


Artigos

Popularizing classics: reflections on contributions from Polish experiences


Popularizando as clássicas: reflexões sobre as contribuições de experiências polonesas

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Abstract: In the 21st century, Polish classicists face numerous challenges, including the declining popularity of classical studies among the general public, the withdrawal of Latin teaching from secondary schools, and a lack of funding for scientific activity. Notwithstanding the aforementioned challenges, classicists persist in their endeavours with unwavering dedication, both within the confines of their professional obligations and in their spare time. They frequently extend their expertise to a diverse audience, often on a *pro bono* basis. With an unwavering commitment and passion, they endeavour to inspire future generations and cultivate a fascination for antiquity. The aim of this paper is to present a concise report on the extramural activity of Polish classicists, with a particular emphasis on their educational and popularising projects.

Keywords: Poland, Classics, Latin, Greek, classical education.

Resumo: No século XXI, os classicistas poloneses enfrentam numerosos desafios, entre os quais se destacam o declínio da popularidade dos estudos clássicos junto ao público em geral, a retirada do ensino de latim das escolas de nível secundário e a falta de financiamento para a atividade científica. Apesar desses desafios, os classicistas persistem em seus esforços com dedicação inabalável, tanto no âmbito de suas obrigações profissionais quanto em seu tempo livre. Com frequência, colocam seus conhecimentos a serviço de um público diversificado, muitas vezes de forma voluntária. Com compromisso e paixão constantes, buscam inspirar as futuras gerações e cultivar o fascínio pela antiguidade. O objetivo deste artigo é apresentar um breve relatório sobre as atividades extramuros dos classicistas poloneses, com especial ênfase em seus projetos educativos e de divulgação.

Palavras-chave: Polônia, Estudos Clássicos, latim, grego, educação clássica.

The pedagogy of classical languages (Latin and Greek) in Poland boasts a long-standing tradition, albeit the intensity of this pedagogy has, naturally, been contingent on historical and political circumstances. Since the dawn of its statehood in the 10th century AD, Poland has been a part of the Latin cultural sphere. Latin was the language of the royal court and the intellectual, artistic and religious elites of the state. The Polish language has developed in parallel with Latin, borrowing numerous terms from it, especially specialized terminology. Consequently, the Polish upper classes were bilingual, which facilitated their affiliation with the broader European Latin cultural sphere and engagement in its spiritual and artistic pursuits. They were therefore “internally shaped by the classical world – Latin language and literature largely determined their view of reality” (Ochman, 2021, p. 71). The utilisation of Latin as the official language in Poland continued uninterrupted until the country underwent the process of partition. At that time, the territory of Poland was divided between three powers (the Habsburg monarchy, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Russian Empire), and the Polish state officially ceased to exist. The Polish population residing within the jurisdiction of foreign powers underwent a process of involuntary denationalisation, characterised by the prohibition of the utilisation of the Polish language and the promotion of Polish traditions and cultural practices. Notwithstanding this, Latin survived as a school subject and was taught in schools and universities, albeit with varying intensity depending on the partition. At the beginning of the 20th century, significant changes occurred, leading to a reduction in the comprehensive classical education that had previously formed the foundation of humanities education in Poland. This education was narrowed down to encompass the teaching of Latin and select aspects of ancient culture (Ryba, 2022, p. 5). In the interwar period, the importance of Latin underwent a marked decline. However, the most rapid and visible decline in the teaching of Latin and classical culture in Poland occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War, when the communist authorities decided that “classical culture and languages are a very strong link connecting our nation with Western civilisation” (Stabryła, 2012, p. 2).¹ Despite the fall of communism in 1989, the status of Latin did not improve. This situation may be attributed to the prevailing crisis in Polish humanities, as well as to the evolving social expectations concerning the preparation of young people for entering the labour market (Czetwertyńska, 2016, p. 287-293). There was a discernible shift away from general education towards a greater emphasis on the teaching of technical subjects that were designed to prepare students for specific professions. The turn of the 20th to the 21st century witnessed a series of revolutionary changes to the Polish education system, with the reorganisation of the teaching system being a key development. A considerable number of

