

Secondly, in the last two decades there has been substantial research on the cinematic depiction of ancient Greece and Rome. For example, Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones has delivered some fascinating interpretations of how the figure of Cleopatra has been perceived and exploited within Hollywood (Llewellyn-Jones, 2002). Another scholar, Jo Paul, has also highlighted the significant role played by chariot races within the epic genre (Paul, 2013). Recently, Monica Cyrino has raised the issue of how cine-antiquity is an important vehicle by which actors like Dwayne Johnson further and enhance their cinematic careers (Cyrino, 2020). Finally, Blanshard and Shahabudin, have convincingly argued for the strong cultural importance of cine-antiquity and how it both reflects and supports the continued study of Classics (Blanshard & Shahabudin, 2011). A core aim of the project was to give students at Peter Symonds an opportunity to experience some of the fruits of this significant academic research and make clear links to the university environment that many of them are aspiring to join as undergraduates.

Thirdly, the project wanted to deliver an inter-disciplinary activity that gave students the opportunity both to relax and to learn during their busy week. It should be noted that there is no formal assessment during or at the end of this activity, so there is no academic pressure on the participants. In addition, many of the academic enrichment activities provided by the college are subject-specific, often serving an exclusive cohort of students. For example, there is the Chemistry Practical Club and the German Grammar and Conversation activity. The activity 'Classics on Film' deliberately aimed to cater for a broad spectrum of students at Peter Symonds with different interests and tastes. The wonderful thing about cine-antiquity is it is a genre that encompasses many different disciplines, such as literature, art, history, politics, music, and special effects. A core aim of this project was to highlight and to explain many of these cultural influences and so give the students food for thought both during and after the activity.

As soon as the project was given the green light in the summer of 2018, a number of challenges soon became apparent.

Challenge number 1: When, where, and how long?

In a normal academic year there are a total of between 20 and 23 lunchtime sessions across the autumn and spring terms during which to deliver this enrichment activity at Symonds. (The activities programme does not run during the summer term). Each lunchtime session is about 50 minutes, which means a window of about 40 to 45 minutes for each session. Originally, we aimed to run the activity in a large standard classroom, but then a colleague in the Film Studies department suggested that we use the college's Science Lecture Theatre, as it has a large projector, a good-quality sound system, and a very good lighting system.[3] This meant that with the lights down, the volume up, and the film projected onto the big screen we were able to organise a highly effective cinematic experience for the students.

Challenge number 2: What can be delivered in the 40–45 minute window?

With its multiple aims and diverse range of students, we had to find a balance between, on the one hand, simply watching film clips and, on the other hand, allowing the students to gain some understanding about the context and craftsmanship of each film.

We were determined to give the students a foundation of knowledge on that week's film from which they could grasp some of its cultural influences and then also appreciate its strengths and weaknesses. Then at the end of the session we wanted the students to give their immediate opinion about the film. It should be noted that this activity was open to any student in the college, regardless of their current studies or previous qualifications. When 'Classics on Film' was up and running, it was clear that different sorts of students were signing up. There was a mix of Classics students, some Film Studies students, and many who had little knowledge about the literature, art and history of the ancient world. After some trial and error, the standard weekly class entailed about 8 to 10 minutes of verbal contextual information backed up by PowerPoint slides and then about 28 to 32 minutes of that week's film.

Challenge number 3: Which films should be included within the activity?

One major challenge was selecting the specific films to be included within the activity. When setting up the activity a number of colleagues jokingly recommended that we should not put on either *Caligula* (1979) or the comedy *Up Pompeii!* (1971). Going beyond these well-intentioned warnings, it is much more interesting to think about the other side of the coin. Of the many films that depict the Graeco-Roman world, which films from this genre would be suitable for this project? Which products of cine-antiquity would both enlighten and entertain sixth form students? Which selection of films would most effectively get across a broad range of themes and ideas that reflect the genre of cine-antiquity? The one academic work that was heavily drawn on during this process was *Classics on Screen: Ancient Greece and Rome on Film* by Alastair Blanshard and Kim Shahabudin (2011). Many of the films eventually selected came from this textbook as it systematically analyses some of the significant examples of cine-antiquity. Other helpful recommendations were also gratefully suggested by fellow Classics teachers and academics, most notably Professor Emma Stafford, Miss Rachel Hopley, and Dr Mike Beer. After four years of running the project, a list of 24 films has been selected, and these are:

