SYLLABUS FOR CLASSICS 140 (#20712)
HERITAGE OF GREECE & ROME

Fall 2011 Semester, San Diego State University
Brett Robbins, PhD., Department of Classics & Humanities
Class Hours: W 4-6:40 PM, Classroom: WC-230
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1) COURSE DESCRIPTION

If you’re curious about your own society, you should also be curious about the ancient Greeks and Romans, because they were the inventors of western culture and you should be curious about where so much of what you take for granted comes from. It’s inherently pleasurable to trace so much of what we think and do today to their roots in ancient Greece and Rome, to make sense of their world and our own world through their world and of both worlds through their interrelationships with each other.

That is, I believe, what is most special about the study of antiquity: we find, if we look closely, so many firsts in western culture: the first epic poems, the first plays, the first theaters, the first histories, even the first cinema (huh?). And through the literature of ancient Greece and Rome we encounter the first expression of certain ideas like community, democracy, and imperialism and of certain emotions like courage, curiosity, and love. If tracing things back to their roots, their origins in the past, excites you, you are in the right place, because that is what I am primarily interested in: getting back to the roots.

There is more, however. While it’s interesting to see where the things we know (or at least think we know) today have come from, it’s also somewhat surprising to discover that, not only do we find in ancient Greece and Rome the first of so many things, we also find the best of so many things. Take the epic poet Homer, for example. We’ll read passages from the Iliad and Odyssey that will blow your mind, in the same way as (or perhaps even more than), say, a modern novel or play or film or video will do.

The Greeks and Romans created their epics and tragedies and comedies and historical works not for us to study thousands of years after the fact but for their contemporaries to enjoy as selfishly and hedonistically as we enjoy the art and literature and drama and YouTube videos of today. It’s this immediacy of the works of the Greeks and Romans—in other words, their entertainment value—along with their influence on so many aspects of our own society, that I wish to explore with you in this course.
2) INTERNET COMPONENT

We’ll be making frequent use of the Internet, and in particular Blackboard and e-mail, to carry out various activities necessary for conducting this course. For that reason, to participate in it you must have access to the Internet (either on- or off-campus) and must check your e-mail at least once a day (in case I make changes or clarifications or the like) and your Blackboard account at least a few times a week or whenever an e-mail message I send you urges you to log onto it.

“This course is one of nine courses that you will take in General Education Foundations. Foundations courses cultivate skills in reading, writing, research, communication, computation, information literacy, and use of technology. They furthermore introduce you to basic concepts, theories and approaches in a variety of disciplines in order to provide the intellectual breadth necessary to help you integrate the more specialized knowledge gathered in your major area of study into a broader world picture.”

H1-H4: “This course is one of four Foundations courses that you will take in the area of Humanities and Fine Arts. Upon completing of this area of Foundations, you will be able to:
1) analyze written, visual, or performed texts in the humanities and fine arts with sensitivity to their diverse cultural contexts and historical moments;
2) develop a familiarity with various aesthetic and other value systems and the ways they are communicated across time and cultures;
3) argue from multiple perspectives about issues in the humanities that have personal and global relevance;
4) demonstrate the ability to approach complex problems and ask complex questions drawing upon knowledge of the humanities.”

3) OBJECTIVES FOR THIS COURSE

In this course you will 1) learn about the most significant people, characters, events, ideas, monuments, and institutions of ancient Greece and Rome, 2) encounter the greatest works of art, architecture, and literature of antiquity by looking at (in the case of art and architecture) and reading (in the case of literature) the primary sources themselves rather than settling for a secondhand acquaintance with them through the filter of one or another text-book (to this end your only required reading will come directly from the minds of the ancient authors so they can speak to you on their own terms), and 3) ascertain connections between these people, characters, events, ideas, monuments, institutions, and art works and their counterparts in our own society which, after all, is a direct descendent of Greco-Roman civilization. On the three exams administered throughout the semester, you will be expected to identify with a high rate of accuracy the author, period, context, and cultural importance of the literary passages and material artifacts of ancient Greek and Roman culture you encounter in your take-home readings and classroom lectures and discussions.
4) PREREQUISITES FOR THIS COURSE

