

Teachers and Students Look at Greek in Their Schools

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The results are in from an opinion survey, a follow-up to a more general survey of Greek programs in American secondary schools. Opinion surveys were sent in March 2002 for both teachers and students in an attempt to help formulate a new rationale for the teaching of Classical Greek in the schools as an aid in promoting wider teaching of the subject in schools of all kinds throughout the U.S.A. Teachers were asked why they believed that students should study Classical Greek in the schools today, while students answered a short set of questions depending on the extent of their study. Responses from both teachers and students in many ways complemented each other, since the momentum to start Greek programs often came from a group of uniquely motivated students or an exceptionally dedicated instructor. Responses to both surveys were abundantly positive and informative, whether coming from long-established programs at independent, parochial, and public schools or from recent start-ups and programs that teach Greek by inclusion in a Latin curriculum.

Overall, instructors from twenty-eight schools responded to the teacher survey. Eighteen responded as teaching a formal Greek course or independent study, whereas ten introduce Greek at some level in their Latin classroom. Fifty-four percent of teacher responses were from private institutions, while forty-six percent came from public ones, two of which were city magnet programs. The largest private school program boasted seventy-five students over a full Greek curriculum, while thirty students formed the largest number who responded from a public school. The following are summaries of the responses prepared by John Oksanish, a 2002 graduate of the MAT Program in Latin and Classical Humanities at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and now a Latin teacher at Walpole High School, and myself.

First, what rationale do teachers offer for teaching Greek, whether as a regular course, in a non-traditional context (e.g., before or after school or during lunch periods), or by inclusion with Latin?

Many say that their reasons are the same as their reasons for offering Latin: the intrinsic value of studying a richly

inflected Indo-European language, the enduring value of reading significant works of classical literature in the original, opportunities to increase students' English vocabulary in ways that are applicable to the sciences and professions and that will improve SAT scores, and the achievement of greater understanding of grammar and a deeper awareness of what language is and how it functions.



Several of the respondents rationalize their teaching of Greek in terms of the Western cultural tradition, as in this statement: "Our Western tradition rests on the foundation of ancient Greece, for in that special time and place we first learned how to use the twin tools of philosophy and literature. The study of ancient Greece is a key not only to our past, but also to our future." Another teacher feels that the neglect of Greek has deprived our students of "the

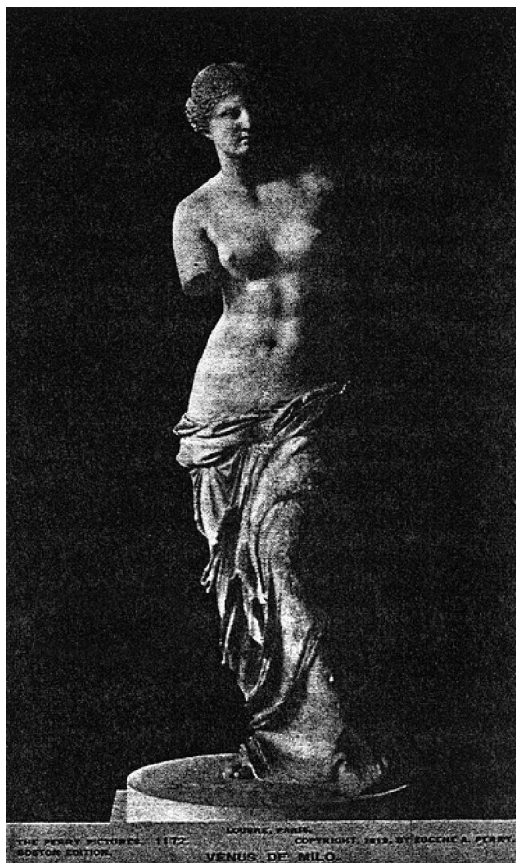
very basis of our Western culture." Another states that he teaches Greek partly to give students "a chance to learn more about the culture that gave rise to our own."

