

## Flavius Agricola: An Interdisciplinary Model for Senior Capstone Courses

As institutions place a higher priority on undergraduate research, senior seminars and “capstone” courses have continued to increase in number and prominence within the curricula of Classics departments. Designing a coherent and communal experience in these courses can be difficult, however, since students bring many different interests to our field, which is inherently interdisciplinary. This paper describes and discusses one approach that I have found successful in confronting these challenges – namely, drawing on a museum collection near my home institution and structuring a course around a sole monument that enables and rewards approaches from various subfields of Classics.

The funerary monument of Flavius Agricola, which is housed currently in the Indianapolis Museum of Art (inv. 72.148), was discovered in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century when the foundations for Bernini’s baldacchino were being dug within St. Peter’s basilica in Rome. Carved from marble, the monument depicts a life-sized man with an elderly face and youthful, mostly nude body. He reclines on a *kline*, his left hand cradling a cup, his right lifting a (now lost) crown to his head. The accompanying inscription in loose hexameters (*CIL* 6.17985a) is now also lost (in fact, it is presumed to have been destroyed by papal authorities because of its salacious content), but the epitaph was transcribed by antiquarians. It identifies Flavius and his hometown (Tibur), mentions his wife and her devotion to Isis, expresses gratitude to her son, and then admonishes readers:

Friends who read this, I advise you: mix the wine, drink deep, crown your heads with flowers, and don’t deny sexual pleasures to pretty girls, for after death fire and earth consume all else.

With further exploration of the so-called Vatican necropolis in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we have a secure archaeological context, most of the monument, and the text of its poetic and philosophical epitaph.

This paper begins by describing Flavius Agricola's monument and laying out the course's organization. Our first class meeting is dedicated to visiting the monument, sketching it, and describing it in minute detail. Then, for the first half of the semester, we approach the monument with a different thematic focus each week (verse inscriptions, historical and archaeological contexts, funerary practices, etc.). Later in the term, students write formal proposals for a longer paper and then workshop drafts of that project. Some students use Flavius as a point of departure for broader questions, but most delve into one aspect of his funerary ensemble. Projects have included a literary commentary on the epitaph, an analysis of Roman funerary dining practices, an investigation of marriages between adherents of different cults, and an inquiry into the Epicurean aspects of the worldview espoused by the inscription.

Next, the paper reflects on the two iterations of my institution's senior seminar that have been dedicated to the Flavius Agricola monument. In my experience, building the course in this way resolves a number of tensions inherent to Classics capstones. While we want students to venture out on their own intellectually, we also want to avoid their feeling adrift on a solo voyage. Similarly, we want a cohesive course, but also want to accommodate a range of student interests, which might be archaeological, literary, historical, cultural, etc. Additionally, at American institutions, Greco-Roman antiquity can seem far

away, almost a sort of intellectual fantasyland. While there is no substitute for study abroad, this project also has the advantage of direct work on a tangible, “visit-able” artifact of the ancient world.

I do not presume to offer a panacea for the challenges of capstone courses with this presentation. Indeed, one shortcoming of this model is that it requires a single faculty member to mentor students engaged in many different kinds and areas of research. But, in describing my experience with Flavius, I hope to stimulate discussion about the challenges of, and possibilities for, Classics capstone courses and also to generate additional ideas from audience members.