

University of Texas Rio Grande Valley

ScholarWorks @ UTRGV

Communication Faculty Publications and
Presentations

College of Liberal Arts

Summer 2007

Reviving the Dead Greek Guys

William F. Strong

John A. Cook

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.utrgv.edu/com_fac



Part of the [Communication Commons](#)

Reviving the Dead Greek Guys

By

W. F. Strong, Ph.D.

Professor, Dept. of English and Communication

The University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College

And

John A. Cook, Ph.D.,

Associate Professor and Program Coordinator of Communication

Dept of English and Communication

The University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College

The long war was finally over. After 50 years of fighting, there was peace. The great battles of Marathon and Thermopylae were distant memories. Persia had agreed to a truce and Sparta had agreed to 30 years of Peace. Soldiers and sailors in thousands were coming home to their beloved Athens. As they streamed into the city, Pericles, the most powerful General of the day, made this observation: "We cannot have these soldiers sitting idle. It is dangerous for a democracy." He went immediately before the assembly and convinced them to provide funds for a vast building program for the city. It was the world's first "public works" project, if you discount the pyramids whose builders weren't exactly paid on a union scale.

One of the first buildings begun under Pericles' plan was the Parthenon, which still stands two and half millennia later. The design of this ancient Greek temple of Athena is alive and well in modern America. Everywhere you look you will see its influence, in our churches, in our federal buildings, in the plantation homes of the old South, in our stadiums, in our monuments, on our college campuses, even in the White House itself. In every city and most every town in America you will find Doric, Ionian and Corinthian columns supporting our banks and schools and churches. This is just one way that ancient Greece is relevant in modern America.

In this essay, we need to talk about that "R" word - *relevance*. We communication scholars of ancient Greece have all been faced with that challenge. As soon as professors begin to discuss any aspect of the classical

period, the hands shoot up and we get the questions: "Why do I have to know about these dead Greek guys? Why is all this relevant?" It was particularly amusing a short time ago when the relevance question came from a fraternity student, sitting there apparently unaware of the Greek letters sewed neatly into his sweater. One could become immediately drunk on the irony. Nonetheless, it is a fair question and it must be answered, which is what this article is designed to do—to answer the question of relevance.

The *simple answer* is this: Ancient Greece permeates every aspect of American and Western culture. It is in our language, our education and our media. Ancient Greece impacts the way we think and feel. We could no more separate ourselves in American culture from ancient Greece than we could from our founding fathers' influence. This is a paper about cross-temporal influence between an ancient culture and a modern one. We believe that we have not only been acculturated by the Greeks, we have, to a large measure, been assimilated, too.

The three things to accomplish in this piece are: first, to demonstrate how to help contemporary students see the influence of ancient Greece on Modern America, and secondly, to help students understand that the university they attend is essentially a Greek institution, and finally to see how Greek influence is alive and well in contemporary mass media.

Our 'simple answer' to the relevance question addressed Greek cultural influence in terms of language, education, and media. Those three areas are the main thrust of our observations herein. We cannot neglect, however, other aspects of culture. The Greeks ruled by direct democracy, they had trial by jury and they paid their jurors to serve. They initiated the Olympics, gave us our architecture for what is seen as noted above in most Southern plantations and the White House itself. Greeks had the marathon, the triathlon, the decathlon and wrestling; and they did it in sports stadiums. The Greeks influenced us through their theatre and drama, their science and math, the practice of medicine, astronomy, logic and of course **philosophy**. The name "Spartan" is a popular name for sports teams and the name "Trojan" is plastered on University of Southern California paraphernalia and on a brand of birth control. The name Athens is employed by 24 US cities, including as Athens Georgia and Athens Ohio, and a town and a village of Athens in New York (<http://www.answers.com/topic/athens-wordnet>). Many US cities are also nicknamed Athens: Boston is the Athens of North America; Berkeley, California is the Athens of the west; the Athens of the South is Nashville, Tennessee; and the Athens of Florida is DeLand. As noted, fraternities and

sororities identify themselves with Greek letters; and it is mostly from Greek texts that Bible scholars translated the New Testament. Clearly the influence of ancient Greece is still a part of who we are in America. Given the previous rather unstructured list, we now turn our attention to three key influences: language, education, and media.

