

# **ENVIRONMENTS**

**technoscience and its relation to  
sustainability, ethics, aesthetics,  
health and the human future**

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# THE "ATHENS OF BRAZIL" IN THE NORTHEAST (19<sup>TH</sup> AND 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES)\*

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Translated by José Curbelo

## FROM THE "ATHENAS PAULISTA" TO THE "ATHENAS DO SUL", THE IMAGINARY OF THE "ATHENAS BRASILEIRAS"<sup>2</sup>

The city of São Carlos, in the Brazilian state of São Paulo, where the last Brazilian Humboldt Kolleg took place in 2016, is internationally renowned for its universities. Until the beginning of the current year, the city's public transport system was serviced by a company called "*Athenas Paulista*" ("Athens of São Paulo") (Figure 1). As I study the phenomena of the reception of Antiquity, this fact led me to search for the underlying reason for this title. I realized that the city of São Carlos has been called "Athens of São Paulo" for many decades due to the quantity and importance of the city's educational institutions.



Figure 1 Bus from the *Empresa de Transportes Coletivos "Athenas Paulista"*, currently under judicial intervention.

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2 "Paulista" is the gentilic adjective for the state of São Paulo; "Athenas do Sul" means "Athens from South Brazil"; "Athenas" is the ancient spelling of Athens in Brazilian Portuguese. The modern spelling is "Atenas". I name "Athenas brasileiras" (Brazilian Athens, Athens from Brazil) the cities in Brazil, belonging to different states, as Rio Grande do Sul, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Minas Gerais, Pernambuco, Paraíba and Maranhão, which were known as "Athens" in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Two important schools that were founded at the beginning of the 20th century gave rise to this name: *Colégio São Carlos* in 1905, and the *Escola Normal Secundária* (now called *Escola Estadual Dr. Álvaro Guião*) in 1911<sup>3</sup>. The moniker of “Athenas Paulista” was strengthened by the progressive consolidation of the *Escola de Engenharia de São Carlos*, associated with the *Universidade de São Paulo* (USP), and in 1970 by the *Universidade Federal de São Carlos* (UFSCar).

I have been a professor of Ancient History at the *Universidade Federal de Pelotas* (UFPel) since 1991. I was born in Porto Alegre, Rio Grande do Sul, where I studied History and graduated in 1989. As soon as I arrived in Pelotas in 1991, my interest was piqued by the fact that in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the city was known as “Athenas do Sul”. In the 1990s, the city had a periodical entitled “*Athenas do Sul*” whose aim was to disseminate cultural activities, as well as literary and intellectual works, holding the premise that the city was a traditional cultural centre in Rio Grande do Sul located in its far southern region. My research on Ancient Greece led me to other subjects and for a long time the “Athenas do Sul” remained simply a curiosity to me. As studies surrounding cultural heritage and social memory began to interest me, I saw the importance of studying the reception of Antiquity. I believed it could help to understand the place of the Ancient World within Brazilian social identity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as well as comprehend the meaning that these reminiscences of Antiquity possess within Brazilian cultural heritage.

We can address reception of Antiquity from the perspective of “cultural memory”, a concept originally crafted by Aby Warburg in 1923 and revisited more recently by [3]. Therefore, the question needs to be answered: “Why Athens?” We can resort to [3], who sustains that: “Through its cultural heritage a society becomes visible to itself and to others. Which past becomes evident in that heritage and which values emerge in its identificatory appropriation tells us much about the constitution and tendencies of a society”. Thus, in the study of urban iconography in Pelotas (with its public monuments, architecture and architectural incorporated imagery), I was able to discern an appropriation and reconstruction of “cultural memory” reminiscent of Antiquity. This appropriation centrally situates within the city’s planning, on one hand, Apollo and the Muses, with their musical instruments as symbols of the pursuit of culture and education (Figure 2) and, in parallel, on the other hand, Hermes/Mercury as a symbol of economic progress (Figure 3) [14, 15].

