Society and Politics in Ancient Greece

Prof. Helen Gaudette, History 200
Queens College, CUNY
Helen.Gaudette@qc.cuny.edu

“Let him who would move the world first move himself.”
— Socrates

Study in Greece, the birthplace of Western civilization, and the land of poets, philosophers, politicians, and artists. It is a country a spectacular natural beauty, where mountains meet the sea, islands sparkle in the sun-drenched blue ocean, and bleached ancient monuments tower over beaches and olive tree groves. Over its long history, Greece produced magnificent achievements in areas of government, science, philosophy and the arts that still influence our lives.

In this course, we’ll be based in Athens to study the politics and society of Ancient Greece. Athens is the perfect location to study Greece’s ancient past because it is there we’ll find the Parthenon on the Acropolis and the new, world-famous Acropolis museum, the Ancient Agora where Socrates taught, and Keramikos, the ancient cemetery where Pericles gave his Funeral Oration. Athens has great museum collections of ancient cultural artifacts such as the National Archaeological Museum, the Cycladic Museum, the Benaki collection, and others. We’ll venture out of the city as well, however, to take a cruise to nearby islands and a three-day trip to visit the ancient sites of Delphi, Olympia, Mycenae, and Epidaurus.

Readings of classical Greek authors such as Plato, Xenophon, Herodotus, and Thucydides, will be combined with visits to the ancient sites. And, during the last week, we’ll focus on the history of fifth-century Athens during and after the Peloponnesian War, bringing history to life by holding the debates that dominated the Athenian Assembly at that time and putting Socrates himself on trial.

“I am not an Athenian nor a Greek, but a citizen of the world.”
— Socrates

During the final week, we will focus on the history of 5th-century Athens during the Peloponnesian War up to and including the Trial of Socrates, with the pedagogy “reacting to the past.”
“Reacting” is an innovative way of learning through role-playing and elaborate games. In the Athens game, The Threshold of Democracy: Athens in 403 BCE, by Mark C. Carnes and Josiah Ober, students will be assigned roles as historical figures meeting as members of the Athenian Assembly and jurors in the trial of Socrates with a “game objective.” At the heart of the Athens game, is animated discussion and debating; you must persuade others that “your” views make more sense than those of your opponents. The debates will be informed by your readings.

You will have two ways of expressing your views: orally and in writing, and both will be graded and contribute toward your final grade. Writing assignments will include journal notes and a final research project.

The class will meet four or five days a week for 2 ½ hours each day. Some afternoons will be devoted to field trips. This leaves some weekends free for independent travel, but please note, all students must sign in and out with myself, the site director, if leaving the campus. Also, there can be NO TRAVEL that interferes with class or field trip attendance.

Required Reading: please purchase before we leave for Athens to bring along with you


Course Requirements:

Participation: (30%) Participation is the heart and soul of this course so it is a crucial component of your grade. Attendance, therefore, is mandatory. During the game, in your assigned role, you will seek to achieve your “game objectives” by expressing your views in the classroom as a member of a particular team (faction) or alone as an indeterminate.

Journal/Notebook/Scrapbook: (20%) The journal will consist of hand-written notes, thoughts, comments, strategies, arguments, postcards, museum receipts, etc. Think of it as a written and visual record of all that you do, see, and learn about Ancient Athens while in Greece. The journal should also include your game outlines and notes with
arguments and counter arguments to each of the major questions concerning the Assembly in 403 BCE and the Trial of Socrates that will come up in the debates. You can and should refer to your outlines and arguments during the debates.

*Choose your journal carefully! Get one that is a comfortable size for you, one you will not mind taking with you everywhere, one that makes you feel like writing! It should have at least 100 pages (you may find yourself writing more than you had ever imagined you would).

**Research Project:** (30%) This 8-10-page typed research project about Ancient Athenian society (with a component to be researched in Athens during the course) will be due a few weeks after we get back home from Greece.

**Final Exam:** (20%) The final exam will be held on the last day of classes in Athens.