LANGUAGE

The etymological roots of our modern English language are such that half the words or more have Greek influence. Word Quest (2002) put it thus:

[The importance of Latin and Greek in English words](#) can scarcely be exaggerated. It is safe to say that more than half the words we use in our daily talk come to us from or through Latin and, to a lesser degree, directly from Greek. It should be understood that quite a significant number of Latin words were influenced (if not replicated with different suffixes) from Greek. The language of the Roman Republic and Empire, were greatly influenced by Greek, with a literary standard and popular forms from which the Romance languages were derived.

It is a simple matter from A to Z to find words we use regularly that are Greek: [Aristocracy](#) [Allergy](#) [Athlete](#) [Academy](#), [Bibliography](#) [Bible](#), [Chronology](#) [Cosmos](#) [Cosmic](#) [Cosmopolitan](#) [Critique](#), [Democracy](#) [Demagogue](#) [Decade](#) [December](#), [Energy](#) [Encyclopedia](#), [Geology](#), [Hypocrite](#), [Hypocrisy](#), [Idol](#), [Icon](#), [Jealous](#), [Logic](#), [Marathon](#), [Meter](#), [Methodology](#), [Metropolis](#), [Necrophilia](#) , [Nausea](#), [Nautical](#), [Politics](#), [Police](#), [Pedophile](#), [Solar](#), [Schizophrenia](#), [Technique](#), [Technology](#), [Theology](#), [Xenophobia](#)

Consider the following paragraph:

David **Soros** had been a **policeman** in the **metroplex** for nearly a **decade** when he was promoted from the **motorcycle** division to the **helicopter** force. They were called the **solar** cops. All his friends were **jealous**, but he gave no **apology** for his success. The captain said it was a **symbol** of reward for his **zeal** and **energy** on the job since he left the **academy**. Now, **December** 1999, so near the new **millennium**, he was part of the **aristocracy** of cops. He would use advanced **technology**, **sophisticated telescopes** and **photography** to fight crime, just as he had learned about when studying **criminology** at his **alma mater**.

All of the words in bold are Greek in origin. We tell students that they can't get through even a few sentences without speaking Greek.

It is also easy to find English tropes (figures of speech and plays on words) that are an American culture extraction from the Greeks. Notable tropes include: metaphorical reference to the Achilles heel, the Trojan horse. We also have our sayings: "it's Greek to me" and "beware of Greeks bearing gifts." Many of our students doubtless are unaware that Nike was the Greek goddess of victory!

A list such as this helps students understand that they already speak Greek, in some small way. Yet as they get more education, they will become gain a greater fluency in words with Greek roots. The influence is much deeper than language, however. It goes the very nature of our education.

EDUCATION

Next we turn to a consideration of the university itself. Virtually every modern discipline has its roots in Plato's Academy or Aristotle's Lyceum. Let's look at the "fathers" of various disciplines:

Aristotle - The father of biology, botany, anatomy, rhetoric, ethics

Herodotus - The father of history

Hippocrates - The father of medicine

Pythagoras - The father of mathematics/geometry

Homer - The father of Poetry/Literature

Pheidias- The father of architecture/sculpture

Pindar - The father of Poetry

Sophocles - The father of Drama

Socrates/Plato Fathers of Philosophy

Aristotle in particular was an amazing force. As one scholar said, "Aristotle was not a professor - he was a university in and of himself" (Denby, 1997, p. 117). Imagine going to your first period class in biology and having the world expert on biology teaching that class. And then you go to your next period class on political science, and there he is again, but again the world expert on that subject. Then you go to rhetoric and there he is again, and again the author of the definitive work on the subject. When you look at this list you will see why a period of about 100 years is called THE GREEK MIRACLE. Many of these geniuses lived at the same time and knew each other. We would not see

this confluence of geniuses again until the renaissance, which occurred in large measure because of the rediscovery of the Golden Age of Greece.