3 “The golden years of the expansion of the cultural influence of the *Escola Normal* occurred from the 1920s to the 1940s. São Carlos, in obtaining the trappings of progress in the economic (primarily from the hefty profits obtained by the coffee export industry) and social spheres (improvements in sanitary conditions, housing, greater access to artistic expression), ended up influencing a wide region in the western portion of the state of São Paulo, making inroads to bordering Minas Gerais and Mato Grosso. For this reason, the city of Campinas earned the moniker of “*Princesa do Oeste*” (Princess of the West) which later shifted to “*Athenas Paulista*”. Undoubtedly the old *Escola Normal* situated in São Carlos, in the words of the state governor Dr. Altino Arantes Marques [1916-1920], was “the primary disseminator of culture in the state’s interior” [10].

These images, elements of the city's cultural heritage, formed part of a larger visual scenario that included images that no longer exist due to the substitution of older buildings with newer ones. These images were the objectification of "cultural memory", in the sense proposed by J. Assmann [3], through which the imaginary of the "Athenas do Sul" became something concrete. Thus, a prominent image of the goddess Athena/Minerva was not necessary to configure the imaginary of Pelotas as a "Greek city". An assortment of various Greek gods, most prominently featuring Apollo and Hermes/Mercury, sustained the "Athens of the South" concept, also based on a series of cultural institutions that flourished in that era in the city.

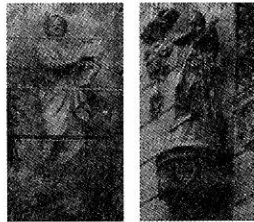


Figure 2 Sculpture of Apollo Citharoedus on the façade of the *Club Caixeiral*, built in the early 20th Century.

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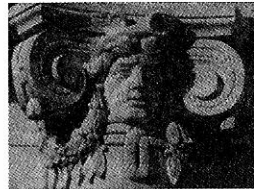


Figure 3 Pillar capital on the *Banco Nacional do Comércio*, in Pelotas, built in 1917, with the head of Hermes/Mercury.

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## THE "ATHENAS BRASILEIRAS" AND GREECE IN BRAZIL

The desire to understand the "Athenas do Sul" led me to greater awareness of this type of phenomena on a national scale. Thus, the "Athens-Pelotas" in the south and "Athens-São Carlos" in São Paulo were not isolated cases. There was also São Luís, the "Athenas Brasileira", Areias, the "Athenas Paraibana", Juiz de Fora, the "Athenas Mineira", Palmares, the "Athenas Pernambucana", Natividade, the "Athenas fluminense", and countless other Brazilian cities that also claimed the fame as "Athens" in Brazil.

In verifying that this was indeed, not an isolated phenomenon, it was necessary to ask: Why is Antiquity present in the construction of identities of Brazilian cities? What could Athens possibly mean in Brazil? What would be the significance that a Brazilian city is an "Athens"?

From the very start, I present a few assumptions here. The "Athenas brasileiras" are a Brazilian cultural phenomenon – and perhaps, more appropriately, a national phenomenon in the case that we could conclude that it contributed to the construction of the idea of Nation. This cultural phenomenon can be categorized as a phenomenon of "reception of Antiquity" or "uses of the past", which are two different perspectives in understanding and explaining the same phenomenon. The latter is characterized by the assumption that appropriations of Antiquity have a planned and conscious political usage, in contrast to appropriations of Antiquity monopolized by the concept of reception, whose logic can be more diverse, and in some cases not entirely intentional or conscious [9, 14].

A second assumption is that the usage of the moniker "Athens + geographical location" ("Athenas Brasileiras", "Athenas Paraibana", "Athenas Pernambucana", etc.) forms part of a larger phenomenon of the singular presence of Greece in Brazil in cities of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. A third premise is that the presence of Greece (and of Athens) played a role in the cultural identities in formation and constant reformulation, and today forms part of the cultural heritage of these cities.

Finally, the most complex aspect, this presence of Antiquity, this appropriation of Greece never is nor was homogenous. This process has various sedimentary layers that have been deposited over time and, as in the stratigraphy of an archeological site, each layer has its own unique coloring. The meanings of Athens in Brazil, though displaying points of convergence, are not uniform. This invites us to compile a catalog of the "Athenas Brasileiras", to explore their temporalities and causalities, their original meanings and their myriad of resignifications.

