Grecian Formula

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol57/iss2/17

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He points out Gallipoli. He points out Macedonia and the Balkans. He points out the Black Sea and a fishlike promontory jutting into it. "You know what that is?" he smiles. "Russia," offers one student. "Are you a Putin booster?" he teases. "Depending on your sympathies, it could be Russia. It's the Crimean Peninsula."

"He" is professor Christopher Blackwell and on this crystalline August day, the first of the new academic year, he is teaching a field that some deride as pointless: Classics. In particular, a class on Greek Civilization.

"I want to be clear," Blackwell says to the students, none of whom is covertly texting or tweeting. "This course is not about ancient history; what we're talking about is ancient civilization." By this, Blackwell means that which ultimately comes of history—and what ultimately determines our shared now.

As he is hopscotching around his map, denoting the Ukraine and Istanbul and Alexandria, he makes a sobering point, "You'll notice that history tends to happen over and over again in the same places."

All these places, he goes on, were once "Hellas," which was not merely Greece but the idea of Greece—like the idea of America—and throughout time they have continued to reassert themselves as places of war, places of religion, places that pivot on the greed, pride, ego, beauty, and grace that make up the crucible of human nature.

Even if you know nothing about Greek civilization, or care not at all for it, consider the concept of culture. Not just culture as we know it in terms of a nationality or a people, but culture that is even less abstract: the culture, for example, of your workplace. Or the culture of your family. The origins of cultures and how they come to be cultures shape all their descendant versions.

In other words, that underlying force you're struggling with at the office? That immovable tension in your family? That is culture, and it started somewhere.

Widen the aperture now and it becomes clear that Greek civilization is more than just the origin of Western culture. What we are dealing with now—church, state, inequality, plagues, political upheavals—is, in effect, what we have always dealt with. What Greek civilization dealt with first; what it set in motion.

Looked at this way, it's arguable that there may be no more important course happening this fall on the Furman campus than Christopher Blackwell's Greek Civilization. Because if we can unlock, much less unpack, the dilemmas of Classical culture, there is a better than middling shot that we could understand, even resolve, the dilemmas that vex our civilization today.

"In this class," says Blackwell, "we are going to take on classical Athenian democracy. We here in America talk about democracy all the time. We use it as a concept, even a rallying cry. Which isn't to say I would want to live under Athenian democracy—that I even love it. Which isn't to say the idea of 'Hellas' was universally the same. In Sparta, for example, the women exercised nude with the men, but in Athens, society was only slightly less liberal than the Taliban. But in analyzing how the business of how Greek politics worked, how the concept of democracy works, my hope is that we in this class will collectively make contributions to the amount of knowledge in this world."

This world.

That's the power of Herodotus, Thucydides, and Aristotle—the very dead and yet very-much-alive voices these 37 young men and women will be studying this semester.

That's the power of the map Blackwell is pointing to, where the civilizations may have changed but where the concepts are still at play nearly 2,500 years later.

And that's the point of all the hours they'll be spending together in Furman Hall 128: to think like a Greek in order to think through the America they're about to inherit.