Cleopatra (1934), *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Ulysses* (1954), *Helen of Troy* (1956), *Hercules* (1958), *Ben Hur* (1959), *Spartacus* (1960), *The 300 Spartans* (1962), *Cleopatra* (1963), *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964), *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966), *The Life of Brian* (1979), *Clash of the Titans* (1981), *Masada* (1981), *Hercules* (1997), *The Odyssey* (1997), *Gladiator* (2000), *Julius Caesar* (2002), *Alexander* (2004), *Troy* (2004), *300* (2006), *Clash of the Titans* (2010), *Pompeii* (2014).[4]

Challenge number 4: In what order should we watch the selected films?

After the films had been selected, the order in which they should we looked at on a weekly basis had to be decided. Originally, in 2018, we considered looking at the films in the chronological order of when they had been released, so the students could identify and appreciate change over time. Then the concern arose that if we looked at the films produced in the 1950s and 1960s during the period of September and October, such as *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Helen of Troy* (1956), and *Hercules* (1958), the students might find these sessions a bit repetitive on account of their similar stylistic approaches. As result, a more thematic approach was soon adopted.

We then made the autumn term the ancient Greece term and the spring term the ancient Rome term, with a small crossover just before Christmas. Consequently, within the 23 sessions, the following thematic sub-topics developed: Homer, Greek Heroes, Greek Warfare, Comedy, Cleopatra, Imperial Rome, Gladiators, and finally Roman Warfare. The opening session in early September involved a brief overview of the activity's aims and then kicked off with the Medusa myth and how the two *Clash of the Titans* films in 1981 and 2010 portrayed the death of Medusa. As a result of this thematic approach, the following running order eventually developed.

Week 1: **Introduction** to activity. Then a comparison between the Medusa scenes from *Clash of the Titans* (1981) and *Clash of the Titans* (2010).

Weeks 2-5 **Homer:** *Ulysses* (1954), *The Odyssey* (1997), *Helen of Troy* (1956), *Troy* (2004).

Weeks 6-8 **Greek heroes:** *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963), *Hercules* (1958), *Hercules* (1997).

Weeks 9-11 **Greek warfare:** *The 300 Spartans* (1962), *300* (2006), *Alexander* (2004).

Weeks 12-13 **Comedy:** *The Life of Brian* (1979), [Christmas break], *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (1966).

Weeks 14-15 **Cleopatra:** Cleopatra (1934) and Cleopatra (1963)

Weeks 16-18 **Imperial Rome:** *Quo Vadis* (1951), *Ben Hur* (1959), *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1964).

Weeks 19-21 **Gladiators:** *Spartacus* (1960), *Gladiator* (2000), *Pompeii* (2014).

Weeks 22-23 **Roman warfare:** *Masada* (1981), *Julius Caesar* (2002).

This thematic running order had various benefits. The students could still see change over time by comparing how Hollywood treated the same topics such as Homer's *Odyssey*, the Battle of Thermopylae, and Cleopatra. It also enabled the students to identify recurring concepts and approaches within these genres e.g. how film-makers depict gods and monsters. Furthermore, this thematic approach allowed the students to contrast the different special effects available to filmmakers when depicting the ancient world. For example, we contrasted the 'Stop Motion Animation' technique employed by the animator Ray Harryhausen in *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963) and in *Clash of the Titans* (1981) with the extensive CGI effects employed in more recent releases such as *Gladiator* (2000) and *Pompeii* (2014) (see Figure 1). This approach also resulted in the beneficial pairing up of certain films such as *The Spartans* (1962) and the *300* (2006).

Challenge number 5: Which scenes from that week's film should we watch?

