

Myth Maker

Classics department head **Antony Agoustakis** on Rome's destruction by Romans, life lessons in Homer, and Beyoncé and Greek letters

I have always been drawn to texts, to what literature tells us about the past.

I grew up in Greece on the island of Crete. We studied mythology beginning in the second grade, and history starting in the third grade. In the 11th grade, I had to decide between pursuing a degree in medicine or the classics. I determined that I liked literature more than anatomy and biology (though I liked those subjects very much).

In the classics, you can study either Greek or Latin. My research focuses on Latin literature. The period I study is very, very interesting because it includes a huge civil war during which Rome was almost destroyed—by Romans. After that, there was an effort to rebuild and return to the good old times. It was also a period of physical disasters—Vesuvius erupted in A.D. 79. There was major destruction in the middle of Italy—Naples and other cities. But there was life afterwards, as there is after every physical disaster.

I teach Roman Civilization, which is a large, 100-level class—about 250 students, mostly freshmen and sophomores. The class is about how Rome influenced the cultures that came after it, including American culture. Our country is built on Greek and Roman foundations, such as law, architecture, medicine and the liberal arts. It's important for the students to see the continuity.

I also teach language courses: Latin, ancient Greek, modern Greek. We have a good number of students taking ancient languages.

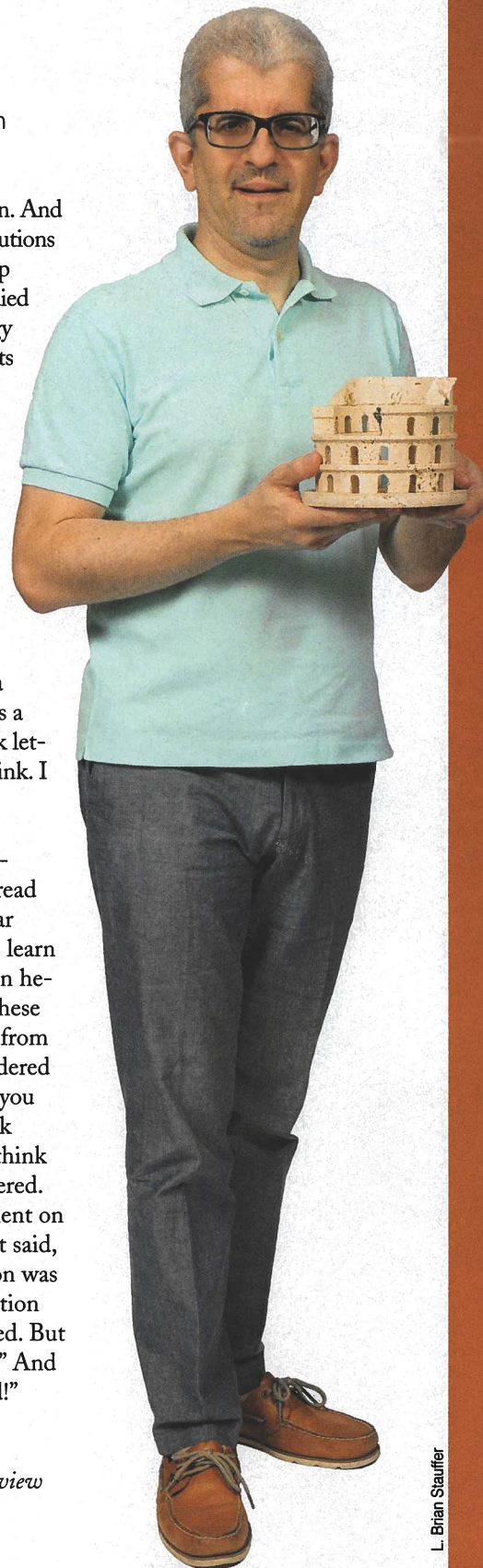
When the U of I was established in 1867, Greek and Latin were the two

foundational languages of instruction. And that's true for most land-grant institutions in this country, especially the flagship universities. People have always studied the classics. The Classical Mythology course at Illinois attracts 700 students every semester, fall and spring.

When I teach Roman Civilization, I use a lot of popular culture. There are so many ancient themes in the video games students play, especially games about war and destruction, like *Rome* and *Empire*. There is music related to ancient themes. Beyoncé appeared as a Roman gladiator in a music video years ago. Now she has a film called *Homecoming* with Greek letters in the title. It's on Netflix, I think. I haven't seen it yet, but I need to.

What we teach the students ultimately is life lessons. When they read Homer, they learn about anger, war and human weaknesses. They also learn about human heroes—superhuman heroes—and about life and death. These are the life lessons that they learn from us. Classics has always been considered a great degree because it provides you with the skills to analyze and think critically. Because when we don't think critically, society becomes endangered. A few months ago, I read a comment on an evaluation in which the student said, "Oh, I thought Roman Civilization was going to be another general education class, and the first week I was bored. But then I couldn't wait to go to class." And I thought, "Yes! This is my reward!"
—*Mary Timmins*

Edited and condensed from an interview conducted on June 11, 2019.



L. Brian Stauffer