The Play’s the Thing

Assistant Professor Lauren Ginsberg brings her research on Classical literature to the Cincinnati theater scene.

UC Classics Assistant Professor Lauren Ginsberg has been bringing her research on the intersection of poetry and historiography in Greek and Latin literature to the rich Theater and Performance community of Cincinnati.

During Spring semester 2015 Ginsberg was invited to participate in the College-Conservatory of Music’s winter operatic production, Claudio Monteverdi’s Incoronazione di Poppea (The Coronation of Poppaea), whose plot is drawn from Roman history: the rise of Poppaea from mistress of the Roman emperor Nero to wife and empress. At the invitation of Professor Emma Griffin, Ginsberg first talked with the cast about the historical backdrop to the opera, the author’s sources for the material, and the conflicting memories of the Age of Nero that hover in the background. She subsequently joined the production’s assistant manager in a public Talk Back after the matinee production, during which they led the audience through various questions about Monteverdi’s opera, its presentation of history, and its Classical models. The historical events on which this opera is based are intimately intertwined with those of Ginsberg’s research on the Roman drama named after Nero’s first wife, Octavia, whom the emperor divorced to marry his mistress Poppaea; her forthcoming book, Staging Memory, Staging Strife: Empire and Civil War in the Octavia, examines how Roman drama and the stage reinterpreted Neronian history after that emperor’s death.

The previous year, Ginsberg had given a pre-show lecture for CCM’s production of Mary Zimmerman’s Metamorphoses on the way in which Zimmerman translated Ovid’s epic of transformation to a stage in the days immediately post-9/11. She explored the complexity of how Zimmerman refashioned Ovid’s epic into a drama for the present, focusing especially on the theme of “Love Conquers All” that is central to both works and on the various ways that each author confronts love’s various struggles and triumphs. She has also been a guest speaker in some CCM courses.

Outside UC, Ginsberg recently delivered a pre-show talk to the audiences of Cincinnati Shakespeare Company’s Antony and Cleopatra on the bard’s manipulation of Roman ideas about women and power. This Spring she will also be speaking at the Cincinnati Women’s Club on how modern America is using Ancient Drama in various ways to confront timeless social issues like war and trauma. Ginsberg says “It’s my hope that this is only the beginning for the ways in which UC Classics can partner with Cincinnati’s thriving performance
The excavation of the Mycenaean palace at Pylos in the mid 20th century by UC Classics Professor Carl W. Blegen revealed a snapshot of the final phase in the history of that structure before it was destroyed by fire in about 1180 BCE. The building, its contents, and the burnt clay tablets inscribed in the Linear B script found in it revealed a hierarchical society and political system whose culture incorporated arts and iconography derived from those on Crete. The on-going excavations by UC Classics researchers Sharon R. Stocker (UC PhD 2010 and Senior Research Associate) and Jack L. Davis (UC PhD 1977 and the Carl W. Blegen Professor of Greek Archaeology) animate the backstory to this snapshot, the development of Mycenaean culture and society in Messenia some 300 years earlier.

The grave of a warrior containing a fabulous hoard of wealth deposited at the time of his funeral was discovered and excavated in 2015, and has been nicknamed the “Griffin Warrior’s tomb” because of the carvings of griffins that decorate several objects found with the skeleton. The body of the man, about 30 to 35 years old, had been stretched out on its back; on his left were weapons, including a bronze sword and dagger with gold and ivory decorations, and on his right side and around his head were rings, more than fifty seal-stones, and more than a thousand beads of gold, carnelian, amethyst, and amber. The burial also contained remains of a suit of armor faced with strips of bronze, a helmet with rows of pierced plaques cut from boars’ teeth, an ivory-handled mirror and six ivory combs, two ivory plaques decorated with the eponymous griffins, and an array of metal vessels in bronze, silver, and gold. There was, remarkably, no pottery; the absence of prosaic ceramic vessels underscores the wealth displayed by the presence of so many precious objects.

The conservation, restoration, and publication of the skeleton and grave goods, which were crushed when the large stone slab forming the roof of the tomb collapsed upon them, will be a long process. Already in 2016, study has begun to yield insights into this individual and his society (see Hesperia 85 (2016), pp. 627-655).

• The combination of a male skeleton with a mirror, combs, and large quantities of jewelry (as well as weaponry and armor) immediately highlights the invalidity of 20th century CE gender assumptions about the grave goods appropriate to different Bronze Age burials.

• A facial reconstruction performed by Lynne Schepartz and Tobias Houlton of the University of the Witwatersrand in South Africa has revealed a thick-necked man with a broad face and a square jaw; this modern forensic methodology permits a comparison between the iconography of how Mycenaeans wished to be portrayed in their art and close approximations of their actual appearances.