advocates of classical education perceived these developments as a potential opportunity to enhance the status of Latin curriculum in secondary educational institutions. However, these expectations were to be swiftly confounded. Latin has not successfully re-established its former status within secondary educational institutions. Moreover, there has been a systematic and gradual elimination of Latin from the curriculum of select humanities degree programmes at universities. This situation gave rise to a wide-ranging initiative undertaken by Classicists, secondary school Latin teachers and all those who still see a lasting and universal value in a thorough humanities education.² The demands formulated by the community of Classicists have yielded results, with the status of Latin in secondary schools improving marginally. It must be acknowledged that this is not a perfect scenario, and it may not fully meet the expectations of all those who advocate for the teaching of Latin. Nevertheless, it is unquestionably a positive development and, more importantly, a compelling motivation for Classicists to persist in their arduous endeavours to promote ancient culture. As R. Toczko (2022, p. 31) succinctly summarises, classical philologists are faced with a substantial set of requirements: “We should demand that our ancient scholars demonstrate that classical tradition is alive, that they highlight its value and relevance in an appealing way, that they ensure its presence in contemporary culture, and that they effectively seek allies to support their efforts.” This is the most fundamental aspiration of those engaged in the teaching Latin, yet it is an endeavour that is not without its complexities. The ability to engage the audience in a captivating manner, particularly in the context of the overstimulated realities of the 21st century, poses a significant challenge. Those with no expertise in the field of antiquity frequently accuse classicists of coming from a bygone era, engrossed in a static milieu of culture and languages that have become obsolete. Polish classicists are thus endeavouring to demonstrate that the exploration of antiquity in contemporary world can prove to be both engaging and inspirational. The present article aims to demonstrate the tasks undertaken by them in order to promote the teaching of Latin and ancient culture beyond the walls of universities.

Firstly, however, it would be beneficial to consider the Latin and antiquity curriculum currently implemented in secondary schools and universities in Poland.

Classics in contemporary Polish universities – a short background

The discipline of Classics is currently taught at a total of 10 universities across Poland.³ These include: University of Warsaw, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, University of

Gdańsk, Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń, Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, University of Łódź, University of Wrocław, Jagiellonian University in Kraków, John Paul II Catholic University in Lublin, and University of Silesia in Katowice.⁴ These universities employ approximately 139 members of staff, including teaching and research staff.⁵ In Poland, academic studies are conducted in accordance with the Bologna system, which entails the structuring of educational programmes into two distinct stages: a three-year bachelor's degree and a subsequent two-year master's degree. The programme of Classics in Polish universities includes the study of two ancient languages: Latin and Greek, as well as two modern languages selected by the students (i.e. German, English, Italian, Modern Greek, and Spanish). Moreover, the curriculum encompasses a comprehensive range of subjects, including ancient and medieval Greek and Roman literature, the history of Mediterranean countries, mythology and religion, philosophy, archaeology, and art history. Annually, between 20 and 40 students are admitted to the first year of Classics. This includes individuals who have had the opportunity to learn Latin during their secondary education, as well as those who do not possess any familiarity with this language.

Latin in the secondary school curriculum

Prior to the university stage, Latin can be studied in some secondary schools.⁶ Greek does not feature in the core curriculum for school education (it was last featured in the curriculum in 2002). Consequently, if it is taught in any secondary school, it is rather as an additional subject, financed from additional funds allocated by the school's governing body (Ryba, 2022, p. 6).

According to Żuchowska (2024, p. 6), in the school year 2023/2024, there were the following opportunities to teach Latin in Polish schools:⁷

1. Latin language and antiquity culture in the extended scope (240 hours) in general secondary schools;
2. Latin and Ancient Culture in the basic level (30 hours) in general secondary schools;
3. Latin as a second foreign language in the basic level (120 hours) in lower secondary and upper secondary schools;
4. Latin as a second foreign language in the basic level (240 hours) in general secondary schools and technical secondary schools in two options:
learning the language from scratch;
continuation from primary school.

