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Macedonians, Greeks, and Human Sacrifice

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Abu Tor
Jerusalem, Israel
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Dear Peter,

Ellen and I really didn't get to see much of Yugoslavia in the five days we were there en route from Paris to Crete. Most of our time was spent driving, and in Yugoslavia, it took all of my concentration just to stay on the road. It wasn't just the local drivers or even the condition of the pavement-- it was more a matter of courage and cold calculation, trying to decide whether to risk passing a heavy, slow-moving, fume-belching tractor trailer just ahead on the mountainside, in the 40 or 50 yards remaining before the next terrifyingly blind curve.

Since we had a schedule and commitments waiting for us across the Greek border and our trip was taking longer than expected, we had to drive at least 300 kilometers a day. And although we managed to pass through at least a small stretch of five of Yugoslavia's six federated socialist republics, there wasn't much time left over after each day's driving except to find ourselves a hotel for the night and to explore the immediate vicinity until it was too dark or until we were just too tired to look around anymore.

That was the rather hurried way we saw the mountains of Slovenia during an afternoon's drive from Trieste. And that was how we spent three days making our way down the Croatian coast. Our first stop was the island of Krk in the Kvarner Gulf, once a hideout for the medieval Uskok pirates, but now just a bleak and rocky holiday resort for East European package tours, connected to the mainland by the massive concrete Tito Bridge. We spent our second night in the port of Split, the ancient Palatium and the medieval Spalato, where the remains of the Roman emperor Diocletian's palace peek out through the laundry lines and wooden shutters of the modern apartments it now contains. And on our third night in Croatia, we were in the tourist haven of Dubrovnik, the immaculately restored medieval port of Ragusa, its buildings and cobblestone streets scrubbed so clean that it seemed as if the elegant boutiques and gift shops lining the main square had always been there.

From Dubrovnik, we continued south into Montenegro along the coastal highway, climbing to what seemed to be incredible heights above the Adriatic Sea. Turning inland around the Bay of Kotor, we

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suddenly came upon an awesome sight, neither planned nor promoted by the local Turisticki Ured, "Tourist Promotion Office." It was the medieval walled town of Kotor, severely devastated by a 1979 earthquake. The devastation was still very much in evidence; huge cracks snaked down the face of the thick fortifications with much of the city inside them still reduced to piles of rubble of varying heights.

Further south, we were forced to make a much longer inland detour, thanks to the unhappy xenophobia of the Albanian authorities. Skirting Albania's northern border, we climbed into the mountains of Montenegro, following the narrow, twisting road cut into the shoulder of the steep Morača River Gorge. Here we entered a world quite different from that we had seen along the Adriatic coast; instead of white-washed stone houses with Mediterranean-style red tile roofs, we now saw villages constructed entirely out of timber, houses with steep-sided roofs pierced in the center by a simple opening for kitchen smoke.

This is how I always imagined that a 19th century Eastern European landscape would look: barnyard animals behind weathered wooden fences, tall haystacks gathered in the fields, and haywagons pulled by horses rolling slowly along the side of the road. Here and there we passed a monastery, nestled in the brilliant autumn foliage. It all seemed so much like a picture postcard, but, unfortunately, this idealized view of the southern Slavic world was not to continue for more than the afternoon.

By the time we reached the outskirts of the city of Priština on the high plateau of Kosovo, the minarets and Turkish dress of the inhabitants made the human landscape suddenly seem more complex. Kosovo, we learned, is an autonomous province of Serbia, and a troublesome one at that. The population here is almost 75% Albanian or "Sjiptar" and a vocal nationalist underground demanding either union with Albania or complete independence stirred up violent demonstra-



Map of Yugoslavia, with our stopping places along the way.

tions that have only recently been discouraged by a liberal use of government troops.

Priština is the capital of Kosovo, but except for the 15th century mosque and restored Turkish baths hidden among the much more plentiful socialist-realist architecture, you wouldn't even know what an incredible history the city has had. Nearby, at a place called Kosovo Polje, "The Field of Kosovo," the Ottoman and Serbian armies engaged in what guidebooks like to call "the most massive battle in medieval European history." In 1389, the forces of Sultan Murad I defeated those of the Serb Prince Lazar, bringing the dubious blessings of Ottoman rule to Priština-- a rule that was broken only by the much delayed counterattack of Serbia in 1912. And since the end of World War II and the beginning of intensive development, Priština has put on an entirely new face. Modern shops, office buildings, and a department store line the main boulevard of the city, and in the middle of it all is the imposing Grand Hotel.