• The majority of the possessions deposited with the “Griffin Warrior” were manufactured either on Crete itself or in the styles then in vogue on Crete; access to such Minoan goods not only established and displayed the elite status of the individual, but was a critical influence over the development of Mycenaean art and culture.

• The four exquisite gold rings with Minoan religious scenes have received particular study already. Their iconography echoes that of other objects in the tomb – the staff held by a female figure on one, for example, is paralleled by a similar staff, found twisted and bent, among the objects in the grave – demonstrating that the collection of objects was assembled deliberately and according to particular tastes and interests, and was not loot snatched without understanding or selection.

The “Griffin Warrior’s grave” is the most spectacular find from the recent excavations by Stocker and Davis, who are investigating the earlier history of the site at Pylos. In 2010 through 2012 Stocker excavated soundings into earlier strata around the palace for the supports of the new roof over the archaeological remains, and the excavations in 2015 also included investigations of the early Mycenaean fortification wall around the site and of a Middle to Late Bronze Age dump. Analysis of these trenches will illuminate the social stage on which the “Griffin Warrior” was an elite actor, and the scenario through which the Mycenaean kingdom of Pylos had become the stratified, palace-centered society uncovered by Blegen.
Identity, Memory, and History in the Later Roman Empire

Assistant Professor Marion Kruse examines the role narratives of Roman history played in constructing Roman identity in the eastern Roman empire after the “Fall” of the Western Roman Empire in 476 CE.

Welcome to Cincinnati! Since you have just joined the faculty of UC Classics, Blegen Bulletin readers won’t be familiar with your work; tell us a little bit about your research interests.

I am a Roman historian with a broad interest in ancient history and historiography, in particular the historiography of late antiquity. My work to date has focused on the reign of the emperor Justinian (r. 527-565 CE) and the preeminent historian of his reign, Prokopios of Kaisareia.

I approach Roman history by considering the Roman state from the vantage point of the later empire. Our sources for the Roman period are predisposed to conceal certain unspoken assumptions and prejudices of the Roman order. It is primarily when the Roman state and society experience major shocks, often requiring the radical modification of core institutions, that our sources reveal the nature of an older order, just as it passes away. The study of late antiquity is the study of Rome’s attempts to adapt to rapidly shifting religious, cultural, and political landscapes that brought with them an accelerating series of crises including the fall (or transformation, depending) of the western empire. It is in the struggles of late antique authors to reconcile their traditional assumptions with contemporary reality that we see Rome dissected, debated, and synthesized into something new. The goal of my scholarship is to explore discussions of Rome’s changes in order to understand how the Romans conceptualized their identity at moments of profound disruption.

What are you working on currently?

My primary project, The Politics of Roman Memory from the Fall of Rome to the Age of Justinian, examines the role narratives of Roman history played in constructing Roman identity in the eastern Roman empire after 476 CE. It posits that historical narratives were revised, redeployed, and contested as part of an ongoing debate over the nature and goals of the Roman empire, and its relationship to the city of Rome and the Gothic Kingdom in Italy.

This is the first monograph to focus on the debates that took place in the eastern Roman empire in the late fifth and early sixth centuries over the meaning and continued relevance of the Roman past. It is a study of memory, reception, and intellectual history, but also contributes a missing chapter to the history of Roman identity during the crucial transition from the ancient Roman empire to Byzantium in the east. Emperors, jurists, historians, and poets of the eastern Roman empire employed history and mythistory in order to come to terms with the new political and cultural realities in which they found themselves, as Greek-speaking Romans in a truncated empire that had just lost its western half.

The book situates itself in a growing discussion of the reception of Rome in late antiquity, Byzantium, and the medieval west, and the ways in which aspects of that history were selectively deployed to create usable pasts and new identities for a changed world. In particular, the book focuses on the creation of new historical narratives, the politics that lay behind them, and the debates they inspired in order to better understand how eastern Romans came to reimagine themselves as the only Romans left and their empire as the only one worthy of the name. But this management of memory was politically fraught, as authors and groups representing different ideologies sought to claim its meaning and contest rival views. Specifically, the divide between the emperor Justinian and his subjects, in particular those subjects working in the imperial administration in Constantinople, is evidence of opposing political perspectives rooted in and expressed through different understandings of the facts and import of Roman history. As such, these debates represent attempts to direct the development of Roman social memory in this period, a contest that was political at its core.

It’s a bit early to be asking with such a major project still in progress, but do you have long-term research plans after the completion of your current book?

