DISCUSSIONS

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Faculty Spotlight

An interview with

Dr. Paul Iversen

by Ryan Tatton

Paul Iversen is the Chair of the Department of Classics at Case Western Reserve University. As an Associate Professor, he teaches upper-level Greek and Latin, courses on Greek Civilization and History, and an archaeology course in Greece during the summer. In this interview, he discusses his recent work and what research within the Classics Department looks like.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity with Dr. Paul Iversen's consent.

What brought you to the field of Classics?

I started out as a dual major in electrical engineering and solar architecture at Lansing Community College before transferring to Michigan State University. I wanted to be an electrical engineer who worked on photovoltaic cells but I was feeling like I was missing something. I had some general education requirements including a foreign language requirement, so I took an Introductory Greek course. When I got to my second year in Greek and read Homer, I was just blown away by its beauty – it transported me to a different world. I also enjoyed my Humanities courses so much more that eventually I switched into Classics and then was accepted with a full-ride to the PhD program in Classics at Ohio State University. I just followed where my heart led me and had a bit of luck.

> *"I just followed where my heart led me and had a bit of luck."*

What projects are you currently working on?

Early in my career I worked in two areas, Greco-Roman New Comedy (the comedy

Photo taken by Chandana Pandurangi

of Menander, Plautus and Terence – the forerunners of the later European tradition of the comedy of manners), and Greek and Latin Epigraphy. As time has gone on I have become much more interested in doing research on Greek and Latin Epigraphy, which satisfies both my philological and historical interests. So, I am no longer pursuing any research on Greco-Roman New Comedy, although I still try to keep up with the field.

> *"[Inscriptions] put us into direct contact with the past...we can be more sure of their intended texts... than any other type of document from the ancient world."*

I should probably define the term epigraphy. Epigraphy is the science concerned with the classification and interpretation of inscriptions. An inscription is a piece of writing or lettering engraved, etched, incised, traced, stamped, or otherwise imprinted into or onto a durable surface, such as stone or bronze. In general coins and gems are excluded from epigraphy because they have their own special disciplines (numismatics and gemology). It is a discipline that is essential to almost every facet of Classics. Unlike traditional ancient literary sources, which come down to us in copies of copies of copies, inscriptions speak directly to us with no intervening hand. They

put us into direct contact with the past, and while they may contain mistakes, provide official misinformation, reflect the sentiments of the upper classes, lack context, or be very worn and fragmentary, we can be more sure of their intended texts, especially if they survive in full, than any other type of document from the ancient world.

My work on epigraphy began on the Packard Humanities Institute Greek Epigraphy project – an online database of Greek (and some Latin) inscriptions. I began working on this project in 1990 as a graduate student research assistant and continued after finishing my PhD in 1998 all the way up until 2006. This brings up my other project – a book about the calendar on the Antikythera Mechanism and its importance to helping us reconstruct other Doric calendars and to understand better how Greek calendars were regulated.

> *"No device of comparable technological complexity is known until 1,000 years later."*

What is the Antikythera Mechanism?

The Antikythera Mechanism is a remarkable geared device that was constructed in the 2nd or 1st centuries BCE. It was basically the equivalent of an ancient Rolex watch, albeit one about the size of a shoebox, that computed and displayed celestial, calendrical, and athletic information, including the phases of the moon, the risings and settings of stars and constellations, eclipses, and information about the scheduling of Panhellenic athletic events. Such celestial, calendrical, and social events were important to ancient societies for regulating agriculture, seafaring, peaceful competition, and religious observance. The Antikythera Mechanism was named after the island in whose waters it was found in 1900 and salvaged in 1901 (from a shipwreck of ca. 70-50 BCE). No device of comparable technological complexity is known until 1,000 years later.

How did you get interested and involved in the Antikythera Mechanism?