We actually decided to stop for a night in Priština, not because of its history-- of which I knew very little-- but really just on a whim. For the last three years I had been working on a book about the ancient Philistines, and strangely enough, I had come across the city of Priština in my research. The problem of the geographical origins of the Philistines is a very difficult one, and an otherwise respected scholar (perhaps in a moment of weakness) published a theory about 35 years ago, declaring that Priština was actually the Philistines' homeland. Since Egyptian hieroglyphics, the earliest source for the spelling of the name "Philistine," make no differentiation between the consonants L and R, the connection was plausible at least linguistically. Archaeologically, though, the connection was much harder to make.

Arriving after dark at the Grand Hotel Priština (whose five stars on the partially illuminated neon sign above the entrance are apparent figments of the management's imagination), we checked into our room overlooking the city center and then escaped quickly back down to the lobby to try to see something of Priština from ground level. The lobby, we now noticed, with its crystal light fixtures and vinyl sofas, was filled almost entirely with middle-aged men in business suits. Some ogled the photos of the hotel nightclub's strippers, posted prominently in a glass case on the lobby wall. Others talked nervously with several very friendly unaccompanied young women. And yet others just sat glumly, tightly packed together on the sofas, drinking tall glasses of sljivovića and chain-smoking cigarettes.

Outside the hotel on the main street, the nightlife was not much more exciting, though at first I thought some sort of political demonstration was underway. The street was closed to traffic and filled

from curb to curb with young people; to the right of the white line they were walking slowly up the street, and to the left, they were coming down. The stores were all closed, as were the cafes, but the young people of Priština didn't seem to mind. This was apparently a customary evening social gathering and, getting into the spirit, Ellen and I sauntered to the right of the white line up the street and made a U-turn at the end to saunter back down to our hotel.

Inside the noisy, smoky lobby again, I went over to the desk to ask for directions for our next day's driving. Ellen, in the meantime, was standing alone when she was approached by one of the guests of the hotel who threw his arms around her and apparently offered her his own very special evening tour. A deft swing of her fist clearly made the point that she had already seen enough of Priština, and I can honestly say that the next morning as we quickly ate our breakfast in the hotel's dark, cavernous ballroom, both of us were happy to leave.

* * *

We had a much better time in the Yugoslav Socialist Republic of Macedonia and in its geographical counterpart, the Greek province of Macedonia to the south. I've always been especially interested in the Hellenistic Period and Macedonia is really where the Hellenistic Period began. In 359 BC, a Macedonian king named Philip II, taking advantage of the decline of Athens and Sparta, began a campaign of conquest that did not end until the death of his son Alexander in Babylon 36 years later-- by which time lands and peoples as far east as the Indus had been brought under at least nominal Macedonian rule.

Yet even with the far-flung conquests of Philip and Alexander, the Macedon-



General map of region with numbered insets.



Inset 1: Yugoslav
and Greek Macedonia.

ians were never considered true Hellenes, at least by the Hellenes further south. The Macedonians wholeheartedly absorbed and spread Greek culture, but their own local language and traditions were always influenced by the steady migration down the Vardar valley of peoples and tribes from Central Europe.

In the 6th century AD, when Greco-Roman civilization was no longer as strong as it had once been, the trickle of northern migrants suddenly became a flood. Within the first 58 years of the 6th century, Macedonia was invaded four times in quick succession, by Bulgars, Slavs, Huns, and Goths. The ethnic make-up and language of the country was changed forever; the language still spoken there, called "Macedonian," is a unique south Slavic dialect, closely related to Bulgarian. And after the Ottoman conquest of the country in 1364, a Turkish topping

was added to the strange layer cake of Macedonian nationality.

There is also the problem of boundaries, since where precisely Macedonia begins and ends is still a matter of dispute. In the 19th century, when Macedonia became a focal point of Balkan nationalism, the issue was settled, at least for the time being. No sooner had Serbia, Greece, and Bulgaria jointly wrested Macedonia away from the Ottoman Empire in 1912 than did they begin a war among themselves, eventually tearing it apart. Greece got the coastal plain around the Bay of Thessaloniki. Serbia (now Yugoslavia) got the highlands. And Bulgaria got what was left.