Without the intention of making an exhaustive list of all the "Athenas brasileiras", I propose in this article to obtain a panoramic vision of the "Athens" - cities of the Brazilian Northeast, taking into account the key role that this region played in the conformation of this concept, and focusing on three states: Maranhão, Paraíba and Pernambuco. We will point out some singularities and similarities in respect to etiology, chronology and characterization, thereby contributing to the understanding of this cultural phenomenon<sup>4</sup>.

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4 The "Athens of São Paulo" (São Carlos, Jaboticabal, Jacareí and Piracicaba), the "Athens of Minas Gerais" (Juiz de Fora, Leopoldina and Paracatu) and the "Athens of the *Baixada Fluminense*" (Natividade), will be the objects of analysis in another publication, national in scope that will span from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present. The "Athens of the South" was previously analyzed by the author [14].

## SÃO LUÍS, THE "ATHENAS BRASILEIRA"

São Luís was the first, and its status continues to be respected, after all, it is the only one to be known as "Athenas Brasileira" ("Brazilian Athens"), even though other cities have prominently displayed the goddess Athena/Minerva within their urban iconography, as observed in Rio de Janeiro and Recife. Not only is it the oldest but it is also the most studied, which makes it difficult, in the reduced space of this essay, to present a brief overview of its meanings<sup>5</sup>. In my view, it is worth highlighting that São Luís was perhaps responsible for creating that imaginary notion that a Brazilian city could be Athens and that this carries meanings that could be added to its identity, as a project of city, society and civilization. São Luís as the "Athens of Brazil" has almost two centuries of history, making up a stratigraphy whose varying layers have different temporalities of significance of belonging to or negating Maranhão "Greekness". Either way, "the definition of Maranhão as the Athens of Brazil has configured itself to be a central strategy to reconstruct memory, history, identity and cultural heritage of the residents of Maranhão" [4]. We can perceive that Maranhão's identity has oscillated between three kinds of belongingness, three cultural heritages: "Athenas Brasileira", "Equinoctial France", and "*Bumba-meu-boi*". It would seem that the nomination of "Athens of Brazil" is what currently carries less weight in terms of the appealing aspects of the city's identity. However, the denomination of "Athenas Brasileira" in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was honorably distinguished for the recognition of the role of a group of intellectuals from Maranhão in the establishment of Brazilian literary canon, which was responsible for a discourse of nation among the first Romantic authors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century associated with Maranhão and Rio de Janeiro:

Within this milieu a group of eminent poets, translators, Romanticists, playwrights, biographers, geographers, historians, mathematicians and various other intellectuals emerged. Their activities, for the span of at least 40 years – from Independence to the 1860's [...] conferred São Luís

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5 Here we do not have the intention to make an exhaustive list or summarize all the possible interpretations, including those of different occurrences of affirmation or negation of the condition of "Athens of Brazil". We can suggest further reading of modern academic literature as well as works from the turn of the century, which serve also as primary sources: ALBERNAZ, Lady Selma. *O "urro" do boi de Atenas*. Instituições, experiências culturais e identidade no Maranhão. Tese de Doutorado em Ciências Sociais. Campinas: Unicamp, 2004. CARDOSO, Patrícia Raquel Lobato Durans. "LOBO X NASCIMENTO NA "NOVA ATENAS": literatura, história e polêmicas dos intelectuais maranhenses na Primeira República" (2013). Dissertação de Mestrado em História. Universidade Federal do Maranhão, São Luís: UFMA, 2013. CORREA, Frederico José; AZEVEDO, Bruno (ed.) *Um livro de crítica*, 1878 (2015). In the 2015 edition, the reader can find two modern essays: LEÃO, Ricardo. "Os Atenienses e a Invenção do Cânone Nacional"; BORRALHO, Henrique. "Uma Athenas Equinocial: a Literatura e a fundação de um Maranhão no Império Brasileiro". LEÃO, Ricardo. *Os Atenienses e a Invenção do Cânone Nacional*. São Luís, Editora Gea de Temas Maranhenses, 2013. LÔBO, Antônio. *Os Novos Atenienses*. São Luís: Tipografia Teixeira, 1909 (second edition: São Luís: SIOGE & Academia Maranhense de Letras, em 1970).

the moniker of 'Athens of Brazil' giving the intellectual and literary figures of Maranhão the antonomasia of 'Athenians' [13].