A balance had to be found between getting the core story across and highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of that week's selection, and simply putting on the most eye-catching sections of the film. We also had to make sure that the episodes selected made up a total of about 28–32 minutes. Sometimes this selection process was straightforward, such as when preparing the 1959 version of *Ben Hur* as three key scenes from this film stood out: a) the opening meeting between Hur and Messala, b) the naval battle, and c) the chariot race (see Figure 2). Often, however, the selection process was fiddly and involved watching certain scenes repeatedly to work out the best places to start and to finish each scene. For instance, preparing the 1964 film *The Fall of the Roman Empire* was very tricky. This epic film of imperial Rome has a large cast of characters, a convoluted plot, elaborate sets, and runs for a lengthy 172 minutes as the story criss-crosses the provinces of the Roman Empire. So, which 28–32 minutes should be selected from the 172 minutes? After some thought, it was decided to focus on the contests between Livius and Commodus including a chariot race and the final single combat, where the climax of the story occurs. The original four-minute trailer of the 1964 film was also played prior to the film scenes, which allowed the students to see the epic multi-faceted nature of the film, how it was marketed in the 1960s, and also Alec Guinness' unique portrayal of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius.[5]

Most films worked well with this method of selecting three to six key scenes. One film, however, was too challenging for this selection methodology. This was Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004) on account of its sprawling complicated plot over its 175 minutes. As a result, we decided to select a single lengthy sequence of 31 minutes from the middle of the film, which covers the entire Battle of Gaugamela up to Alexander's entry to Babylon. The students could then appreciate the extraordinary battle sequences, Vangelis'

Figure 1. The bronze giant Talos from *Jason and the Argonauts* (1963).

Figure 2. Charlton Heston in his quadriga from *Ben Hur* (1959).

wonderful soundscape, and also enjoy the entertaining Celtic accents of Alexander and his lieutenants (see Figure 3).

Challenge number 6: How should violent scenes be treated?

In spite of the films being classified either a 15, a PG or a U and the sixth form students being 16, 17 or 18, we were, nonetheless, conscious that there were going to be a few violent scenes that had to be sensitively handled. On the one hand, we did not want to adopt a Mary Whitehouse approach censoring out key scenes, as these omissions might undermine the narrative and the students' understanding of the film. On the other hand, we did not want sensitive students being shocked and upset with blood-curdling violence. There are an increasing number of anxious students on our registers, since coming out of the pandemic. The films that we took the most care with were the *300* (2006), *Alexander* (2004), and

Gladiator (2000). After consulting a colleague in the Film Studies department at Peter Symonds, we adopted their sensible approach when studying films that entailed violence within their A level course. This was to give the students unambiguous verbal warnings about the upcoming violence. On top of this, we also put up a visual warning prior to these violent scenes, so the students were clearly pre-warned.

The standard structure of a 40–45 minute cine-antiquity class

During the first year of the project a standard structure and the resources of the weekly activity evolved. The key tools are a PowerPoint presentation, the DVD of the film, and a script with the key facts of the film and the timings of the selected scenes. The first few minutes would see the students enter, register electronically, and then settle down. As this was happening, a poster of that week's

Figure 3. The cavalry charge at the Battle of Gaugamela from *Alexander* (2004).

film was projected on the big screen with its title and year of release. At the same time a segment of the film's soundtrack would be playing in the background. Then after a few minutes, I (the teacher) would verbally deliver the historical and modern context of the film. The Powerpoint slides are a valuable support in this process as they convey important visual and textual information during the verbal introduction, such as relevant images (e.g. maps, costumes, and film sets) as well as specifics about the cast, production, and plot of the film. Then, after indicating which scenes we would watch, the lights were lowered and we would watch 3 to 6 selected scenes from the film, at times providing verbal explanations between scenes to ensure gaps in the narrative were covered. Then at the end the lights were raised, and the students would then give their opinion about the film: either a raised or lowered thumb. Some students would even waggle their thumb up and down indicating their mixed opinion of the film. Then next week's film was publicised, and the students would depart.