As indicated by data supplied by the Polish Philological Association, within the scope of its “Latin-friendly school” initiative, Latin and ancient culture is currently taught to varying degrees in 286 schools⁸ out of a total of 3179.⁹

In comparison, within other European countries, secondary school pupils have the opportunity to study Latin for a significantly greater number of hours. Furthermore, pupils in Europe begin their education with Latin on average three to four years earlier than their Polish peers (Toczko, 2014, p. 68). The most recent data concerning the teaching of Greek and Latin in Europe is presented in the Eurydice report (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2023, p. 61-64). The data demonstrate that “classical languages are compulsory for at least some upper secondary students in almost half of all European countries”. In the Balkan countries of Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia, Latin is a compulsory subject for all secondary school pupils. In a further 13 education systems, Latin is compulsory only for students on specific pathways. These systems include those of Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, Croatia, Italy, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Romania, Slovenia, Serbia, Switzerland and Liechtenstein. In France, all students enrolled in secondary education have the opportunity to pursue classical Greek or Latin as an optional subject. In 11 countries, secondary school pupils have the opportunity to learn Latin as part of a specific pathway (Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Spain, Luxembourg, Austria, Portugal, Slovenia, Liechtenstein, North Macedonia, Norway). Furthermore, Greek language instruction is available in 11 countries (Belgium, Denmark, Spain, Luxembourg, Austria, Portugal, Slovenia, Serbia, North Macedonia and Norway) under analogous conditions. Conversely, Poland is one of 13 countries where classical languages are neither a compulsory subject nor one that students can choose to study. Classical languages may be taught as optional subjects, selected from a range of other options.

Unfortunately, in Poland optional learning and a limited number of Latin lessons are inadequate for the cultivation of a widespread, societal appreciation of both Latin and broader ancient culture. Furthermore, there appears to be a decline in the number of schools offering Latin on an annual basis. Consequently, there is a necessity to popularise antiquity, a task that falls to academics and secondary school teachers.

Extramural activities of classics’ scholars

The present study set out to examine the methods employed by classicists to promote awareness of antiquity among the public, with a particular focus on the role of these scholars outside academic institutions. The focal point of this investigation pertains to the potential contributions of classicists in the dissemination of

knowledge from antiquity within contemporary society. This society is predominantly oriented towards the pursuit of expeditious and ostensibly spectacular outcomes, along with the undertaking of endeavours that are deemed to be highly advantageous.

The development of a questionnaire has been undertaken as a preparatory measure for this paper. The questionnaire was disseminated to all Polish universities offering programmes in Classics. The response to the questionnaire has been somewhat limited; however, the respondents' replies have provided sufficient detailed information to provide a comprehensive overview of the non-academic activities of classicists.¹⁰

The Survey

The survey comprised 19 questions. Primarily, the objective was to ascertain whether academics had ever been involved in promoting knowledge about antiquity outside the walls of universities and who their audience was. Most academics were involved in the popularisation of knowledge of antiquity among non-university audiences (72%). The audience was predominantly composed of secondary adults, followed by secondary school pupils and a smaller number of primary school pupils. A mere 2 per cent of the audience were pre-school children (Fig. 1).

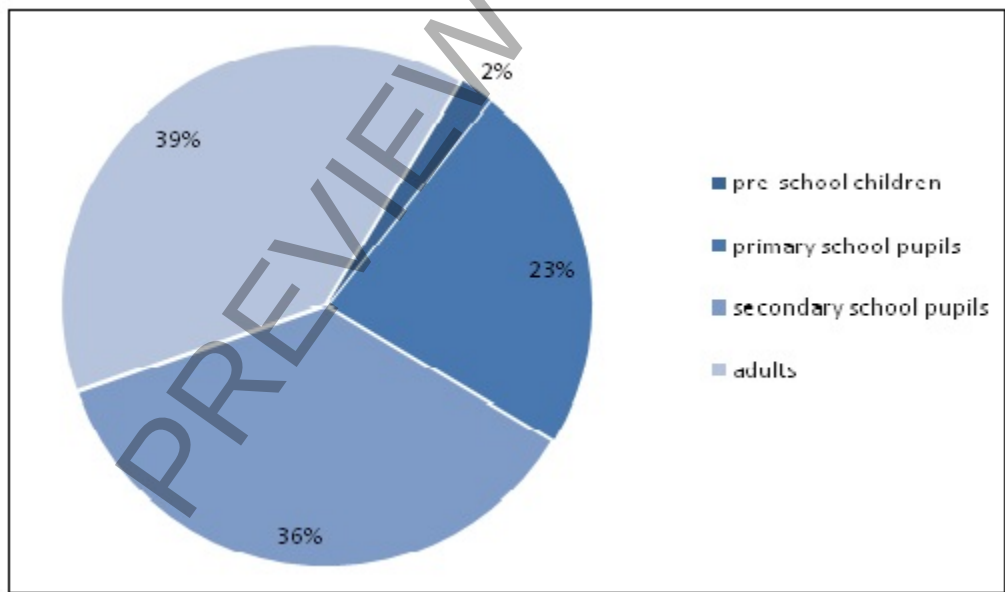


FIGURE 1
The composition of the audience

Most events concerning the popularisation of antiquity occurred within the premises of university buildings (35%); a slightly smaller number were hosted in educational institutions (20%) and online (20%). The popularisation of antiquity was also facilitated by libraries