Most respondents, however, rationalize their teaching of Greek as an extension of, and as support and background for, their *Latin* teaching. One teacher remarks that Greek culture should be taught as a *precursor* of Roman, in architecture, for example, while another notes that Greek adds richness and detail to just about any genre of Latin literature, except satire, which, according to Quintilian, was wholly Roman. One teacher remarks, "We talk so much in class of the Romans' debt to the Greeks that it is good to see what their language was like." Another notes that when a person starts to read Latin literature, there is an almost immediate curiosity about Greek literature and also notes that since the language of education for the Romans was Greek, one wants to know what it was that the Romans were getting from the Greeks through their language and literature. Many believe that at least a rudimentary knowledge of Greek should be offered so that students can see beyond their Latin texts. One teacher remarks that his AP students love to compare the opening of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* in Greek to that of Vergil's *Aeneid* in Latin and that his students always compare the Greek of Sappho's lyrics with Catullus 51. One teacher quotes her mentor, Professor Harold Gottof of the University of Cincinnati, who once told her, "To be a good Latinist, you have to be a good Hellenist." The teacher comments, "I'm training good Latinists; I want them to have the full wealth of background material. I try to give as much as I can

to my Latin classes, but there are times when my Greek students definitely have the advantage.” Another teacher remarks, “Since the Greeks influenced the Romans so much, it seems absolutely necessary to offer both languages if you offer Latin.” In etymology, too, teachers emphasize that one needs to go back beyond the Latin to trace the travels of many English words from their Greek origins. For one teacher, inclusion of some Greek in his public school Latin program “rounds out his students’ high school study of Classics.” A private school teacher agrees, stating, “it makes good sense for our students at the Academy, who are offered a secondary education with a classical (humanistic) emphasis through a rigorous 5-year Latin requirement, to complement their high school studies with a year of Classical Greek.” In justifying inclusion of Greek in her Classics teaching, one teacher asks, “How can you understand a subject deeply, to the core, if you do not understand what is at the core?” Another remarks, “You don’t go to Niagara and not see the falls.”

Some teachers include in their rationales for offering Greek that they wish to “challenge” their students, that Greek provides “good mental exercise,” that it has “the flair and feel of the exotic,” and that students are “enthusiastic about studying a more ‘obscure’ and unusual language and different alphabet.” One teacher remarks that the “uniqueness” of her students’ having studied Greek sets them apart on college applications. She writes letters of recommendation saying that her “students are doing *extra* work, and challenging work at that.” Another teacher underscores this point: “The cachet,” he states, “of ancient Greek will be a remarkable and creditable

embellishment to [students’] high school achievements, and will make their college application dossiers considerably



more appealing to even the most prestigious colleges.” This teacher also justifies his program as “redounding to the credit of the . . . School District” and enhancing its “reputation for offering a sound, traditional, and rigorous academic program.” Most would admit, however, that a full, rigorous course in Greek is not for *all* students, but as one teacher remarks, “For those for whom it is the right thing, it is a nonpareil intellectual journey with limitless rewards.”

It is student curiosity that drives many of the programs to excel; one instructor commented on how several students asked to meet her *before* school several times a week to read *Athenaze*,

while other teachers have met insistent students over the summer to oversee similar ventures. As further evidence, some schools have effectively doubled their enrollment by word of mouth, as well as the sheer student interest in doing something new, little known, and satisfyingly challenging. Another teacher recalled a class that was offered primarily for learning-disabled students who, despite previous letdowns in language study, found success with the “fresh start” offered by the Greek alphabet and culture. Perhaps, then, it is Greek’s ostensible novelty that draws students in, and shocks them *not* with its utter strangeness – but with its remarkable familiarity, discovered like a secret, once one knows the tricks of the trade.



Some teachers who taught Greek by inclusion in their Latin courses lamented the lack of a full Greek course in their school curriculum. Despite tough times, however, a few things seem sure.

Instructors almost unanimously described the rationale for their teaching Greek (and often the strength of their programs) in terms of linguistic and cultural interchange and influence, as noted above – whether between the classical civilizations of Greece and Rome or between that of Greece and our own. This observation is perhaps fortuitous in light of the *APA/ACL Standards for Classical Language Learning*, as well as the current educational *milieu*. Yet it can be no coincidence that Goals III and IV, which respectively emphasize Connections and Comparisons, describe exactly what many of our teachers of Greek are doing, what our students are enjoying, and what the educational environment is demanding.

No less important than the teachers’ rationale for offering Greek is the rationale of the students who study it. This seems particularly true in the case of Greek, which is most often offered as an elective course that depends especially upon the interest of students. Indeed, a number of teachers remarked that the initial impetus for beginning a Greek course, supplement, or independent study came from a handful of their highly motivated *discipuli*. Still, many students who were compelled to take Greek as a required course – or who chose Greek as their foreign language requirement – found their study highly rewarding.

