



HISTORY HAPPENINGS

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Editors: Suzanne Onstine and Caroline Peyton

History Abroad

DR. BENJAMIN GRAHAM

I suppose there are lots of reasons to take a large group of adolescents to another country and set them loose. For Dr. Goudsouzian and I, the idea came to us during conversations about how the COVID-19 pandemic had changed our students and our department. We lamented that, after the experience of isolation and lockdown, our students seemed more hesitant to take chances and try new experiences. Further, we observed that the in-person experience for undergraduates at the U of M seemed to have diminished since the pandemic; there were fewer reasons to make the effort to be present and engage with the campus community.

In a moment of despair, we convinced each other that an opportunity to experience Italy and Greece might excite students and nudge a few of them into interacting with the world around them. We sat down and designed a class centered on built space in the ancient Greek and Roman world, which we eventually called “Sites of Power, Sites of Death in the Ancient Mediterranean.” Starting with places that we both had some familiarity with through our research and travels (and places that we thought would be impactful to a group of 18-22-year olds), we reverse engineered an introduction to ancient ideologies of spectacle, religion, status, and death that would be accessible to students in any major. Listing in both the history department and Honors College, the course ran in the Spring 2024 semester.

The course planning, it turns out, was the easy part. The bureaucratic hurdles to co-teaching a spring course that culminated in summer travel with students from across the university and traveling across two countries were quite formidable.



Dr. Chrystal Goudsouzian and Dr. Graham at the precinct of the Delphic Oracle.

The financial barriers for interested students to commit to the trip were also significant. Fortunately for us, and our students, we had great logistical and financial support from Melinda Jones and Jonathan Holland from the Helen Hardin Honors College, Rebecca Laumann from the Center for International Services, and the Chair of History, Dan Unowsky.

Our efforts paid dividends. Students showed an enormous amount of interest in the trip—we had over 90 students who solicited more information about the class and trip.



Students and Acropolis in Athens; Palatine Hill in Rome; photo from the inadvertent hike up Mount Ellanio on the island of Aegina referred to in the article; cover photo: Acropolis in Athens.

HISTORY ABROAD CONT'D

And we ended up with 23 students who took the class and traveled with us to Italy and Greece. This was the largest study abroad group since COVID and one of the largest in the institution's history.

On May 10, we departed with the group to Rome and spent 6 nights there. The students were able to see first-hand many of the sites in Rome we had discussed in class: the Colosseum, the Pantheon, and the Palatine Hill. We also took two day-trips, one to the hill town of Orvieto to see an Etruscan necropolis and one to Pompeii to see the city buried in volcanic ash in 79 CE. The students ate pizza and gelato and learned how to use public transportation in a large metropolitan city.

Even after our Metro pep talks, we still had to assure them it was okay to brush against and generally share space with people they didn't know. At the start, we had to push and pull them in and out of the subway, but by the end of the trip, they were old pros, standing hip to hip with the denizens of Rome. The students generally kept their cool when mishaps occurred - like when they were given an hour to hike up and down Mount Vesuvius (on a hot day) or when we all learned that the sprawling ruins of Pompeii had two exits, not a single exit where we would assuredly locate everyone.

On May 17, we boarded the plane again and flew to Athens. Once again, we called back to important urban sites featured in class: the Agora, the city walls, and the Acropolis (where we met up with our newest faculty member, Dr. Gaggioli!).



Wall paintings from the House of the Vetti in Pompeii.

From Athens, we took a day trip to the Bronze Age ruins at Mycenae and one to visit the oracle at Delphi. For the final leg of the trip, we boarded a ferry and spent our remaining days in Greece on the island of Aegina where the students took in a few last ancient sites. Students braved difficult situations in Greece, too, like facing off against stealthy, hungry peacocks on Moni island or allowing a wrong turn to turn into a 5-mile hike to the top of Aegina. Frankly, I learned the students were willing to do anything to get a good selfie.

I can happily report that all 23 students made it back to Memphis without any lasting bodily harm (despite a rogue bungee jumping expedition into the Corinth Canal). Dr. Goudsouzian arranged a reunion with the class earlier in November, where we exchanged photos and remembered funny stories. Some of the younger students left the reunion with the warning that "we will see you again in '27." They want, it seems, to go back to the Mediterranean, to continue their exploration of the world through study abroad. While Dr. Goudsouzian and I appreciated the sentiment and tallied it as a successful mission to draw students out, we hope, next time around, we can summon the energy to do it again.