(13%). Other potential venues that have been proposed include museums, foundations, the city centre (i.e. the town square) and even the National Stadium in Warsaw.

The most frequently chosen subject for meetings was literature (25%), followed by history (21%) and language (18%). This was followed by the disciplines of art (10%), mythology (13%) and philosophy (7%). In addition to the aforementioned responses, individual answers were provided, including those relating to the reception of antiquity, religion, mathematics, astronomy, biology, chemistry, the history of science and archaeogenetics. The majority of projects involved regular meetings (65%). The occurrence of one-off meetings was less frequent (35%).

It is noteworthy that the majority of academic projects, amounting to 78%, have led to the establishment of a database comprising materials that have demonstrated remarkable potential for reuse in diverse academic endeavours. These include board games, multimedia presentations, books, films, newspaper articles, worksheets, mini escape rooms and playing cards.

Initiation of projects was almost equal between academics (30%) and cultural institutions (27%), and somewhat less frequent among the recipients themselves (16%), larger groups of classicists, and other parties. The lowest number of projects were initiated by the authorities of universities (11%) or institutes.

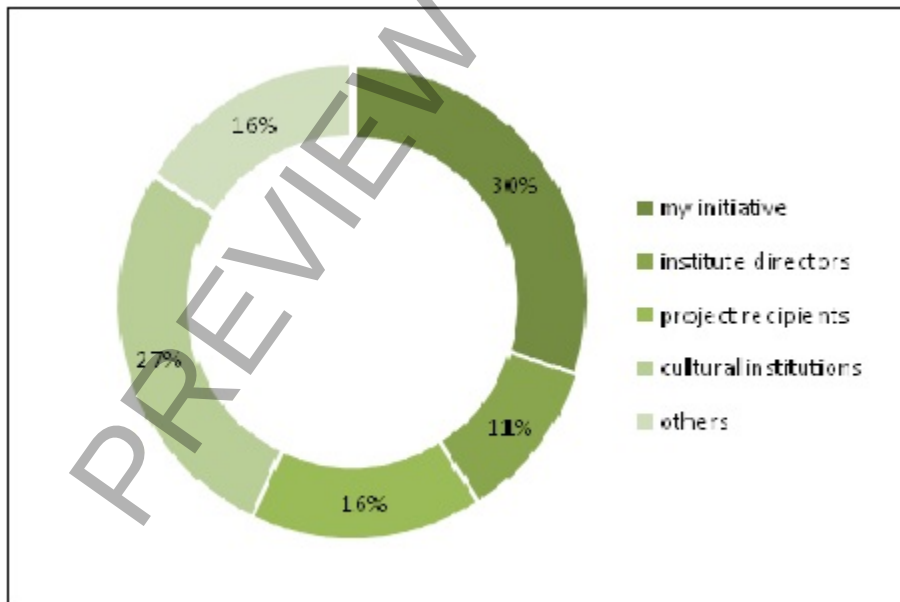


FIGURE 2

The project initiator

However, the majority of these projects did not receive financial support (39%), necessitating their execution on a *pro bono* basis by academics during their spare time. On occasion, teachers could rely on partial funding from the university (10%) or from a grant (13%).

Researchers could rarely expect to receive full reimbursement from the university (6%). Financial support for programmes that promoted classical antiquity was also provided by external institutions (23%). The category of ‘others’ incorporates city authorities and the Polish National Science Centre, among other entities. The expenses incurred for the project included, among other things, the preparation of materials and travel to the venue.