Finally, as we examine education let's take a look at all the modern disciplines that have Greek names, and many of them Greek origins such as Archaeology, Astronomy, Biology, Cardiology, Dermatology, Etymology, Ecology, Genealogy, Hematology, Meteorology, Mythology, Paleontology, Psychology, Radiology, Paleontology, Theology, Zoology.

Obviously, any name with "ology" means the "study of" that discipline or subject. Virtually all disciplines in the university are of Greek roots and origins. You add the influence of fraternities and sororities and it is difficult not to proclaim that our students attend neo-Greek universities. the most definitive influence and mirror of culture: mass media itself.

MASS MEDIA

In examining the influence of Ancient Greece on Modern American Culture, it is perhaps most readily demonstrated in the presentation on various Media channels.

In television, two of the top ten television programs in syndication worldwide are "Xena: Warrior Princess" and "Hercules: the Legendary Journeys." Xena, which aired from 1995 to 2001 and then went into syndication was rated 223 out of 16,693 shows on www.TV.com (see: <http://www.tv.com/xena-warrior-princess/show/698/summary.html>). Hercules, which aired 1994-2000 before going into syndication. www.TV.com had no similar rating but users on their site for Hercules rated the show five stars (<http://tv.yahoo.com/hercules-the-legendary-journeys/show/30968>).

University of California at Berkeley Library shows a list of films with Classic Greek settings/characters, including: Alexander (2004) {Epic}, Hercules (1997) {Disney, animated}, It's a Greek Life (1936) {animated short}, Jason and the Argonauts (1963) {Epic, kept these authors awake as

children}, The Odyssey (1997), {Movie made for TV}, The Trojan Women (1971) (Classic with Katherine Hepburn, Vanessa, Redgrave, Genevieve Bujold}, Troy (2004) (Epic}

Source: <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/MRC/ancientmovies.html>

It is of course not an exhaustive list. There are probably more movies about Hercules (or more accurately Heracles) than there are about any other ancient

hero. And while it must be admitted that more movies were produced with themes of Ancient Rome (From versions of Spartacus to versions of Antony and Cleopatra) the Greek influence is strong in films. The latest evidence is the powerful depiction of the battle of Thermopylae in the movie "300." The phrase "300 Spartans" is a colloquialism for what it takes to get a monumental task accomplished. The impressive thing is that 2500 years later, the theme of fighting for freedom against the odds is as powerful a notion as it was then. Of course once betrayed, the 300 Spartans eventually lose but they fought bravely enough that the rallying cry of "Thermopylae" was as inspiring then as "remember the Alamo" was at San Jacinto. Victor D. Hanson's critique reminds us that the film was to depict a graphic novel (comic book) version, and although "it makes plenty of allowances for popular tastes" 300 preserves the spirit of the Thermopylae story." (Hanson, 2006). This is an interesting point about the 3 most recent films from 2004-2006 on the Greeks. "300" chose to be true to the story even if depictions were decidedly surreal per graphic novel representation—*i.e.*, the basis of American Mythology (the comic book) intrudes onto the Greek story—the historical facts are not much distorted. This is no less true, claims Hanson, of other depictions such as the earlier Hollywood Movie "300 Spartans." The Story holds such interest for all of us that Steven Pressfield's Novel *Gates of Fire* and poems by Lord Byron and A.E. Houseman have also "paid homage to the Spartan last stand." (Hanson)

In a review of the 2004 movie Alexander, we are reminded that a half a century prior Fredric March played Philip and Richard Burton played the title role in "Alexander the Great." However, in the recent Oliver Stone film, Stone chose to alter history for his artistic choices and thus in the credits the film declares "inspired by certain historical events." The critic claims a distinction between inaccuracies based on sloppy research, and inaccuracies for artistic effect. (Borza, 2004). This critic goes on to say that the artifacts reflect the times, as does the Macedonian military equipment, however "historical errors abound."

