CORE 200, Spring 2017: The Culture of the Athenian Democracy

Instructors, meeting time and location
Professor C. L. Max Nikias and Professor Thomas Habinek
Thursdays 2:00-3:50 pm in LAW 130

To apply: http://undergrad.usc.edu/athenian-democracy/application/

Classical Athens of the fifth century BC is the world’s first attested democracy. Initially an experimental form of government designed to ease tensions between the rich and the poor, the democracy quickly grew to unprecedented strength and influence throughout the ancient world. During its ascendancy, the Athenian democracy gave birth to new forms of literature and art – prominent among them the tragedies of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, as well as the comedies of Aristophanes – that were performed at annual festivals before the assembled population. These plays provided a model of democratic engagement, while exploring issues of vital importance to their original audience, and to us today.

The Culture of the Athenian Democracy gives students a unique opportunity to explore the achievements of the classical Greeks and their continuing relevance from a variety of perspectives. Professor Nikias will lead the discussion of three plays by Sophocles -- Antigone, Oedipus the King, and Philoctetes -- while Professor Habinek will consider the institutional arrangements of the Athenian democracy and its successes and failures, especially as viewed from the perspective of Thucydides, the most influential Greek historian, and witness to Athens’ long and destructive conflict with Sparta.

Among the topics to be treated include tensions between individual and society, law and ethics, destiny and fate, and political ideals and practical realities; the nature and lessons of leadership and of civic participation; the importance of understanding oneself and others; and the potential healing role of art. Students are encouraged to regard the course as an introduction to the timeless wisdom crystallized in the experience and literature of the classical Greeks and Romans.

Students will receive two units of credit under the heading CORE 200. Course requirements include regular class attendance and participation in discussions (twelve sessions in all); timely completion of all readings; one short midterm assignment (approximately two-three pages); and a paper at the end of the semester (approximately seven-eight pages). All readings will be in English, and no prior study of the classical world is expected.

Enrollment in the course is limited to 40 freshmen and sophomore students – i.e., students who began college studies no earlier than Fall 2015. To apply, follow the link above. For priority consideration, complete the online application by noon on Friday, October 28 (see link above).

Students who would like more information about the structure and format of the course may contact Professor Habinek via email, habinek@usc.edu.