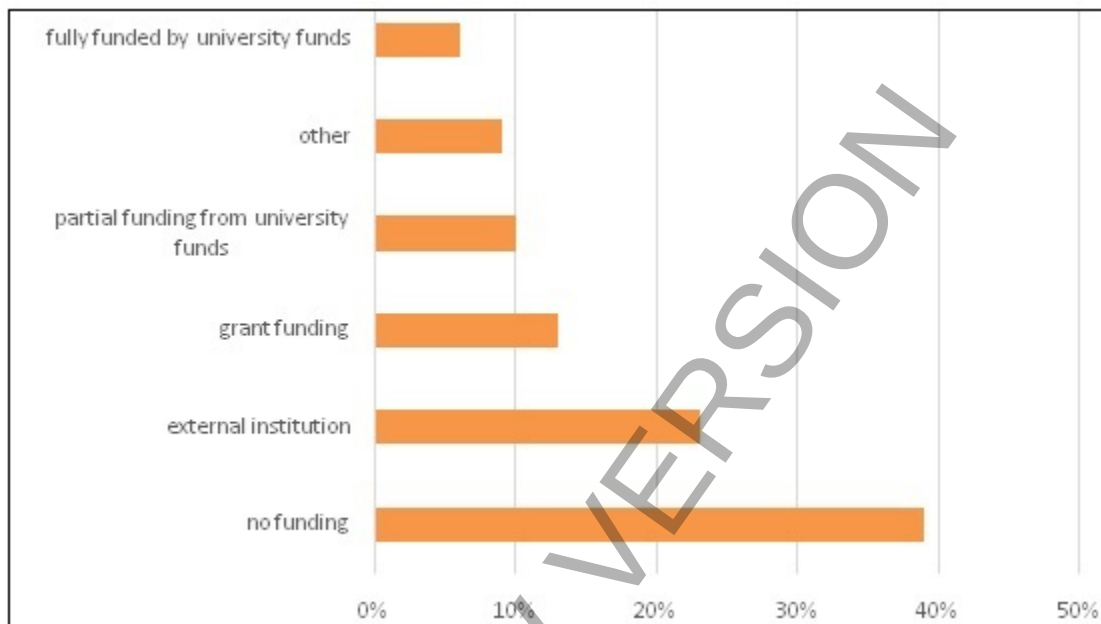


FIGURE 3

The reimbursement

The aforementioned results are consistent with the responses to the subsequent question, which pertains to the perception among academics of inadequate support from the university system to undertake dissemination projects (65%). The request for information did not solely pertain to financial assistance, but also encompassed a broader range of support, including general management assistance. In the majority of cases (65%), teaching professionals allocate the majority of their leisure time to the preparation of educational projects.

In the survey, academics were also invited to comment on their potential role in shaping the curriculum for teaching Latin and antiquity at lower levels of education. The vast majority of respondents – as many as 78 per cent – do not feel that they play a meaningful role in this area. It is also noteworthy that the majority of respondents expressed a desire to have this capability (65%). It has been asserted by members of the academic community that this will provide them with the opportunity to establish a coherent and well-considered curriculum for students from the earliest years through to

university study. This would enable classicists to influence the knowledge possessed by university candidates.

Furthermore, respondents have drawn attention to the issue of access to education in classical philology. The teaching of Classics is confined to the largest university cities in the country. In a similar vein, education in Latin is available in a limited number of secondary schools, predominantly in major cities; Latin can also be delivered on a one-to-one basis by a private tutor. Consequently, access to learning opportunities concerning antiquity is severely restricted, and it is probable that many individuals are unaware of the existence of such opportunities.

The extramural activities

Despite the aforementioned challenges, Polish classicists demonstrate unwavering commitment to their discipline. A variety of scientific and educational events are initiated with the aim of appealing to a diverse audience. Classicists in their leisure time devise open lesson's and lecture's programmes, engage with social media, lobby in parliament, and extend their activities beyond the university to reach a wide audience and inspire a passion for antiquity. The following section outlines the most significant non-university activities undertaken by Polish classicists.

The 'Latin on the Edge' Programme¹¹

In response to the perceived decline in the visibility and significance of Latin and broader studies of antiquity in modern life and society, classicists have initiated a project known as 'Latin on the Edge'.¹² The result of this initiative was an increase in the number of hours Latin is taught in secondary schools. Community representatives have been known to lobby Parliament for changes to the law, with a view to facilitating greater access to Latin teaching in Polish schools, as well as to promoting classical culture. The actions undertaken have had a discernible impact. The current total teaching hours for the 'Latin and Ancient Culture' subject at secondary school is 240 at extended level and 30 at basic level over the teaching cycle.