It was while working on Corinthian inscriptions in 2010 that I learned that a complete calendar had been recently discovered/deciphered on the Antikythera Mechanism with the help of newer technologies. The authors of this discovery suggested that this calendar might be that of Corinth or one of its colonies. Since the calendar of Corinth was mostly lost, I found this topic potentially of great importance for Corinthian religion and history, so I began to look carefully at this question. That is how I got involved with working on the Antikythera Mechanism, and eventually I was named a contributor to the Antikythera Mechanism Research Project.

How were Greek calendars set up?

Greek calendars were lunisolar calendars, like the traditional Chinese and traditional Jewish calendar, so they were based on the phases of the moon, as well as the solar year. The first day of the month was ideally the first day after conjunction, also known as the new moon, when the moon couldn't be seen as more than a sliver. As the month progresses the moon waxes until about the 14th or 15th day at which there is a full moon. From here, the moon wanes down to the 29th or 30th of the month, which is the last day of the month, ideally coincided with conjunction. They also had a roundabout way to keep this system of months generally in line with the solar year.

The ancients used the phases of the moon to keep track of time because they could see them. It was just much easier than, say, a solstice or an equinox, which could not be seen and required special equipment to measure. Although they eventually figured these out, they had the traditional lunisolar religious calendar, so they were not going

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to give that up. These religious months are named after religious festivals that happened in that month. For example, the month of Karneios is the month in which the Karneia festival takes place. The Greeks believed that it was necessary to hold festivals and make sacrifices to the gods as close as possible to the same season each year. They wanted to keep track of time according to the lunar calendar, but also wanted to keep it seasonally anchored. So, if we can identify the season of these month names better or even specific lunar months in specific years, which the mechanism allows us to do, then we can use modern lunar tables to tie these festivals and month names to more specific historical events.

Are you currently doing research on the Mechanism?

Yes, I am. With the generous support of the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Cyrus Taylor, the Baker-Nord Center for the Humanities, and Mark Griswold, the Director of The Interactive Commons, I've been able to purchase an extremely powerful computer program and I have been given access to a very powerful computer to reconstruct the Mechanism, including the inscriptions, using digital scans that were made of it in 2005 by the Antikythera Mechanism Research Project. I personally am most suited to using this technology to produce an edition of the inscriptions on the Mechanism, which are key to understanding its functions, but I am also looking for CWRU students in more scientific and computing fields who might be interested in helping me, say as part of a Senior Project, with the 3-D constructions of the entire Mechanism with the view of making the first Hololens image of it.

You mentioned that you teach an archaeological course in Greece in the summer. What is that?

The course is entitled "Archaeological and Epigraphical Field School" and is conducted as a part of a project called The Lechaion Harbor and Land Settlement Project. Corinth had two harbors, and the Lechaion Harbor was the major one on the Gulf of Corinth, and it's the inner harbor, so it's no longer under water, but on land.

What do you anticipate or plan to do on your excavation trip to Corinth this coming summer?

There are some buildings and docks built around the inner harbor, which is where we'll be excavating. The students will excavate in three major areas in which there are several trenches. I think I'm safe in telling you that one of them is a Roman basilica. I'm the epigrapher of the project, which has about thirty undergraduate students working on it from three different universities, and five to ten graduate students from around the globe. While the students (including CWRU students) are excavating, I will break off small groups from all three excavation sites to go to the Old Museum of Corinth where the inscriptions are stored. There I will teach the students the basics of epigraphy along with some new photographic techniques. The archaeologists will train the CWRU students about the methods of archeology and I will teach their students about epigraphy. There are other experts in all these fields that are part of the project, so it's cool. This coming summer I will be taking 6 students to excavate

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and learn about epigraphy for three-and-a-half weeks. We'll also be visiting Athens and the Acropolis along with the ancient archaeological sites such as Mycenae, Tiryns, and Nemea, or Byzantine sites like Mistras. There are nice beaches and great food, and the Greek people are wonderful. The students love it and I'll be bringing back other students maybe in 2020 or 2021.

A Selection of Dr. Iversen's Work

Iversen, P. A. (2017). The Calendar on the Antikythera Mechanism and the Corinthian Family of Calendars. Hesperia: The Journal of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 86(1), 129. doi:10.2972/hesperia.86.1.0129