Overall, five hundred and eighty-six students from forty schools responded to the survey. Four hundred and sixty-six responded as being enrolled in a formal Greek course or independent study, whereas a hundred and twenty came to know Greek, at some level, in a Latin classroom. Sixty-two percent of individual *student* responses were from

private institutions, while thirty-eight percent came from public ones. Of the three hundred and sixty-two private school students who were learning Greek, three hundred and thirty-six did so in an actual class or independent study. Of the two hundred and twenty-two public school respondents, a hundred and thirty reported being enrolled in an actual class or independent study. No discernible correlation of opinion could be attributed to these factors and, by and large, student responses were highly positive.



Full-course Greek students were first asked why they chose to study Greek. The responses ranged from overtly practical reasons to the purely intellectual. Most had already studied Latin for at least a short while and were

taking Greek to supplement their knowledge of the Classical world. Some of these expressed a clear desire to read Greek myths, Homer, tragedy, Plato and the New Testament in the original. Many others found that Greek has a certain cachet or a chic intellectual obscurity (resulting primarily from the different alphabet) that sets Greek students apart from their peers, and they saw Greek as a unique transcript item that would appeal to top-tier colleges. Some mentioned the linguistic and cultural links between Greek, Latin, and English, while others were of Greek background and were motivated to take the course by a parent or personal interest. Nearly all respondents – whether they had previously studied Latin or not – said that their choice reflected a search for a new, interesting elective that they had heard was fun yet challenging.

Almost everyone found that the course had met their expectations, some finding it “easier than Latin,” with the majority of respondents acknowledging that they had been pleased to find more links between Greek, Latin, and English than they had expected; several students reported a newly-found “general linguistic awareness,” while others praised the course’s inclusion of cultural facts, as well as the application of Greek vocabulary to derivatives in science and philosophy. The vast majority would recommend its study to others, but many with the warning that whoever intends to take Greek should be ready to work hard.

Most said that they would continue to study Greek if possible, citing all of the aforementioned benefits, despite the difficulties. The majority of those who said they would *not* continue were merely prohibited by the fact that Greek

was not offered beyond the initial year of study, or that they were graduating and that it was not offered at their college in the fall. Others had the courage to admit that Greek was simply “not for them,” or that they did not take well to languages, although they had benefited from its study. Still, a fair number of respondents mentioned that, although they had failed at other languages, Greek gave them a new start and that they had at last begun to succeed.

Students doing Greek by inclusion in a Latin course had similar reactions to their full-time counterparts. Asked whether or not Greek should be studied in conjunction with Latin, most students welcomed the combination as a nice break that added “flavor” to the class and allowed them to learn something new. Most stressed an interest in achieving a “total classical knowledge” with a combined emphasis on the languages and cultures of both the Greeks and the Romans, noting in Horatian overtones how *Graecia capta* had made an indelible mark on the Roman West. Some few future Hellenists, armed with their new knowledge, went so far as to call the Romans mere thieves of Greek culture. Others found Greek to be beneficial in relation to their other classes and fields of interest – including English, Science, AP Biology, and Medicine.

Still, some students (albeit a small minority), preferred to see “Latin left as Latin” since the two languages seem falsely to overlap on certain points of grammar and vocabulary, producing confusion at times, though none who complained of this gave any specific examples. The new alphabet and vocabulary seemed to prove as difficult

to some students as they were intriguing to others. Even so, those who would



have been happier without the sister language were intrigued by Greek culture, myth, philosophy, and history.

Indeed, when asked what was most interesting to them about the study of Greek, the cultural enthusiasts more or less tied with the students who had fallen in love with the Greek alphabet and the

etymological web between Greek, Latin, and English. Ultimately, the survey results suggest that the response of students to learning Greek – whether full-time or in Latin class – has been overwhelmingly positive. Perhaps this is because many of the students who take Greek do so electively in the latter half of their high school years, or because of Greek's alleged cachet and its ostensibly obscure alphabet. Truly though, all seemed aware that learning Greek, while a challenge to some, was "easily worth the effort" because of the relatively

quick return on the investment: students in regular courses were able to delve into real texts by the end of the first year or shortly thereafter. Even students who claim that study beyond a year or two of Greek was "not for them" admit that they walk away happily enriched from a course that was rigorously challenging, interdisciplinary, and culturally relevant – in a word, *Classic*.

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