

Teaching Culture in Beginning Greek

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Whether we realize it or not, we Greek (and Latin) teachers are in the culture business—preserving it, transmitting it, and understanding it. One of the reasons students are attracted to ancient Greek is because they are attracted to the cultural richness of ancient Greece. Many instructors, too, enjoy introducing culture to their beginning Greek students, but perhaps feel that language comes first or are concerned that there is not enough time to cover both language and culture or would like better ways for integrating culture into beginning Greek. The challenge, of course, is how to integrate culture successfully into a language course without taking away too much time from language learning. In fact, teaching culture, I would argue, is not a delightful add-on to teaching ancient Greek, but is essential for all levels of Greek, including beginning Greek. Thus, in the first section, I make a case for why culture should be included in beginning Greek (and Latin) courses. Second, I describe the contours of a definition of and an approach toward culture that is appropriate for a beginning Greek course. Finally, I offer some practical examples from an online book, [*Ariadne: Resources for Athenaze*](#), that give a voice to both dominant and underrepresented groups within fifth century Greece and demonstrate how to integrate culture into language learning so that there is time for both. While the specific examples I use come from ancient Greece, my hope is that Latin teachers can find that the approach of teaching language through culture outlined here can be readily adapted to a Latin classroom.¹

Why Culture in a Language Course?

If time is so precious and there is so much grammar and vocabulary to be taught, then why include culture in beginning Greek or Latin? First of all, students want it and expect it. On the Greek side, they have heard about the Parthenon, Socrates, Athenian democracy, the Olympics, the Trojan War, and the wars with Persia. On the Latin side, they are enamored with the Colosseum, Julius Caesar, Cleopatra, Roman baths, and the Trojan War. Moreover, they might never have another opportunity to learn more about these topics, not to mention other important people, places, and events. Yet topics such as these offer a hook to get students to explore these people, places, and events within the larger context of Greek or Roman society and motivate them to continue studying Greek or Latin.

Second, our students live in a multicultural world and need to learn to become responsible global citizens. By exploring a different culture through the lens of the Greeks or the Romans, they can learn to understand and appreciate different cultural attitudes and perhaps learn to empathize with those different from themselves. In addition, they can begin to explore the many different cultural perspectives within one society. In fact, it may be possible to argue that students can tackle the difficult and complex issues of gender, ethnicity and citizenship, war and imperialism, and slavery more fearlessly and with less bias

¹ In other words, my approach is rooted in the [Standards for Classical Language Learning](#) and offers some practical ways to integrate Goal 1, Communication, with Goal 2, Culture.

by examining a culture that is “safely” distant from their own. Without bringing as many personal prejudices to the topic, they not only can understand the nuances of an issue, but they can begin to see through the eyes of those who are not empowered by the dominant culture.

Finally, a basic introduction to ancient culture in beginning Greek or Latin courses is crucial for students who plan to continue to read and study primary texts. Our students will read texts better if they understand the cultural values and attitudes that are embedded in the words and actions of the texts they read. Language reading specialists, in particular, stress the importance of both language decoding skills (bottom-up skills) and the background cultural and rhetorical information (top-down strategies) in a given text. Embedded in every text are cultural memories and cultural scripts that native speakers understand, but that *barbaroi* like us need explicated in order to make sense of the behaviors, allusions, and meanings in a passage. In other words, teaching grammar and vocabulary is not sufficient if students are to become fluent in the target language. They need training in the target culture, too (Morrell).

An interview on *Talk of the Nation* with Native American author Sherman Alexie illustrates the importance of culture in order to be effective and perceptive readers. In the interview, Alexie talked about his new novel *Flight*, a novel about a fifteen-year-old boy named Zits who travels through time, learning about himself as he experiences the violence and vengeance that have occurred at several distinct moments in Zits’ life and in Native American history. During the course of the interview, Alexie and callers to the program spoke of Little Big Horn, Wounded Knee, alcoholism among Native Americans, and humor and cynicism as a way of coping with genocide. As I listened to the interview, it became clear that to understand Sherman Alexie’s narrative and its narrator Zits—or any text, whether from one’s own society or from the ancient world—one needs a threefold approach to grasp the different layers of the text. First, one must understand events and cultural facts such as Little Big Horn and Wounded Knee. As Alexie points out, the defeat of Custer at Little Big Horn was “an incredible victory for Indians,” yet “no one talks about what the Indians did afterwards—incredible acts of mutilation and torture.” Second, one must go beyond stereotypes and recognize the complexity of behavior such as alcoholism among Indians. Alcoholism, Alexie argues, is a “cold, damp, reality. We have a major problem with alcoholism among Native Americans. . . . My mother, my father . . . my sisters and brothers, my aunts, my cousins are all alcoholics in one stage of recovery or another. . . . I write about it because it continues to be an active and daily part of my life.” Third, one must appreciate the distinctive perspective that Zits brings to his journey. Alexie points out that Zits’ “mocking tone” emerges as a result of “growing up in a culture of story-tellers and highly indigenous, stand-up comedians.” It is cynicism and humor that allow Zits to confront the repeated acts of vengeance that have occurred in his life and at crucial moments of American history.