Case Study: *Spartacus* (1960)

As the students entered the lecture hall, the film poster of *Spartacus* (1960) was up on the screen with the soundtrack by Alex North playing to create atmosphere. After the students settled down, some key historical background to this period of Roman history was verbally delivered using a map, some names, and key events behind the Spartacus Revolt up on the Powerpoint slides. The plot of the film was then explained, supported by some relevant information about its cast (e.g. Woody Strode being one of Hollywood's first leading black actors), its difficult production (e.g. the initial director being fired), and its successful reception (e.g. winning four Oscars). We then watched six scenes from the film. The duel between Spartacus and Draba worked especially well as the students could view a dramatic gladiator fight that did not depend on CGI (see Figure 4). The famous oysters and snails' scene was also included, (which I explained had been edited out of the original 1960 release but included in the 1990 re-release (Blanshard & Shahabudin, 2011).

Then, after 45 minutes, the students gave their opinion about the film. As they left, the final crucifixion of Spartacus was frequently the main talking point of the departing students.

The outcomes of the project

1) Attendance and student feedback

Looking at other enrichment activities, we originally estimated that about 20–30 students would sign up for the activity. This last academic year of 2021–2022 ended up with an average of 45 on the register in the Autumn and Spring terms with an average of about 35 turning up per lunchtime. In the 2022 cross-college survey, there was a warm response to the activity. 95% of the students who signed up for the class in 2021–2022 ticked the box 'Agree' in response to the statement: 'The activity has been stimulating and interesting', with 44% of these respondents strongly agreeing with the statement. 92% of students were also glad they chose the activity, with 60% of these respondents strongly agreeing with their choice.[6] Anecdotally, there have been some memorable comments from the students at the end of each session. For instance, after we looked at the 1963 film *Cleopatra* student comments included: 'Elizabeth Taylor looks like a real woman' and 'Why aren't there actresses like her in today's films?' There have also been some specific requests. After watching *Troy* (2004) where the duel between Achilles and Hector caused some unexpected laughter amongst the students, one student made the following request. 'Could you please stop people from laughing at key moments during the film.' A number of students did find the 1934 black and white version of *Cleopatra* very dated with some commenting that it felt theatrical and amateurish.

2) Diverse range of supporting images available on cine-antiquity

As a consequence of the news media, research into cine-antiquity, and fan websites, there are numerous images available about the production, marketing, and impact of the films selected. These

Figure 4. The duel between Spartacus and Draba from *Spartacus* (1960).

images are a wonderful means of providing contextual information to the students. For instance, the Stephen Boyd fan site is fascinating with some wonderful shots of Stephen Boyd on the sets of *Ben Hur* and *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.[7] We also came across photographs of American protests in 1979 against Monty Python's *The Life of Brian*, which demonstrated the reaction of religious groups to this important satirical film. Then, when researching Disney's 1997 film *Hercules* the strong influence of the British cartoonist Gerald Scarfe became apparent. Scarfe was the concept artist behind Pink Floyd's *The Wall* (Rebello & Healey, 1997). It was wonderful coming across some of Scarfe's pre-production sketches for the Disney film, such as those of Hercules fighting the Hydra. These pictures indicated that the animated depiction of the hero Hercules had not been completely sugar-coated by the Disney Corporation. The many posters employed to market these films also provided excellent backdrops as the students entered the lecture theatre.

3) Fascinating facts about cine-antiquity

During this project many fascinating facts came to the fore about these films depicting the ancient world. For instance, Liz Taylor in *Cleopatra* (1963) achieved a world record for the most costume changes in a film with a total of 65 different costumes (see Figure 5).[8] In addition, some of the costumes employed in the 1963 film *Cleopatra* were re-used in the 1964 comedy *Carry on Cleo*.[9] When the *Life of Brian* was released in 1979 it was banned in a number of countries including Norway. This ban became part of the marketing for the comedy film including this line in Sweden: 'The film that is so funny that it was banned in Norway.'[10]

Another discovery involved the treatment of the Hercules myth by the Disney organisation. As part of the marketing of the animated film *Hercules* in 1997 there was a 'Hercules Light Parade' organised on the streets of New York on June 14th.[11] Footage of the parade can be found on YouTube and is shown to the students prior to watching the film.[12] It is strange seeing mythic characters like Hercules and Hades reduced to brightly-lit motorised floats as American commentators on live television promote the ideology of the Disney organisation.