The milieu referred to by Ricardo Martins emerged with the arrival of the Portuguese Court to Brazil (1808). In those times, the city lived an economic recovery and a cultural rapprochement with Portugal. It was characterized by a "proliferation of recreation, artistic and literary societies, conferences and polemic issues, inaugurations of public schools and libraries, and a multiplication of publishers and periodicals dedicated to political and literary journalism" [13]. An example was the inauguration in 1817 of the current *Teatro Artur Azevedo*<sup>6</sup>, originally entitled *Teatro União*, in homage to the *Reino Unido de Portugal, Brasil e Algarve*. Being the fourth theatre to be constructed in the city, it stood out from the previous theatres for the grandiosity of its architecture, for relinquishing colonial tropes and adopting a Neo-Classic style in the second decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was an "*avant garde* novelty, completely contemporary with what was being built in the capital of the Empire" [14]. On its *façade* the local population could appreciate an icon that culturally linked the city to Ancient Greece, a stylized five-string cithara (Figure 4).

However, we owe the imaginary institution of the Brazilian "Athens" to the literary movement and editorial activity. Typography and periodicals contributed to the configuration of the city's literary scene. In the 1820s, only Rio de Janeiro rivalled the vitality of the local press such as *O Maranhense*, founded in 1825 by Franciso Sotero dos Reis. Antiquity inspired a proliferous generation of literary figures, identified with Classical ideals, who lived in São Luís between 1820 and 1860. This contributed to the formation of *Parnaso Maranhense*, published in 1861, a local version of *Parnaso Brasileiro*, published between 1829 and 1831 in the capital of the Brazilian Empire, Rio de Janeiro. The compilation organised by the editor and typographer from Maranhão, Belarmino de Matos, contained, among other texts, poems of Antônio Gonçalves Dias (1823-1864) and Manuel Odorico Mendes (1799-1864), two of the four pillars of the so-called "*Grupo Maranhense*". Also, in this group, we can highlight João Francisco Lisboa (1812-1863) and Francisco Sotero dos Reis (1800-1871) [3].

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6 It received this name in 1920 in homage to the playwright from Maranhão instead of the denomination of *Teatro São Luís*, given in 1852.

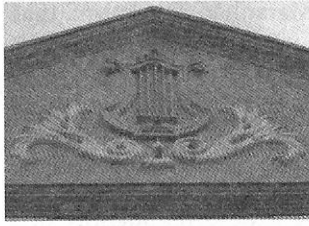


Figure 4 Five-string cithara ornament on the pediment of the Neo-Classical *façade* of the *Teatro Artur Azevedo*, São Luís (1817).  
©Fábio Vergara Cerqueira (2011).

Odorico Mendes firstly and Sotero dos Reis, beside him, are considered to be the “founders of a literary strain [...] that permits the establishment of the myth of ‘Athens of Brazil’ ” [13]:

As a faithful interpreter of Virgil and Homer, [Odorico Mendes] was, among us, the beginning of literary good taste and the careful cultivation of vernacular and Classical literature. It is without a doubt that Maranhão owes to this benefit and vigorous impulse the status of being the first among its sister cities to merit the denomination given by certain writers of the flattering epithet of Athens of Brazil [11].

I would like to highlight a fact of Brazilian and Lusophone intellectual history, concerning tradition and translation of the Classics, which legitimizes and sustains the image of São Luís as “Athenas Brasileira”. Francisco Sotero dos Reis, though self-taught and being more widely known for his 1866 work, *Gramática Portuguesa*, in his youth felt at home in the *Gabinete de Leitura Português* where he expanded his knowledge of Latin, a language of which he became a teacher as early as 1821, at the age of 21. Furthermore, he was the first public teacher in Maranhão. Thus, he dedicated himself to the activity of translation, becoming well-known, for example, for his translation of Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* (*Commentarii de Bello Gallico*) into Portuguese, translated as “Comentários” (reedited in 1967), among other lost translations, as the one of Tacitus.