If understanding the facts, behaviors, and perspectives of Native American culture helps a reader understand *Flight*, then understanding the cultures that shape the classical Greek *polis* is just as important for our beginning Greek students. Just as readers of *Flight* would fail to appreciate the novel without a knowledge of the American Indian Movement and Wounded Knee, the gnawing effects of alcoholism on Native Americans, or the embrace of humor and sarcasm to cope with the systemic marginalization of Native Americans by the dominant culture, so too readers of Plato and Xenophon would be at a loss to fathom their Symposiums without an understanding of Greek education, pederasty,

gendered spheres, and democracy. Beginning Greek and Latin are not too early for students to encounter some of the major cultural issues in fifth century Greece or first century Rome, and to see how various topics become more intelligible in the light of the behaviors and attitudes of those times. We would not expect our students to read a passage without knowing cases and tenses, so why should we expect them to grasp the meaning of a passage without knowledge of the cultural memories, behaviors, and attitudes that shaped distinct cultures of the ancient world?

Appropriate Goals for Teaching Culture in Beginning Greek

If we were to describe what topics someone should know about culture, we might begin with the outline provided by Pfister and Borzilleri (1977):

- A. The family unit and the personal sphere, e.g., family relationships, eating and shopping, housing.
- B. The social sphere, e.g., class structure, work, leisure, attitudes toward sex, population.
- C. Political systems and institutions, e.g., government, education, law and justice.
- D. The environment, e.g., geography, economy, urban vs. rural, natural resources and the environment, weather.
- E. Religion, the arts, and the humanities, e.g., role of religion, mythology, folklore, history, literature, music, creative arts.

Such a list is rather daunting, given the time constraints of beginning Greek. An instructor would need to be selective and at the same time include some topics that are not present on the list, such as slavery. Furthermore, an instructor should not hope to cover these topics in depth: an introduction to the various topics would be good start at providing the basic cultural background essential for comprehending Greek texts. More importantly, it is easy to imagine that teaching these topics via separate essays or units may impede the discussion of how these topics intersect with each other and weave their thread through so many other elements of Greek society. For example, slavery is not only a component of class structure, but impacts attitudes toward property, the economic output of the polis, the social dynamics within the household, and power structures of the “democratic” state. Even more to the point, there is a danger that these topics may be discussed in the abstract without offering students opportunities to see them applied to specific situations. For example, it is all well and good to discuss slavery in the abstract, but what is it really like when a slave decides to cope with her situation by deciding to preserve herself and her body through a work slowdown?²

Rather than Pfister’s and Borzilleri’s descriptive list, we might think of culture, in Jaime Wurzel’s phrase, as “habits of the heart and the mind” (3). In other words, culture is what events, monuments, and stories a community shares (facts/products), how members of that community relate to others and spend their time (behavior/practices), and what they

² See, e.g., [Ariadne, Chapter 2](#), especially the “Writing Assignment” and “Thinking about Culture” sections.

collectively remember, believe, and value (perspectives).³ Many of these cultural artifacts and perspectives resonate deeply in a people's psyche. They are habits, memories, and patterns of thought and behavior that affect the way a group interprets events, makes decisions, and evaluates people. These patterns of thought and behavior are unconscious or at least assumed by those engaged in the culture on an everyday basis, but when an outsider arrives, or in our case, a beginning Greek or Latin student encounters these cultures, these assumptions need to be described, analyzed, and explicated and the person encountering them needs to undergo a process of initiation.

Second, for a student to begin to see through the eyes of another, it is essential to recognize that intercultural understanding is a process that affects students both cognitively and emotionally. Milton Bennett proposes that the process of intercultural sensitivity moves through six stages, from avoiding cultural difference—through denial, defense, or minimization of the importance of those differences—to seeking cultural differences—by accepting those differences, adapting to them, or integrating them into one's world view. Such a process needs to begin as soon as students begin a language so that such a process will have time to mature and develop. In addition, if it is important to recognize that one's cultural reality is both an emotional and intellectual experience, then the same is true for comprehending the people of fifth century Greece. As Bennett notes, the shift to accepting and adapting to cultural difference "is not merely cognitive; it is a change in the organization of lived experience, which necessarily includes affect and behavior" (70). Thus, while the process of becoming more interculturally sensitive is facilitated by understanding cultural difference intellectually, it is equally important for this knowledge to be personally relevant. When students experience a situation or event personally, they begin to view Greeks as people like themselves and can begin to engage in empathy.