I have a few small articles I’m either planning or working on that have come out of my first monograph, but for my next major project I’m interested in looking at the rhetoric and ideology of restoration in Roman imperial propaganda from Augustus to Justinian. We know that imperial virtues changed over time, but a small set of characteristics, such as military victory, remained essential to imperial ideology. I’d like to see how consistently restoration was used and if its presence or absence can help give us a sense of the political culture of the Roman empire. The topic is doubly interesting to me because any notion of restoration requires a corresponding historical interpretation, a sense of what exactly is being restored. So an emphasis on bringing back the past essentially turns emperors, or at least their official personas, into historians, and politicizes the past in ways that have not yet been fully explored. This is especially true in later periods, when the focus was less on restoring political forms or customs (such as Augustus’ claim to have restored the Republic) than on restoring political boundaries and military supremacy (such as Aurelian’s claim to be “the restorer of the world”).

Faculty News in Brief

Antonis Kotsonas was invited to be the 2018 Visiting Professor of the Australian Archaeological Institute at Athens, and lecture at Departments of Classics across Australia. In addition, his article on “Politics of Periodization and the Archaeology of Early Greece” was published as a forum piece by the American Journal of Archaeology (http://www.ajaonline.org/forum/2596), to whose Advisory Board he has also been appointed.

Daniel Marković’s chapter on “Lucretius: Polemics in Translation,” published in the Strategies of Polemics in Greek and Roman Philosophy (ed. by S. Weisser and N. Thaler, Brill 2016) discusses the most interesting features of philosophical refutation in Lucretius. Although Lucretius rejects rival philosophical views by pointing out the contradictions of his opponents, he nevertheless avoids naming these opponents (with the exception of those belonging to a distant past). By leaving out the identities of the more recent rivals, Marković argues, Lucretius presents Epicurus as the triumphant general of the philosophical arena and fashions
Alumni Updates

Peter Anderson (PhD ’03) is Associate Professor and Chair of Classics at Grand Valley State University. His book, Seneca: Selected Dialogues and Consolations, was published with Hackett in 2015. Current projects focus on Seneca and on Musonius Rufus. Peter continues to work on teaching Latin and Greek as well as he can, is having fun (?) parenting three teenagers in a blended family, and stays healthy in spite of it all with lots of tai chi.

Signe Barfoed (MA ’09) completed her PhD dissertation, Cult in context. The ritual significance of miniature pottery votives in ancient Greek sanctuaries from the Archaic to the Hellenistic period, at the University of Kent, defended in September, and got her PhD diploma this year in July.

Denis Brault (MA ’73) teaches Latin, Greek, and various classical civilization courses at the university and high school levels, as well as teaching Latin and Greek (and occasionally giving public readings in English from ancient authors) for La Fondation Humanitas - an outreach program for the general public; next year will mark her 45th year of teaching Latin and Greek. Denis writes that he has very fond memories of UC and Cincinnati!

Jack L. Davis (PhD ’77) has been named to head the Department Classics at the University of Cincinnati.

Jody Gordon's (PhD ’12) co-edited volume, Mobilizing the Past for a Digital Future, is available for download at https://thedigitalpress.org/mobilizing-the-past-for-a-digital-future/. It includes articles by a number of UC Classics denizens: current PhD candidate Christopher F. Motz, Senior Research Associate John Wallrodt, and Associate Professor Steven Ellis.

Jennifer M. Hardy (née McMahon - BA ’95) received her MA from Vanderbilt University in ’97. She is Senior Associate Registrar and Residency Coordinator at The University of Tennessee and also a member of the Classics Advisory Board at UT. Jennifer lives in Knoxville, Tennessee with her husband Brian and 3-year old daughter Lydia.

Fred W. Jenkins (BA ’79) is currently in his 30th year at the University of Dayton, where, in addition to being an administrator, he still teach Latin and Greek on a regular basis. Most recently, he has contributed to Brill’s New Jacoby and also has a book coming out with Brill in the Philological and Historical Commentary on Ammianus Marcellinus series in December: Ammianus Marcellinus: An Annotated Bibliography 1474 to the Present (http://wwwbrill.com/publications/philological-and-historical-commentary-ammianus-marcellinus).

Jim Newhard (PhD ’03) was recently promoted to full professor in Classics at the College of Charleston. In addition to his promotion, he has been appointed Director of the Archaeology Program.

Please help us update our alumni files and let your friends know what you have been up to. Visit www.artsci.uc.edu/alumni to share your news online. The information you provide will be used in future publications. You can also update your contact information, nominate a distinguished alum for recognition or make a gift to the department.