

## **The Origins of Democracy: Study Abroad in Greece Spring 2009**

This past May, Rob Fleck, Andy Hanssen, and eleven MSU students traveled to Greece, visiting major ancient sites. The two-week trip was an integral part of an advanced, research-oriented course called “Property Rights, Economic Performance, and the Origins of Democracy: Lessons from Ancient Greece.” Throughout the spring semester, the class studied and discussed the currently booming literature on the way democracy and other institutions are related to economic growth – a topic on which Rob and Andy have focused much of their research, including their recent publications on ancient Greece. This set the stage for trip, which began with several days in Athens, where the group toured the Acropolis, visited the Archeological Museum, discussed the origins of Athenian (and American) wealth and democracy, and speculated about the economic organization of modern street vending. The next stop was Sparta, home of King Leonidas, Queen Gorgo, fierce warriors (all of whom could vote and shared power in an unusually equal manner), and – something not portrayed in the movie “300” – a large non-Spartan population repressed by the Spartans. One of the most remarkable features of Spartan society was the level of rights and property held by Spartan women; for more on this, see Rob and Andy’s recent article, “Rulers Ruled by Women: An Economic Analysis of the Rise and Fall of Women’s Rights in Ancient Sparta” (*Economics of Governance*, July 2009). While in the vicinity of Sparta, the group climbed to the top of the ancient Byzantine ruins at Mystras. After Sparta and Mystras, the group spent five nights in the city of Nafplio, making day trips to Mycenae (home of King Agamemnon, and a major power prior to the rise of Greek democracies) and other ancient sites, while enjoying Nafplio’s beautiful Venetian architecture, the views of (and from) its stunning fortresses, extraordinary gelato, and the beach. The next stop was Thermopylae (where Leonidas and his 300 fought the Persians and died) en route to the last major destination, Delphi (home of the famous Oracle and a major religious center in ancient Greece).

Thanks to generous funding from the Charles G. Koch Charitable Foundation, the eleven students received scholarships to support research they conducted as part of the class. Each of the students wrote a paper that illuminates the importance of institutions in explaining economic performance. Specific topics included how the need for secure property rights can influence the choice of political institutions, the link between Greek warfare, the protection of property rights, and the rise of democracy, the effects of international trade on democratization, how religion shapes the functioning of democracy, and the development of remarkably advanced financial institutions in ancient Athens. Rob and Andy report that they both learned an enormous amount from the students’ research projects.

Ancient Rome is a prime possibility for a future trip. We will keep you posted.