Finally, if culture is more than just a set of interesting facts, stories, and tidbits, our students need a framework in which we can take our students through the process. Patrick Moran offers such a framework for understanding culture that consists of four components. The first, Knowing About, consists of learning cultural information--the facts and data that allow us to describe the culture to an outsider. This descriptive and primarily intellectual task is important for introducing students to the physical and spatial world, historical events, and mythological stories that shaped the Greeks of the fifth century BCE. The second, Knowing How, is potentially more experiential. It involves the acquisition of various cultural practices—the customs, rituals, and interactions of everyday life. Yet it also involves participating in that world, at least vicariously, and becoming familiar with new patterns of behavior—in religious sanctuaries, on the Pnyx, in the theater, in the *oikos*, in the *agora*. Thus, performing these activities helps create a personal experience that can reinforce the abstract knowledge of those cultural practices and provide a deeper understanding of living in a society—fifth century Greece—that is both more democratic and more hierarchical than our own.

Third, Knowing Why is essential for acquiring cultural perspectives, that is, Greek beliefs, values, and attitudes. Performing the activities of daily life in Knowing How leads learners to question, explain, and interpret the cultural facts and practices they encounter and

³ This three-fold approach to culture is at the heart of the [Standards for Classical Language Learning](#), Goal 2, which emphasizes that products/artifacts and practices/behaviors are a means to understand the perspectives or beliefs of the people in Greek or Roman culture (Gascoyne et al., 9-11).

to compare them to their own culture.⁴ As they question why, they can grapple with the underlying assumptions and values of fifth century Greeks and move closer to understanding the culture from an insider's point of view. Moreover, within Knowing Why, it is crucial for students to realize that the ancient world was not monolithic, but that multiple perspectives co-existed—women and men, slave and free, metic and citizen, Athenian and non-Athenian, Greek and non-Greek. Without becoming familiar with these underrepresented groups, students would have a limited knowledge of ancient Greece and the overwhelming emphasis would be focused on the male citizens of fifth century Athens (Hallett).

Fourth, Knowing Oneself, asks students to make the knowledge they have acquired personally relevant. Through personal reflection, learners are challenged to put themselves in the shoes of Athenian citizens, but also of those often marginalized: women, slaves, metics, Spartans, and Persians. This final stage is also the most difficult because it may involve upsetting a student's own belief system, for as they reflect on the practices and beliefs of the ancient world, they may realize that their own beliefs and practices need to be reevaluated. As Martha Nussbaum explains, becoming global citizens means engaging in Socratic self-examination: "Attaining membership in the world community entails a willingness to doubt the goodness of one's own way and to enter the give-and-take of critical argument about ethical and political choices" (62). Moreover, if students are to make progress on Bennett's stages of intercultural sensitivity, our teaching must not divorce knowledge from the personal and emotional (Wurzel 12). And if our students are to comprehend the habits of the hearts and minds, they must see the Greeks (and Romans) as people, at least in some significant ways, similar to themselves.

Integrating Culture and Language Learning

Since understanding culture attracts students to ancient Greek, enables our students to function better in a multicultural world, and is crucial for learning how to read Greek, incorporating culture into beginning Greek makes perfect sense. The more challenging question is how to do it. The previous section offered a definition of culture that stresses the need to look at both the historical monuments and events of ancient Greece and the patterns of behavior and values that shape the culture—in short, habits of hearts and minds. It also emphasizes the importance of looking at culture from multiple viewpoints and perceiving the culture not just in the abstract, but through experiential activities that encourage students to see through the eyes of individuals with whom they feel a connection as fellow human beings.

This framework for thinking about culture while communicating in ancient Greek is the goal of [Ariadne: Resources for Athenaze](#). The website provides multiple ways for learners to encounter and reflect on culture, some in English, but most in Greek. Typically, a chapter begins with Images (accompanied by a narrative in English) that help students visualize some aspect of fifth century Greece. Oral Scripts—designed to act as conversational prompts for teachers and students—use speaking, listening, and movement to encourage students to use all their senses in language learning. Readings provide inscriptions, poetry, and other

⁴ Standard 4.2 of the [Standards for Classical Language Learning](#) states that "students compare and contrast their own culture with that of the Greco-Roman world." (Gascoyne, et al., 14). In other words, comparing cultures helps students see the relevance of the ancient world to their own lives.

authentic texts that give voice to women and other underrepresented groups. Writing Assignments build upon the readings and offer an opportunity for students to imagine themselves in different roles and as different characters. Finally, Thinking about Culture asks students to step back from what they have been doing and reflect on the behaviors and values that they have enacted or to compare their own situations and beliefs with those of the Greeks. In short, Images and Thinking about Culture act as the cultural frame for the lesson while Oral Scripts, Readings, and Writing Activities explore cultural situations through the target language.

