

Remarks on the opening of the Center for Hellenic Studies at the University of Chicago, 11/8/2019, Jason Merchant, Vice Provost

Κι εγώ σας καλωσορίζω στο καινούργιό μας Κέντρο Ελληνικών Σπουδών.

I also welcome you to here on this auspicious occasion of the inaugural event of the Center for Hellenic Studies at the University of Chicago.

We celebrate the opening of this new Center not just because the study of Greek and the Greek world is so important—a point I’ll return to briefly in a moment, but which others speaking today will have much more to say about—but also because the Center and its work form an integral and indivisible part of the institution that is proud to host it, the University of Chicago.

It’s worth remembering that universities are the only institutions that humans have created that are solely dedicated to the discovery, preservation, and dissemination of knowledge. They are a bulwark against ignorance, intolerance, and superstition, and the loci of transformative education and research. They demand—and reward—a commitment to the highest levels of achievement and study, and can thrive only when they ensure unfettered academic freedom. It is sometimes too easy to take such institutions for granted and fail to appreciate both their importance in our joint projects of discovery and their potential fragility.

This center represents the University’s ongoing institutional dedication to the ideals of free inquiry and truth-seeking that the Greeks pioneered and that helped create and continue to form the only foundation for free societies. At a time when the very ideas of truth, merit, and free inquiry are under attack, it is no exaggeration to paraphrase Abraham Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address:

“Now we are engaged in a great [struggle], testing whether any [institution] so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure.”

Our dedication to these ideals is only the beginning—what the creation of this center, as part of this university and of its Division of the Humanities, represents, is also a dedication to the realization of those ideals.

That is why the opening of this Center is an occasion for celebration—it represents institutional commitment to the study of a language, a people, and a set of ideas and works, that have a special place in the history of the society that we live in and in which the institution of the university is able to thrive at all. And so I’ll end with a remark on the importance of Greek itself. As a linguist, it pains me when people say and believe wrong things, even if well-intentioned, about how languages work, for example that philosophy would not have been possible without the Greek language, or that it was Greek *per se* that enabled Aristotle to think the thoughts he did.

Plato, Aristotle, the Christian Evangelists, and scores of other important thinkers and artists didn't become Plato, Aristotle, the Christian Evangelists, and so on **because** they were writing in Greek. No. Greek became Greek because these extraordinary people wrote extraordinary texts in it. It was the thinkers and writers who used Greek as the medium for their ideas that forged an expressive language that merits study even and especially today. Their thoughts and genius were not formed or enabled because of Greek—rather, Greek was formed by **their** use of **it**. This does not, however, in any way undermine the case for specialness of Greek, or its claims on our attentions—just the opposite. This is precisely why the study of Greek remains so important and rewarding—because only it provides unmediated access to some of the greatest works of the human mind and imagination. Some people are lucky enough to grow up speaking the modern variety of this language (and I envy them every day!)—the rest of us are fortunate that universities and now this Center exists where we too can acquire knowledge of this language and its history and of the remarkable people who wrote and spoke it and of their ideas and works.

So again I welcome you and thank you for your own dedication to the ideals of free inquiry and the study of the Hellenic world.