A series of initiatives were implemented within the Latin on the Edge movement with the objective of raising public awareness of the importance of teaching Latin in the modern world. Despite the fact that some of the objectives of the movement have been realised, those involved continue to maintain a website with the aim of popularising the study of Latin. Furthermore, the production of videos and interviews is ongoing, in addition to the encouragement of potential candidates to study Classics.

Societas Philologa Polonorum(Polish Philological Association)¹³

The Polish Philological Association was established in 1893. The organisation currently boasts approximately 500 members, comprising academic researchers, school teachers and individuals with a general interest in antiquity. The primary objective of the association is to “cultivate and promote knowledge in Poland about Greco-Roman antiquity and classical culture in its entirety, from antiquity to modern times” (Polskie Towarzystwo Filologiczne, 2025), through scientific, educational and promotional activities. Popularisation activities include the organisation of competitions on antiquity for secondary school students. Furthermore, members of the society engage in the writing of articles and make appearances in the media with a view to promoting and stimulating interest in ancient Greece and Rome among a wider audience. Furthermore, they are highly active on social media platforms, leveraging the latest technological innovations to disseminate knowledge about ancient times. The association is responsible for the publication of the EOS journal (*Commentarii Societatis Philologiae Polonorum*). This journal provides a platform for the presentation of scientific research by scholars from around the world specialising in the field of antiquity.

The Foundation Traditio Europae¹⁴

The Traditio Europae Foundation was established in 2007 by classicists from the University of Toruń with the objective of promoting research into Greco-Roman antiquity. The Foundation is responsible for the organisation of competitions and educational programmes aimed at children and young people. One of the foundation’s first and most significant programmes is a competition for young people known as the Antiquity League. According to the organisers, this is “a special programme, developed in the form of a competition, the aim of which is to popularise knowledge about ancient culture, stimulate and deepen interest in antiquity, and shape awareness of common European traditions among young people”.¹⁵ The programme format consists of a series of lectures delivered by subject experts on a monthly basis, complemented by a knowledge test competition. The programme was initially administered in a classroom setting and was designed for students from the Kuyavian-Pomeranian Province. Following the transition to online meetings in 2020, students from across the country now have the opportunity to participate in the competition. Furthermore, in collaboration with external numismatic organisations from Poland and abroad, the foundation regularly organises workshops on ancient numismatics.

The Latin Olympiad¹⁶

The Latin Olympiad is a national competition for secondary school students. The event has been organised on an annual basis since 1982 by the Polish Philological Society. The Olympiad is comprised of three distinct stages: school, district, and central. The participants of the Olympiad are required to demonstrate their knowledge of the Latin language and ancient culture. Depending on the stage of the competition, participants are required to translate a given Latin text into Polish, solve a grammar test and answer five oral questions posed by the competition committee. Participants must demonstrate a firm grasp of Latin and translation skills, as well as familiarity with the required reading list and a comprehensive understanding of antiquity.

The Citadel Project¹⁷

The most recent initiative, which has yet to be completed, is Project Citadel, conducted in cooperation with universities in Malta and the Netherlands. The University of Gdańsk is a Consortium Partner and works under the leadership of the University of Malta. The project facilitates engagement with antiquity for secondary school students by means of an interactive game based on themes from the *Iliad*. In the initial phase of the project, secondary school students from three countries are participating in lectures on ancient literature and workshops on video game development. The subsequent phase will entail the creation of a fully functional computer game that incorporates characters from Homer's poems.

The Researchers' Nights¹⁸

The annual Researchers' Night, organised by universities, is becoming increasingly popular with the public. The European Researchers' Night, initiated in 2024, represents a significant opportunity for the presentation of research findings to a broad audience. On this day, institutions of higher education open their doors to the public and offer a variety of activities designed for audiences of all ages. To exemplify this, at the previous edition, the classicists from the University of Gdańsk prepared a multimedia presentation entitled "Hic sunt... Animals" on the bestiaries. This provided an opportunity to introduce the audience to the bestiary as a literary genre and to facilitate a brief linguistic discussion in which analogies were demonstrated between Latin, Polish and English. The presentation comprised Latin proverbs pertaining to animals, thereby facilitating the identification of their modern language equivalents. Furthermore, an attempt was made to facilitate the translation of

concise passages from Pliny's *Natural History* by the participants. The activities were underpinned by contemporary didactic methodologies, encompassing multimedia presentations and board and card games.