Gill's (2004) review of Troy has similar points of contention to the previous two recent films of Ancient Greek legend. However her lament in the critique is largely departure from the tale of the **Iliad** itself. The gods and goddesses are conspicuously absent, as are key characters such as Priam's wife "Hecuba and her infamous daughter Cassandra." Gill's final thought in the review is

The movie is spectacular. With a quick advance re-read of the **Iliad**, so you don't get too confused between what happened in legend and what is a development from the godless plot, it is definitely worth seeing. (p. 2)

This seems aligned with the other reviews—historical and/or legend adherence is not fully present but it was the Greeks who inspired the American culture's version.

The merger of Greek and American culture does seem to cost the Ancient Greeks something—after all it is Hollywood. And certainly any historical event considered heroic receives its own share of mythification over the decades and over the centuries, however the Greek influence is still very clear. We tell the tales again and again in American culture.

PRINT MEDIA

The graphic novel or comic book obviously brings some of this to life as the current movie about Thermopylae is based on Frank Miller's graphic novelette. Marcia Williams offered in Comic Book format *Greek Myths for Young Children* (1995). Everything from interactive comic books to books deal with ancient Greece (see, for example, Time Warner Books list at: <http://www.timewarptrio.com/teachers-parents/books-links/olympics.html>) And of course who can forget that DC Comics' most powerful heroine Wonder Woman from *Amazon Island* who exclaims so often: "Great *Hera*," in times of trouble.

There simply isn't room in this document to cover all the Greek cultural impact in print in American culture. In fact it goes without saying that it is "cultured" to discuss the Greeks intelligently—including the legends and myths. If you are not well versed and need a quick enculturation, another print source that is not so scholarly in tone is a quick primer by Macrone (1992) entitled *By Jove! Brush up your Mythology*.

CONCLUSION

So many more themes and influences can be listed. We could examine closely and find clearly demonstrated that we are in a form of government, law, education and culture that is quite Greek. America is in many ways the tree that grew from a seed planed by the ancient Greeks. We are the flower of their ancient labor.

We like to point out that the Greeks were even more democratic than we are because they did not have a representative democracy. Every citizen was expected to vote on every issue. Their Olympics survived well over a thousand years, whereas the modern games have only been in existence for 100 years. The entire spirit of sports, of play, says Edith Hamilton, was brought into the

world by the ancient Greeks, "and they played on a grand scale . . . Play died when Greece died, and many and many a century passed before it was resurrected."

The evidence above does not in and of itself *prove* relevance. It is, however, a good place to start in helping students understand that this world of America is in large measure, a Greek product. They are citizens in a democratic society; they wear Nikes, celebrate the Olympics and sports; they love to play and to party; they major in subjects with Greek names, they belong to Greek organizations, they love films as the Greeks loved theater, they are fiercely patriotic, imperialists at times, and they love to argue in a language heavily influenced by Greek. Why should they find the dead Greek guys relevant? Because they are the reincarnation of those men and women who lived the miracle two and half mellenia ago.

REFERENCES

Borza, E. (2004) "Movie Commentary: Alexander," Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) online publication.
http://www.archaeological.org/pdfs/papers/AIA_Alexander_Review.pdf

Denby, D. (1997) *Great Books*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Gill, N. (2004) "Warner Bros. Troy vs. The Trojan Legend," About.com: Ancient/Classical History.
<http://ancienthistory.about.com/cs/grecoromanmyth1/a/troymoviereview.htm>

Hamilton, E. (1993) *The Greek Way*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company

Hanson, V. (2006) "History and the Movie 300,"
<http://www.victorhanson.com/articles/hanson101106.html>.

Macrone, M. (1992) *By Jove! Brush up your mythology*. New York: Cader Books.

Roberts, J (2002) WordQuest <http://www.wordquest.info/> Site was set up 6 January 2002 and updated in 2005.

Williams, M. (1995) *Greek myths for young children*. Cambridge: Candlewick Press.

Online references not attributed

<http://www.answers.com/topic/athens-wordnet>

<http://www.timewarp trio.com/teachers-parents/books-links/olympics.html>

<http://tv.yahoo.com/hercules-the-legendary-journeys/show/30968>

<http://www.tv.com/xena-warrior-princess/show/698/summary.html>

[Back](#) [Home](#) [Top](#) [Next](#)

© 2007 Global Media Journal. All rights reserved.