Before I discuss specific examples, a brief word about how these activities are integrated into the flow of a unit might be in order. Since I teach at the college level, I expect my students to have read and viewed the Images section before they come to class, but it would not take more than 15-20 minutes to show the images and to introduce the cultural background during class time. During class, I still present brief grammar explanations, sometimes inductively, sometimes deductively. Outside of class, I still expect my students to learn the vocabulary, do homework exercises, and occasionally paradigms or verb synopses as a way to synthesize morphological knowledge. What the activities from *Ariadne* do is, first of all, suggest a framework in which to use the target language in a realistic cultural context and, second, offer scenarios for students to be active learners, applying the vocabulary and grammar that they have acquired to new situations that involve both language and culture. What I give up is class time spent meticulously going through homework items—a source of drudgery for most students. Instead, I spend only fifteen or twenty minutes checking homework for each chapter, answering questions and asking students to answer targeted and problematic homework items. In other words, class time is devoted to active use of the target language to read, write, listen and speak rather than time spent reviewing what students have already answered or completing worksheets that have no cultural context. As a result, class time is more meaningful and students are more engaged.

As an example of how students might participate in all four parts of Moran's framework and utilize ancient Greek to learn about and experience the culture of fifth century Greece, I offer a unit on Athenian Democracy in Action (*Athenaze*, Chapters 21-22). The unit begins with basic cultural information, Knowing About, that provides the necessary background for further activities. [Images: Athenian Democracy in Action: The Pnyx, the Bouleterion, the Prytaneion, and Heliaia](#) shows the major sites where the assembly (*ecclesia*), the Council (*boule*), and the executive committee of the Council (*prytaneis*) met. In the narrative that accompanies the images, students learn some basic political terminology and how Athenian democracy was structured, but the images themselves show the physical setting of each of these places, including reconstructions of the Bouleterion and the Tholos (Prytaneion). As a result, students can begin to imagine themselves in these places.⁵

After students have read the information about these public buildings of Athenian democracy and seen the images, it is time for them to begin to understand this information using the target language. [Oral Scripts: The Ecclesia](#) offers a visual chart of who meets (e.g., citizens, the people), who speaks (e.g., the president, the rhetors), what are the key places on the Pnyx (the altar and speaker's platform), what verbs can be used to describe the actions in the assembly (gathering, entering, sitting, speaking, voting), and what is the order of events

⁵ Latin students can do a similar review of the political spaces of the Roman Forum by visiting the Forum in the [VRoma MOO](#), Region VIII in the City of Rome. Simply login as Guest and make sure that your browser accepts pop-ups for this website.

during the assembly (prayer and sacrifice, the herald reading the preliminary decree and then asking who wishes to speak, the rhetors speaking, followed by the vote). Using this semantic map of the *ecclesia* as a guide, the teacher elicits the appropriate vocabulary by asking students questions in Greek, such as who meets, where does it happen, what happens, and how is it said. As students respond, the teacher writes the words on the board in groups based on semantic categories. After the basic vocabulary is put on the board, students then use this vocabulary to utter complete sentences that describe what happens at a typical assembly (and in what order). Thus, the Oral Script acts as a transition from Knowing About to Knowing How since students begin to use basic vocabulary to describe the order of events at the *ecclesia*. In addition, the Oral Script can serve either as a pre-reading exercise to help students activate the key vocabulary they will need to read *Athenaze* 21a or as a post-reading activity that will help students solidify the vocabulary they have just seen in the reading passage.⁶