Scholae Latinae Wratislavienses¹⁹

The University of Wrocław's Department of Classics has established an educational programme to facilitate the learning of classical Latin. The programme incorporates workshops led by esteemed Latin scholars. The workshops are scheduled to take place during the summer months (two weeks) and winter (five days). Weekend sessions are also held in spring and autumn. Classes are conducted using the immersion method, at various levels of proficiency.²⁰ Furthermore, thematic lectures on palaeography, Roman law, liturgy and metrical poetry composition are also conducted in Latin. In addition to conventional classroom-based learning, course participants are afforded the opportunity to engage in social interaction and converse in Latin during excursions, recreational activities and shared meals.

Theatre

A particularly salient method of popularising ancient culture is the presence in theatres that stage classical works of ancient literature. While this form of drama is evidently a student undertaking, the role of the lecturer is supportive. In addition to their supervisory roles within the performance, these individuals frequently serve as the authors of scripts derived from original ancient plays.

The Latin Walks

Furthermore, classicists organise city walks during which they provide explanations of the Latin inscriptions found on monuments. These inscriptions, which are typically found in ancient ecclesiastical structures or royal residences, are often incomprehensible to contemporary audiences lacking familiarity with fundamental Latin. The programme incorporates guided walks, during which participants acquire knowledge of history and are taught to translate the most common Latin words and phrases encountered on church and tombstone inscriptions.

Books

It is common practice among academics to organise lectures for primary school pupils, in which children can gain an understanding of the fundamentals of the Latin language in an engaging manner. One of the series of workshops is called Treasury of Knowledge and has resulted in the publication of a compendium of games and

activities for the youngest (Starek; Witczak, 2021). The opportunity to study Latin is not typically available to primary school students within the conventional school curriculum. However, initiatives such as educational books can serve as a source for introducing Latin to children.

Conclusions

In terms of the number of researchers, international recognition, or the amount of funding allocated to science, Poland is not a leading nation in the field of classical philology. However, it boasts a number of highly specialised and dedicated specialists, idealists, and enthusiasts, who, through their commitment and passion for antiquity, inspire successive generations of Polish youth. Researchers who, in the course of their entire lives, demonstrate that in today's world it is worthwhile to engage in activities that do not yield only a financial profit. Furthermore, it is the shared legacy of Greco-Roman culture that has the power to unite us in these difficult times: "in an era of growing nationalist tendencies, it is worth noting that the classical tradition is our shared cultural code, uniting us rather than dividing us" (Toczko, 2022, p. 31).

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Notes

1

Those interested in learning more about how Polish Classics and the teaching of classical languages functioned during the communist era should refer to Brzuska (2016), Orzechowska (2020), and Ryba (2022).

2

The initiative “Poland in Europe – Latin in schools” was discussed in detail by R. Toczko (2014). It will also be referred to in more detail later in this article.

3

Moreover, a basic course of Latin is a compulsory element of the curriculum in most humanities departments at universities throughout the country.

4

Available at [Lingualatinapl](https://lingualatinapl.com) (2025).

5

This determination was made on the basis of the list of employees provided on the websites of the respective universities.

6

Those interested in teaching Latin in selected secondary schools in Poland are referred to English-language publications on this subject: Marciniak, Strycharczyk (2021), and Samsonowicz-Kaczmarek (2020).

7

The translations from Polish were made by the author of this article.

8

Available at Google Maps (2023).

9

Available at Bank Danych Lokalnych (2025).

10

It should be noted that participation in the survey was entirely voluntary and anonymous. The researchers were affiliated to a total of nine universities.

11

Available at Facebook (2025a).

12

For more detailed information on the programme, please refer to the article by Ochman (2017).

13

Available at Polskie Towarzystwo Filologiczne (2025).

14

Available at Facebook (2025b).

15

Available at Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika w Toruniu (2025).

16

Available at WordPress (2025).

17

Available at The Citadel Project (2025).

18

Available at Euraxess (2025).

19

Available at Scholae Latinae Wratislavienses (2025).

20

Further information regarding the methodology of teaching Latin as a living language can be found in Loch (2015)

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