4) Soundtracks of cine-antiquity

It is wonderful how many high-quality original soundtracks have been composed for the films that depict the Graeco-Roman World.

Figure 5. Liz Taylor in one of her sixty-five different costumes from *Cleopatra* (1963).

Figure 6. Claudette Colbert from *Cleopatra* (1934).

These orchestrated soundtracks are often an integral part of conveying the mood and narrative of these films (Solomon, 2001). Employing YouTube to play the soundtrack of that week's film alongside an accompanying poster as the students entered the lecture theatre was an effective way of generating an audio-visual atmosphere prior to providing the contextual information. For example, Hans Zimmer's soundtrack of *Gladiator* creates a booming martial environment, and the *Life of Brian*'s soundtrack generates a festive vibe prior to the Christmas break. Delivering the enrichment activity in the college's Science Lecture Theatre with its extensive sound-system helps deliver this key component of cine-antiquity.

5) The pairing up of films

One of the most rewarding and constructive developments of the project was the pairing up of some of the selected films with matching stories across a fortnight. This resulted in the students seeing how two different films treated the same myth or historical event. For example, *Ulysses* from 1954 was matched up with the *Odyssey* from 1997 in the Autumn term and then in the Spring term the 1934 black and white *Cleopatra* was paired up with the 1963 technicolour *Cleopatra*.

These pairings enabled the students see how directors like Cecil B De Mille and Joseph L. Mankiewicz adapted and delivered the same core narrative. The students could also compare the abilities of different actors playing the same role, such as Kirk Douglas and Armand Assante as Ulysses/Odysseus and Claudette Colbert and Liz Taylor as Cleopatra (see Figure 6).

Conclusions

It is important to put this enrichment activity into the context of the academic system in England and Wales, where students who have taken between 6 to 10 GCSEs in year 11, then focus on three A level subjects prior to university in years 12 and 13. This sudden focus on only three academic subjects frequently limits and stifles a student's broad academic experience. At Peter Symonds College, we continue to actively pursue an extensive enrichment programme to ensure students have a broad as possible timetable. It must be added that the college also offers the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ), which many students pursue during their second year in addition to their 3 A levels. The enrichment activity 'Classics on Film' is part

of the continued effort to provide a broad academic experience. In the 2022 cross-college survey, it was great to see that many of the students responded positively to this enrichment activity. It is clear from what students are telling us, that they are not only watching some of these films in their own time, but they are also reading the ancient texts from which some of these films originate. If you are considering setting up an enrichment activity on cine-activity, make sure you put time into identifying the various upcoming challenges, make sure you ask colleagues in different departments for advice, and make sure you draw on good supporting resources, such as Blanshard and Shahabudin's *Classics on Screen* (2011). Hopefully such an extra-curricular activity will add another string to the bow of your classics department.[13]

Notes

1 Preceding versions of this paper were delivered at the Cambridge Schools Classics Project annual conference in April 2018 and at the Classical Association annual conference at Swansea in April 2022. Thank you to Miss Caroline Bristow and Miss Mish Bancroft for supporting the initial delivery of this paper.
2 In 2021-2022 about 160 students took A level Classical Civilisation and 13 students took A level Latin at Peter Symonds College.
3 Thank-you to Miss Amy Charlewood in the Film Studies department at Peter Symonds for the advice about the Science Lecture Theatre and also for the valuable guidance about film scenes depicting violence.
4 In the academic year of 2022-2023 we will be adding the film *Hercules* (2014) starring Dwayne Johnson to the list.
5 Paramount Movies (2013, November 13) 'Fall of the Roman Empire – Trailer' [Video]. Available online: YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sQ-sPXgSWCs, (accessed 10th August 2022).
6 Thank you to Mr Jason Bushell in the MIS department and Mr Nick Allen the Quality Manager at Peter Symonds for the data from the 2022 cross-college survey on the 'Classics on Film' activity.

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13 All the images come from the IMDB website. www.imdb.com

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