

Modern Greek Studies at the University of Cambridge

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Περίληψη

Οι νεοελληνικές σπουδές στο Cambridge προσφέρονται από το Παράρτημα Νεοελληνικών Σπουδών, το οποίο αποτελεί μέρος του Τμήματος Σύγχρονων και Μεσαιωνικών Γλωσσών. Η επίσημη διδασκαλία της νεοελληνικής γλώσσας και πολιτισμού ξεκίνησε το 1936. Το παρόν άρθρο παρουσιάζει το πρόγραμμα σπουδών και τους στόχους των δυο μαθημάτων που προσφέρονται (την ύλη για τη διδασκαλία της γλώσσας, της λογοτεχνίας και του πολιτισμού). Τα μαθήματα προσφέρονται σε προπτυχιακούς και μεταπτυχιακούς φοιτητές. Επίσης γίνεται σύντομη αναφορά στα βραβεία και απαριθμούνται και άλλες δραστηριότητες σχετικές με τις νεοελληνικές σπουδές. Το άρθρο ολοκληρώνεται με την διαπίστωση ότι, παρόλο που η προσφορά είναι περιορισμένη, τα μαθήματα των νεοελληνικών χαίρουν μεγάλης εκτίμησης και έχουν την ένθερμη στήριξη του Πανεπιστημίου. Προβλέπεται ότι με την επικείμενη δημιουργία το Κέντρου Ελληνικών Σπουδών στο Πανεπιστήμιο το Cambridge η διδασκαλία της νεοελληνικής γλώσσας θα βρει ακόμη μεγαλύτερη στήριξη και προβολή.

Λέξεις-κλειδιά

Νεοελληνικές σπουδές, διδασκαλία γλώσσας, λογοτεχνίας και πολιτισμού.

Abstract

Modern Greek Studies at Cambridge are offered by the Modern Greek Section, which forms part of the Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages. The formal teaching of Modern Greek language and culture began in 1936. The present article outlines the syllabus and the objectives of the 2 courses offered (their language, literature and culture components). The courses are available to both undergraduate and postgraduate students. It also briefly mentions the prizes and enumerates other activities related to Modern Greek studies. It concludes with the realization that the present limited provision of Modern Greek courses is highly regarded and that there is significant support for the subject within the University. It is envisaged that the teaching of Modern Greek will be supported and further promoted by the imminent creation of a Centre for Greek Studies in the University of Cambridge.

Key words

Modern Greek studies, Greek language teaching, Literature teaching.

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Modern Greek Studies at Cambridge are offered by the Modern Greek Section, which forms part of the University's Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages (MML). The formal teaching of Modern Greek language and culture began in 1936, with the appointment of Romilly Jenkins as the first Lewis-Gibson lecturer. His tenure was interrupted by the war, during which he served in the Foreign Office, but he managed to complete a biographical study of Solomos (1940) and other publications. In 1946 he was appointed to the Koraës Chair at King's College London, and subsequently enjoyed a distinguished career in the UK and the USA, specialising in Byzantine History. He was succeeded at Cambridge by Stavros Papastavrou, who taught Classics as well as Modern Greek and held the lectureship for 32 years, until his death in 1979. The third Lewis-Gibson lecturer was David Holton, who was appointed in 1981. He was promoted to a Readership in 2000 and a personal Professorship in 2006, retiring in 2013. During the 1980s and 1990s student numbers in Modern Greek grew significantly, while the teaching programme underwent major revision; particular attention was paid to the enhancement of language teaching, thanks in part to an exchange agreement with the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. At postgraduate level Modern Greek options were introduced into the master's degree (MPhil) in the first decade of the 21st century, and 16 students completed PhDs. The Modern Greek Section also published its own academic journal, *Κάμπος*, which ran to 20 issues (1993–2013).

Until 2013 Cambridge was one of the few universities in Britain where Modern Greek could be studied as a major component of the BA degree in Modern Languages, as well as at graduate level. Admissions to the degree programme in Modern Greek were then suspended until further notice and the Lewis-Gibson lectureship remains unfilled. However, existing undergraduate students from a number of Faculties can still take papers as part of their degree and indeed Cambridge, alongside Oxford, is one of only two Universities in the UK where the Modern Greek programme of study incorporates the teaching of the language itself.