While I expect you to prepare the assigned readings before coming to class, they may not make complete sense to you until we hash them out together. Therefore, **rest assured that I expect from you no knowledge whatsoever about the ancient world when you arrive on the first day of class.** Granted, we’ll have some fun comparing what preconceived notions you’ve acquired from the way the ancient world is depicted in literature, the mass media, etc., but that will only be to gain a sense of satisfaction at the end of the semester that the false clichés and stereotypes you once harbored have been dispelled by experiencing their works for yourselves. The only prerequisite for this course, then, is one thing and one thing only: a curiosity about what the ancient Greeks and Romans were all about and what we ourselves have inherited from them, for better or worse (okay, I guess that’s two things). Other than that: the cleaner the slate when the course begins, the better!

5) CLASS FORMAT

We’ll rely on both lectures (Powerpoint and old school) and classroom discussions to come to terms with ancient Greece and Rome and the way they continue to exert influence on our own times (vis-à-vis the latter, your input via discussion will be indispensable). **I expect you to come to class prepared, which means you’ve already read and recorded in your notebook answers to questions about the assignments listed in the CLASS SCHEDULE for a given day.**

6) REQUIRED TEXT

Although I welcome and encourage as much outside reading as you’d like to do to help you learn the material we cover in class and in our readings (for example, Wikipedia tends to do a pretty good job of providing you with background information about the figures and events we’ll be encountering in our readings), the readings you'll need to complete BEFORE coming to class on a given week are included within the document you're now reading. In other words, you don't have to buy any books for this course. You're welcome.
7) GRADING

3 non-cumulative exams (including the final), each worth (in chronological order) 30%, 35%, and 35% of your course grade.

Your grade for this course will be based on your ability to demonstrate a mastery of objective information you’ve acquired from the readings you’ve done and lectures you’ve attended and discussions you’ve participated in throughout the semester. Unfortunately, with 80+ people in class a more subjective approach to grading (response papers and the like) isn’t feasible. Thus, while our focus in class will be on learning about the ideas and institutions of the ancient Greeks and Romans and their links to our own society in a relatively broad-based and expansive manner, your exams will reflect how good you are at recalling information I consider to be essential for the student of western civilization to know and understand. To this end (and because I respect the desire of those who care about their GPAs to earn the best possible grade—I’ve been there), I’ll do my best throughout the semester to make sure—especially via study guides and word-banks—that we’re all on the same page regarding what data need to be learned in order to do well on exams.
8) CLASS SCHEDULE

Introduction to the Course

Wednesday, August 31

CULTURAL ANTECEDENTS

Readings: none.

Wednesday, September 7

MINOS & THE BULL

Readings: none.

Wednesday, September 14

THE IMPERFECT HERO

Readings: Handout 1

Wednesday, September 21

ASCENDENCY OF ZEUS

Readings: Handout 2

Wednesday, September 28

BIRTH OF DEMOCRACY

Readings: Handouts 3, 4, 5

Wednesday, October 5

EXAM #1

Wednesday, October 12

THE OEDIPUS COMPLEX

Readings: Handout 6

Wednesday, October 19

THE PARTHENON AS METAPHOR

Wednesday, October 26

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1 I reserve the right to change anything in this schedule—or, for that matter, in this syllabus as a whole—during the semester for whatever reason. If I do so, I’ll be sure to inform you of it via e-mail, Blackboard announcement, and in class at least twice, so you can make the appropriate changes to your copy of this syllabus.
Readings: Handouts 7, 8

Wednesday, November 2

THE ATHENIAN GADFLY

Readings: Handout 9

Wednesday, November 9

THE HUBRIS OF ALEXANDER

Readings: Handout 10

Wednesday, November 16

EXAM #2

Wednesday, November 23

THE PRAGMATISM OF AUGUSTUS

Readings: Handouts 11, 12

Wednesday, November 30

PROVINCIAL LIFE IN ROME

Readings: Handout 13

Wednesday, December 7

THE ROMAN UNDERGROUND

Readings: Handouts 14, 15, 16

Wednesday, December 14

FINAL EXAM (4-6 PM/WC-230)