

Song in the Greek Classroom

A number of studies have demonstrated the value of song in the language classroom (review of scholarship Sposet 2008, Irby-Massie 2009): song is fun, it provides effective mnemonic reinforcement of pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary, and it offers an incomparable gateway into various aspects of culture. In this paper I present two relatively easy ways of introducing song into the teaching of ancient Greek: the singing of extant Greek melodies and the singing to made up melodies of Greek verse.

Until relatively recently ancient Greek music was almost exclusively the domain of the specialist, and pedagogical use of extant melodies would have been very difficult. Numerous publications in the last thirty years, however, have made it much easier for non-specialists to understand much about how Greek music worked (see especially Barker 1984 and 1989, West 1992). Furthermore, all the extant melodies discovered through about 2000 are now gathered conveniently into M.L. West and Egert Pöhlmann's *Documents Illustrating Ancient Greek Music* (2001=*DAGM*).

I present in this paper three of these melodies: the so-called "Song of Seikilos," a musical epitaph of the first or second century CE (*DAGM* #23); a song by Hadrian's court musician Mesomedes (*DAGM* #24); and a fragment of Euripides' *Orestes* (*DAGM* #3). Each of the songs provides valuable reinforcement of lessons in pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary. The first thing I do on the first day of Beginning Greek I, for example, is sing the "Song of Seikilos" with my students. Students thus begin pronouncing letters even before they have officially learned them, and they immediately have an exercise they can repeat with pleasure as they practice pronunciation. The Mesomedes song, which I introduce later in the semester, includes some grammatical features especially useful mid-way through the first semester of Beginning Greek:

personal pronouns, consonant-stem nouns, and three different types of imperatives. The Euripides fragment, introduced near the end of the semester, offers the students one of their first exposures to deponent verbs.

The songs also provide an effective way of bringing discussion of culture into the classroom. Each of the melodies sounds odd to our ears, an important reminder that Greek music—and Greek culture in general—was very different from our own. I teach the Mesomedes song directly from the ancient musical notation, without a transcription. Students can thus feel with a sense of accomplishment that they themselves are reading ancient Greek music. The Euripides fragment exposes students to quartertone intervals, a feature of Greek music not found in the modern West.

Beyond music, the songs offer superb jumping off points for wider discussions of ancient Greece. Because the Song of Seikilos and the Mesomedes melody are from the Roman era, for example, they provide an opportunity to discuss the liveliness of Greek culture well after the classical period on which our textbooks tend to concentrate. The Euripides fragment leads easily into discussion of all aspects of tragedy, including the chorus, Euripides himself, and the importance for tragedy of the house of Atreus.

The number of extant melodies that lend themselves to presentation in the Beginning Greek classroom is limited. Another source of song, however, is boundless: Greek verses sung to melodies of the instructor's and students' own making but with the rhythm provided by the meter. Much, if not most, ancient Greek verse was sung. While the pitches sung are in almost all cases lost, a close proximity of the rhythm is preserved in the meter. We can thus recreate some part of actual ancient performance by singing Greek verse with long syllables as quarter notes and short syllables as eighth notes. More important than any approach to authenticity,

however, the singing of Greek verse provides a fun way both to reinforce students' learning of vocabulary and grammar and to introduce important features of Greek culture. I conclude the paper with two examples of verse I sing to made-up melodies in my Beginning Greek class:

Odyssey 9.408 and Aristophanes' *Frogs* 209-15.

I will lead the audience in singing each of the songs presented. A handout with copies of the songs will accompany the paper. No other audiovisual tools will be necessary.

Works Cited

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