There are currently two papers on offer:

- Paper Gr.3 "Introduction to Modern Greek language and culture", and
- Paper Gr.6 "Myth Matters: Receptions of mythology in Modern Greek Literature and Culture"

Both papers are taught jointly by Dr Liana Giannakopoulou (literature and culture) and Dr Regina Karousou-Fokas (language and linguistics), who have the title of Affiliated Lecturer. The aim of the papers is to introduce students to Modern Greek language and culture, past and present, and they appeal to students, mainly from the Faculties of Classics and Modern and Medieval Languages, with a wide range of interests. Prior knowledge of the Modern Greek language is not a prerequisite.

Teaching: syllabus and objectives

Paper Gr.3 "Introduction to Modern Greek language and culture"

This paper offers students a sound and systematic introduction to the Modern Greek language, and the opportunity to acquaint themselves with key aspects of Greek culture from the late nineteenth century to the present.

The aim of the “language” part of the course is to equip students with a good reading knowledge of the Standard Modern Greek while the “culture” element consists of the study of (a) selected literary texts by major authors and by more recent ones, and (b) a topic relating to the Greek language. In particular:

The language component

Students need to acquire a good reading knowledge of Greek in the short time of Cambridge’s three teaching terms (20 weeks in all). In the first two terms, they attend two hours per week of language classes which concentrate on the essentials of grammar and the development of basic vocabulary. In the last term, students are required to attend workshops on translation from Greek to English.

The aim of the language classes is not only to teach students language skills but also to enhance their cultural awareness so that they can understand the Greek cultural context and viewpoint and to equip them with the skills necessary to interpret the world from this ethno-perspective. In particular, the aims of the language component are:

- a) to acquaint students with the language, developing their competence in the receptive skills, stretching from the A1 to the B1 Level of the Common European Framework of Reference,
- b) to enable them to access the literary texts of the syllabus in their original form, and
- c) to develop their intercultural competence.

The literature and culture component

Modern Greek literature and culture are exceptionally rich and rewarding to study, partly thanks to the long cultural tradition that lies behind them, partly thanks to Greece's geographical position between West and East.

The paper covers the historical and cultural background to Greek literature during the twentieth and twenty first century and introduces the student to different literary genres and forms. The texts and topics studied refer to some of the most important historical events in recent Greek history and their far-reaching political, social and cultural consequences. Amongst them are the 'National Schism', the Asia Minor Disaster, World Wars I and II, the Civil War (1941-1949) and the Dictatorship of the Colonels (1967-1974) as well as the recent financial and refugee crisis and their consequences in Greek culture and society. Thus, the aim of this paper is to study a range of 20th and 21st century literary and cultural texts (a number of poems, a novella and a selection of short stories) in their literary, cultural and historical context.

The current syllabus consists of the following selection of topics and a selection of poems and short stories by a variety of authors:

Topics:

- Language and identity in Greece, 1900-1976
- Identity and otherness, 1990-today

Primary Texts:

- C.P. Cavafy, selected poems
- G. Seferis, selected poems from *Log Book 2*
- S. Doukas, *A Prisoner of War's Story*
- A selection of short stories (from 1990 onwards)

The texts selected for this course are eminently accessible: the poetry of Cavafy and Seferis is internationally recognised and appreciated; the prose texts are all interesting examples of experimental writing by contemporary male and female authors. The topic on "Language and identity" appeals to students with specific interests in the subject but

also contributes to a broader understanding of Modern Greek culture. “Identity and Otherness” highlights the challenges that immigration has brought onto modern Greek perceptions of identity.

In addition, screenings of contemporary Greek cinema and additional internal seminars are organised throughout the academic year with the aim of enhancing student exposure to Modern Greek culture and encouraging further exploration of the topics studied.

Paper Gr.6 "Myth Matters: Receptions of mythology in Modern Greek Literature and Culture"

Myth has shown a remarkable capacity to evolve throughout the ages and adapt to the intellectual and aesthetic requirements of different periods. Western European Literature is permeated by Classical Greek myths and it is well known that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in particular, with the advances in science, the industrialization of society and the decline in religious faith, writers explored and re-interpreted these myths in order to offer modern approaches to the inherited past, time, history, humanity's yearning for order and individual and national identity. This paper offers students the opportunity to explore how Classical Greek myths have been adopted and reworked in Modern Greek literature and culture and how they have interacted with and creatively assimilated European traditions.