After students have read Pericles' speech at the eve of the Peloponnesian War whether Athens should go to war with Sparta (*Athenaze*, Chapter 21b), then it is time to ask students to move to Knowing How. Their reenactment of a meeting of the assembly, however, will have a twist. The women are asked to leave the room since only male citizens are allowed to participate in the assembly.⁷ After the women express their shock, dismay, and perhaps anger at not being able to participate in this reenactment, the instructor gathers the women outside the room to tell them to plan their own counter-assembly, just as the women in Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazousai* formed their own assembly. Each group then prepares to reenact the assembly in the target language, each choosing an *epistates*, priest, herald, and rhetors. If the class is small, then the instructor might choose to combine or eliminate certain roles. Each group should be prepared to propose a motion, to speak for it (one to two sentence speeches based on language in the reading passage), and to have the group vote on whether to go to war or make peace. Props may make the scene more realistic, a speaker's platform (not lectern), a stuffed pig for the priest to sacrifice, a wax tablet from which the *probouleuma* is read, and a wreath for the rhetor speaking. The people attending the assembly sit on the ground since the Pnyx had no seats, and they vote by raising hands (Hansen). After the groups have completed their preparations, the two groups finally gather in the same room and each group attempts to lead the assembly as they see fit. As the two groups vie for control, there might be a need for Scythian archers!

A [Writing Assignment: Myrrhine and Melitta's Feelings about the Evacuation](#) leads students into the third element of Moran's framework, Knowing Why. After the assembly is concluded, Dikaiopolis and Philip return home and break the news to Myrrhine and Melitta that Athens is likely to go to war with Sparta and that those living in the countryside will have to evacuate their homes and take refuge in Athens. In the story that follows (*Athenaze*, Chapter 22a), Myrrhine and Melitta express their reservations about leaving their home, farm, and possessions and their fears about what war might bring. After students have read the Chapter 22a reading passage, it is time for them to begin to take on the role of those who were not heard at the assembly and voice the fears and concerns so often not heard as a country goes to war.⁸ This writing assignment, building on the new grammar, asks students

⁶ A Latin parallel for this activity can be found Gruber-Miller, "Fluency and Accuracy," where a semantic map for *comitia* is described (170).

⁷ If the class has enough students, the reenactment would be even more effective by identifying some students as slaves and others as metics who are also excluded from the assembly.

⁸ One need not look any further than Homer and Greek tragedy to find examples of women affected by war, their fear of enslavement, their grief at the loss of their kin, and their frequent inability to voice their

to write three or four sentences in Greek that express their fear using fearing clauses. Ideally, after these sentences have been peer edited, they are uttered by the students to the rest of class. One further step is to let them be uttered either without responding to them, leaving these voices unheard, or with Dikaiopolis reiterating the importance of going to war.

After the assembly has been reenacted and the Writing Assignment has been completed, the final step is a debriefing in English (Knowing Oneself). It is time for students to evaluate how they felt during the assembly and how they responded to the way that Athenian democracy functioned. How did they feel about being excluded or seeing their peers excluded? How did they want to react and why did they choose to take action as they did? Even today, whose voices are marginalized and why? How would they evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of democracy in Athens? Would they recommend it for communities or countries today, and if so, in what settings?⁹

To return to Rebecca Roberts' interview with Sherman Alexie, a caller during the interview talked about seeing a Ghost Dance dress from Wounded Knee in a San Antonio museum. What struck her is that the ritual dress, divorced from the context needed to understand its controversial history, seemed more "like a trophy" of American imperialism.¹⁰ In the same way, we need to offer our students a context in which to read Greek texts and understand the people who inhabit them, a context that does not look at isolated episodes, but connects the dots between facts, practices, and perspectives, that explores not just the dominant culture, but also the many sub-cultures that comprise the ancient world, that thinks about culture both in theory and in performance. Instead of claiming that there is not enough time to do culture, instructors should imagine ways to use ancient Greek to encounter and experience these cultural topics. *Ariadne* is one site that offers a wealth of activities combining language and culture and welcomes suggestions for additional activities. When learners can use and practice the language to compose meaningful utterances within an authentic cultural setting, then students are able to integrate language and culture so that the two reinforce each other. As a result, students both learn the structures of Greek and become a *kosmou polites*, a citizen of the world.

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disaffection with war. For an influential modern account of the connection between gender and war, see Tickner.

⁹ A similar unit can be designed for Latin students. Rather than a vote to decide whether to go to war, however, the students could hold a municipal election for *duumvir*. Three to five candidates can be chosen and students can then write "graffiti" on newsprint in support of their favorite candidates which could then be taped to the walls of the classroom or even the hallways of the school (Gruber-Miller, "Writing," 203-4). After the graffiti has been posted and additional comments have been scribbled, students can assemble as a *comitia* with various factions shouting cheers and making speeches in Latin followed by an actual vote to elect the two *duumvirs*. See Cooley and Cooley for more information about municipal elections. After the election, students can compare methods of campaigning, types of endorsements, and negative advertising in the ancient and modern world.

¹⁰ Such a [Ghost Dance dress](#), similarly decontextualized, is presented on the Smithsonian Institution's website as part of their 150th anniversary traveling exhibit.

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