However, it was the great Odorico Mendes that stood out for his sublime manner of translating the Classics. The first Portuguese translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, carried out by him and finished just before his death in 1864, were published posthumously in 1874 and 1928, respectively. Before then, in 1858, his translation of the complete work of Virgil (*The Aeneid*, *The Georgics*, *The Eclogues*) had been published in Lisbon under the title *Virgílio Brasileiro* (Brazilian Virgil). The publication of the Brazilian *Iliad* in Rio de Janeiro in 1874 nationally

consolidated the image of Maranhão humanism, that gave credence to the representation of “Brazilian Athens”, an image that was defended by nationally-relevant intellectuals and literary figures of Maranhão such as playwright Artur Azevedo. Far beyond simply being the first translations of Homer into Portuguese, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* of Odorico Mendes stand out as a great poetic masterpiece in the Portuguese language.

João Francisco Lisboa exudes the identity of a “Brazilian Athens”. He assumed the pseudonym of Timon, between 1852 and 1854, when he published *Jornal de Timon*, which reached 10 fascicles. Inspired by the Athenian citizen Timon, who was well-known for his misanthropy, his journal was influenced by Varro’s *Menippean Satires*, aligned with the ancient tradition of Cynicism, and it conveyed contempt for wealth, ridiculed social behaviors and carried out pointed political criticism. One of the first themes of *Jornal de Timon*, seeking to enter into local political debate, were ancient electoral systems. He dealt with Sparta, Athens and Rome (Republic and Empire) employing, above all, Plutarch and Tacitus, of which he had read the translation of Sotero dos Reis [13].

These facts indicate that the attribution of “Athens of Brazil” does not take place simply as superficial nationalism because of the projection of identity and self-attribution of cultural and educational values. There was intellectual weight, there was depth in this “Brazilian Athens”, under the leadership of the “Athenians” of the *Grupo Maranhense*.

## AREIA, THE “ATHENAS PARAIBANA”

In the state of Paraíba, in terms of the vitality of cultural life, the city of Areia held primacy over the state’s capital, João Pessoa, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Even up to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was a destination for the state’s students, in part to engage in higher education at the *Escola de Agronomia do Nordeste*, the first institution of higher learning of Paraíba, founded in 1934.

The city’s fame as Paraíba’s cultural capital began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In 1859, the theatre “*Recreio Dramático*” was inaugurated. It was conceived by two local leaders, who organized many residents into action, through an association for that purpose [1]. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the city housed four theatres, whereas the state’s capital would not receive its first theatre until the end of the century.

“*Recreio Dramático*” was built in Baroque style and later was remodeled without significantly altering its characteristics. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its *façade* received a Neo-Classical treatment, with a pediment that boasts, on its tympanum, a winged figure, and on top, a statue of the goddess Minerva (Figure 5).



**Figure 5** Statue of Minerva on top of the frontispiece of the *façade* of the *Teatro Minerva* from Areia, Paraíba.

©Rogério Reis / Tyba (2013) Fonte: <http://tyba.com.br/br/resultado/?busca=minerva#pag-1>.

The memorialist from Paraíba, Horácio Almeida, describes this change as follows:

At the beginning of the century [20<sup>th</sup>], when Otacílio was mayor of Areia, *Teatro Recreio* received the last improvements in its history. The mayor, with the collaboration of Horácio Silva, who oversaw Portuguese and Mathematics courses in the city, bestowed the theatre with a garden, terrace, gas lighting, furniture and other improvements. Horácio Silva, on this opportunity, placed a statuette of the goddess Minerva, which was recovered from the public garden of Santa Rita, on the frontispiece of the building. This gave rise to the moniker that took root and still endures, *Teatro Minerva* [1].

Here we can observe the importance given to this statue of Minerva by an active intellectual in civic life, Horácio Silva, who decided to move it from a garden to the top of the theatre, thus clearly establishing a symbolic link between theatrical entertainment and the patronage of the Greek-Roman goddess.