The objective of the “language” part of the course in terms of structure and aims is identical to that of the Gr.3 paper but teaching is offered at two levels. The “culture” component examines the reception and re-writing of well-known myths based on a core of Modern Greek poems.

Language Component

Teaching focuses on comprehension and translation skills. As mentioned before, the option of two levels of proficiency is available. The higher level is intended for students who have previously taken Gr.3 or have gained an equivalent qualification (A2 level CEFR or the GCSE at grade A or above). The aim is to help the student develop or advance knowledge and understanding of the linguistic features of the Modern Greek language and to become confident readers in a range of texts at basic or advanced intermediate level.

The teaching pattern is the same as that of Gr.3. In the first two terms, language classes concentrate on the essentials of grammar for the basic level. In the advanced intermediate level, classes build on the grammar base already acquired in previous studies and mostly concentrate on language use. In the third, the emphasis will be on translation from Greek.

The literature and culture component

The paper examines the reception and re-evaluation of the myths of Odysseus, Penelope, Elpenor, Helen, Orpheus and Eurydice in Modern Greek poetry. Among the writers and artists covered in the module some (Cavafy, Seferis, Angelaki-Rooke and Angelopoulos) have a worldwide reputation, while there are others (such as Zoe Karelli for example) who are less well known but also accomplished. Study of all of them allows students to reflect on what happens when myths return to their “birthplace” and asks whether their use in Modern Greek culture offers an alternative paradigm of reception and creative assimilation. Modern Greek literature with its double helix of appropriation and alienation, offers a particularly significant lens through which to read antiquity in dialogue with modernity and modernism.

Students are encouraged to engage in cross-cultural comparisons and contrastive readings of important texts, to reflect on how the use of myth varies from genre to genre and to appreciate the dynamic, protean nature of ancient Greek myths and their ability to adapt to the needs of new ideas and sensibilities.

The following topics are explored in the current syllabus:

- Myth and identity
- Myth and politics
- Myth and history
- Women's writing and myth
- Myth and the visual arts
- Myth in Modern Greek surrealism

Films and the visual arts are used as complementary material to provide additional perspectives and broaden the students' exposure to the topic.

Prizes

In 2009, the Catherine Grigoriou-Theocarakis Prize for excellence in Modern Greek Studies was established by Dr Nikolaos Theocarakis in memory of his late wife Catherine Grigoriou-Theocarakis. A number of students who have excelled in one of the above papers have been the recipients of this prize in recent years.

Student Numbers

The papers offered in the Modern Greek Section are available to undergraduate students of the MML Faculty as well as certain other faculties. Students can choose one of the two papers on offer in the second or final year of their studies as one of the scheduled options of their degree. The papers cannot be taken simultaneously.

Attendance to the papers is open also to University staff, post-doctoral fellows and postgraduate students and indeed numerous take up this opportunity.

- 2013-14: 17 undergraduate students, 1 member of staff auditing
- 2014-15: 15 undergraduate students, 1 postgraduate student auditing
- 2015-16: 6 undergraduate students, 6 members of staff, postgraduate students and post-docs auditing
- 2016-17: 9 undergraduate students, 5 members of staff or postgraduate students auditing.
- 2017-18: 27 students, (none auditing due to the high number of students)

What do students do after studying Greek?

With the students reaching, as reported by one external examiner, ‘an impressive standard’, it is no surprise that various students over the years have received scholarships from the Ministry of Education for the International Summer School in Thessaloniki. Others have self-organised and attended summer schools in Athens or other places in order to improve their language skills.

Upon graduation, as is the case for all graduates from the Modern Languages and Classics Faculties, our students find employment in a wide range of professions including language teaching (school and university level), translation/interpreting, journalism, the diplomatic service, publishing, marketing, public service, banking and investment, accountancy, law, logistics and distribution, teaching English as a foreign language, arts and recreation, speech and language therapy, and information technology among many others. Notably, former students of Greek have gone on to work for the European Union or gained experience in Greece that has allowed them to specialise in refugee studies. Others have become volunteers in refugee camps in Athens.