This identification with the goddess Athena/Minerva contributed to instituting the imaginary of "Athenas Paraibana", which was reinforced by the city's role as an educational center. When this city in the region of the Brejo lost its character as an economic centre over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the benefit of other regions of Paraíba, the imaginary of "Athens of Paraíba" contributed to the feeling of nostalgia of a lost golden age. At the same time, however, the antonomasia serves as a tourist attraction for the city, as we can observe on the website of *Up Magazine*, of TAP – Air Portugal, which refers to the city as follows: "Areia, also called 'Athenas Paraibana' merits an extended visit"<sup>7</sup>. It is curious to observe, however, that Areia was not the only city in Paraíba to declare itself "Athens". The city of Mamanguape had also received, even in the 19th century, the denomination

7 [http://upmagazine-tap.com/pt\\_artigos/hoteis-na-paraiba/](http://upmagazine-tap.com/pt_artigos/hoteis-na-paraiba/).

of “Athens of Paraíba”. The town received the title not because of its intellectual or artistic life, but rather the urban sophistication stemming from the city’s economic success and political prestige. This prestige even prompted a visit from the Emperor D. Pedro II in 1859 [12], contributing to an ethos of modernity in the city, “gaining new forums of civilization” [8]. According to [2], the city stood out in Paraíba with its granite sidewalks. Its “public lighting [...] was so spectacular that it was called Athens of Paraíba” [12]. One of the city’s symbols of wealth were the tiles imported from Portugal, that “identified the comfort and power of the patriarchal family” [8].

Here we can observe that in the added value of the name “Athens”, Maman-guape differs from Areia and São Luís. It is not culture and education that are factored in, but rather the totality of the city’s structure, which conveys ideals of modernity.

## **PALMARES, THE “ATHENS OF PERNAMBUCO”**

Palmares, a city in the *Mata Sul* region of the state of Pernambuco, also known as “Land of the Poets”, was elevated to the status of municipality in 1873. It is located in a region in which prior to that it had been the site of the famous maroon community of *Quilombo dos Palmares* and to which it owes its name. In 1882, the city already had an active “*Clube Literário*” (Literary Club), while the city, well-known for the quality of its tobacco, entertained itself at the *Recreio Palmareense*, frequented by the elite classes, or at the *Recreio Popular*, where *soirée* dances were held.

At that time, airs of Ancient Greece could be felt even in the tobacco industry. One of the cigar brands was called “*Cigarros do Pindo*” (Cigars of the Pindus, referring to the Greek mountain range). Furthermore, its label depicted, in addition to Cupid preparing to shoot his arrow, five Olympian gods, identified from left to right as Diana, Apollo (with a lyre in hand), Pallas (Athena), Saturn, Venus and Mercury (Figure 6), “as if they presented the literary and intellectual spirit of the city. As if they symbolized the Literary Club and its bohemians, compared with the Classics that were inspired by the airs of the Pindus mountains” [7].



**Figure 6** “Cigarros do Pindo” label, produced by Manoel J. Barros Gusmão, Palmares, Pernambuco.

c. 1880. Litograph by Bento Amaral.

Recife, Joaquim Nabuco Foundation, Collection of Cigarette Labels Brito Alves, BA-542. <<http://digitalizacao.fundaj.gov.br/fundaj2/files/i/776/2-BA-%200542.jpg>>, acesso em 06.05.2018.

©Fundação Joaquim Nabuco, Recife, Pernambuco.

The city became known, since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “in the entire state [of Pernambuco] for having been the cradle of renowned artists from Pernambuco” [5], including intellectuals, artists, musicians, poets, Romanticists and playwrights. At that time, “*Theatro Apollo*” (1914), now “*Cine Teatro Apolo*”, was operating in Palmares. It was the first theatre in the interior of Pernambuco and the third oldest in the state”.

The installation of the theatre completed the ethos of modernity brought on by industrial growth, in that “the presence of the theatre signified a modern space, connected to the best characteristics of the nation’s capitals” so that “it provided a modern experience even though it was surrounded by geography characterized by its rural and patriarchal traditions and deep-rooted Catholic morality” [6].

The many Athens of Brazil were projects of modernity, in that material development did not overshadow intellectual, artistic and educational development. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were icons of a project of civilization that linked the idea of modernity and progress with inspiration in the ideals arising from Antiquity, thus given new meaning. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Athens stood out as a symbol of collective investment in education.

“Athens of Brazil” was the thought upheld as the greatest paradigm of civilization.

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