However, even among those whose career destination after university is not related specifically to Greek affairs, many continue their close relationship with the Greek language and culture.

Other Activities

Modern Greek Lecture Series

Each academic year the Modern Greek Section organises occasional lectures by invited speakers on topics of interest to the students.

Modern Greek Alumni Reunions

From time to time reunions are arranged for all former students of Modern Greek. Typically, they take the form of a lunch or dinner, followed by a short talk given by a distinguished invited speaker. These events provide an opportunity for alumni and current and past members of staff to interact and maintain the Modern Greek network.

International Conference

From Kornaros to Kazantzakis: Language, Culture, Society and History in Crete.

Conference organised in honour of Prof. David Holton, Selwyn College, Cambridge 30 June-1 July 2014.

The conference proceedings were published in 2017 by Cambridge Scholars.

Contributions of the Modern Greek Section across the University and the wider community

In order to enhance the presence of Modern Greek in Cambridge, particularly while the subject is considered under threat due to lack of permanent funding, a concentrated and carefully orchestrated effort has been made to contribute in any way possible to the academic and intellectual life of the University and beyond. In this vein, the Section has repeatedly contributed with talks, poetry reciting and language taster sessions to the outreach events organized by the University (such as the Festival of Ideas) and has collaborated with other bodies (e.g. the Society for Modern Greek Studies and the Cambridge Hellenic Learned Society) with the aim to fuel the interest of the wider academic community and the public and to encourage them to explore contemporary Greek Culture.

Indicative events are:

Cavafy In Cambridge. A celebration of the poetry of C. P. Cavafy, in collaboration with the Society for Modern Greek Studies, 2014.

Penelope. Reading of Katerina Anghelaki-Rooke's poem in Greek and English, for "The World in Cambridge", an event organized by the University's Equality & Diversity Office, 2014

Songs Beyond the Borders of Greece. A talk by Prof. Peter Mackridge (Oxford), "The importance of Mikis Theodorakis in Greek Culture" and live performance of music by Mikis Theodorakis. In collaboration with The Cambridge Hellenic Learned Society, 2016.

Literature, Retellings and The True Waste Land. Lecture by the author Apostolos Doxiades. The Festival of Ideas, 2016.

Our Vision

The decline in student numbers opting to study modern languages as part of their school or university studies in the UK is a reality and a "real concern". Within this difficult environment, is it not surprising that across the UK, the number of students opting to study Modern Greek as part of their undergraduate degree is currently rather small. Nevertheless, the need for Modern Greek is great. An indicative example of this is that

according to one Cambridge alumna who works for the European Commission, Greek is regarded as a “shortage” language and there is an urgent need for translators and interpreters of Greek with English mother-tongue. In addition, within the University itself, there is clear indication that there is a lot of interest in contemporary Greek studies. This has become obvious from the feedback we have been getting from the students, who show a keen interest and desire to engage further, as well as the demand from postgraduate and post-doctoral fellows from both the MML and the Classics Faculties with research interests involving diverse topics. One such example is the enhanced research interest in Greek linguistics in the Faculty of MML.

The fact that the teaching of Modern Greek language and culture is no longer a fully-fledged degree subject does not allow us to make consistent and systematic plans for growth, in terms of what we can offer. However, our proposal to add another paper was met with enthusiastic support from the MML Faculty and hence we were able to offer paper Gr.6 from 2016. This is a completely novel paper unique for its comparative outlook and originality of subject matter. Undoubtedly, there is scope to expand such teaching both in the undergraduate and the MPhil programme.

To conclude: the present limited provision of Modern Greek courses is highly regarded and there is significant support for the subject within the University. This fact offers hope for the future. In this connection, it should be noted that it is envisaged that the teaching of Modern Greek will be supported and further promoted by the imminent creation of a Centre for Greek Studies in the University of Cambridge.

Research in Greek Studies, including language and linguistics, literature, art, history, archaeology, religion, society and politics across all chronological periods, from pre-history to the modern day, and across the entire Hellenic world, has been for many years a strong point of the University. It is believed that the establishment of the Centre, whose constitution has just been announced, will provide a cohesive and mutually supportive context and greater visibility of the range of first-class research expertise and teaching in Greek Studies across the University.