All of these historical developments, from the 4th century BC to the 20th AD, have left their mark. It's not always easy, I learned, to disentangle them, but one thing is certain. If anyone thinks that a visit to Macedonia can provide a single clear picture of the country's role in history, that person can't be further off the mark.

* * *

On our last day in Yugoslavia, Ellen and I finally slowed down the pace of our driving to spend a few hours at an intriguing archaeological site. Near the course of the Vardar River, where the moun-

tains of Yugoslav Macedonia begin to flatten out as they slope down toward the part of Macedonia that is now in Greece, we visited the ancient city of Stobi, an impressive mound of Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine remains excavated by a joint American-Yugoslav expedition in the mid-1970's, and since 1978, by the Yugoslavs alone.

During the first few seasons of the excavation, the American and Yugoslav diggers concentrated on the area of the ancient forum, clearing an unusually well preserved amphitheater (the seats of which still bore the carefully carved Greek names of season ticket holders), a complex of workshops, villas, Byzantine churches, and a well-appointed 4th-5th century AD synagogue. For the last few seasons, the work has been restricted to a single structure: the episcopal basilica, with wall frescoes and floor mosaics, and containing an important inscription testifying to the prominence of Stobi in early Byzantine times.

October isn't generally the best time to visit an archaeological excavation; most digs around the Mediterranean are completely closed down by September 1. And when we arrived at the site of Stobi, the tourist parking lot was empty, the museum was closed, and the elderly attendant on duty seemed annoyed to have to rifle through the drawers of his desk in the gatehouse to get out the entrance tickets. After paying our fee and walking down the main colonnaded street of the city, we wandered toward the only apparent activity at the site: a small team of workmen, supervised by a young archaeologist, busy constructing a metal roof over the nave of the basilica to protect it from the coming winter rains.

I had come to Stobi just to see the ruins and I really didn't expect to find any political significance in the excavations here. But when I spoke with the Yugoslav archaeologist supervising the workmen, I suddenly began to see why the episcopal basilica-- of all the buildings of the city-- was of particular interest to the University of Belgrade archaeological team.

Under the new protective roof, in the nave of the basilica, was a long Greek inscription, dated to the late 4th or early 5th century AD. It described the territory under the ecclesiastical control of the bishop of Stobi, mentioning a number of other Macedonian cities (among them, Pella, capital of Alexander the Great) as being subsidiary centers of the one true Macedonian diocese. The implication-- or fact, as the archaeologist assured me-- was that this Byzantine inscription was based on an earlier tradition and that Stobi was the true spiritual and cultural capital of ancient Macedonia, not any of the cities that now lay beyond the border in Greece.

I was a little taken aback by this patently patriotic theory and I wrote it off to the archaeologist's understandable enthusiasm for his site. But there was something more to this debate about ancient Macedonia than just one man's enthusiasm; after we crossed the Greek border and visited the truly spectacular excavations at the site of Vergina, I discovered that archaeological claims for precedence in Macedonia were not just a one-sided Yugoslav monologue.

* * *

It took us about 4 hours to drive from Stobi across the Greek border to Thessaloniki, where we spent our first night in Greece. Election posters and spray-painted election graffiti were everywhere; the supporters of the two major parties, Pasok (the Greek Socialist Party headed by Prime Minister Andreas Papandreu) and New Democracy (the conservative party headed by Kostas Mitsotakis) were apparently vying with each other to cover every available concrete surface with pictures of their leaders and to deface those of their opponents. Late into the evening loudspeakers blared from the opposing party headquarters, and every now and then a pickup truck covered with posters and fitted with a sound system would pass down the main street beneath our hotel window playing patriotic Greek songs.

Early the next morning, Ellen and I left the electioneering of Thessaloniki behind us and headed about 50 miles west across the flat Macedonian plain, crossing the Vardar River, whose name was changed to the more classical Axios here in Greece. The political posters and graffiti were still very much in evidence even in the countryside, but as we arrived in the village of Vergina, founded in 1923 as a resettlement site for Greek refugees from Turkey, the hilly, sometimes mountainous landscape seemed almost identical to that which we had seen in Yugoslav Macedonia.

The archaeological excavations at Vergina are still closed to the public despite the world-wide publicity they have received. And it was only after we had presented our letter of introduction to the nervous watchman that we were permitted to pass through the barbed wire gate and climb down beneath the surface of the ground to see the almost unbelievable ancient treasures that have recently been discovered here.

The work at Vergina is directed by Professor Manolis Andronicus of the University of Thessaloniki, a man who has spent the last 30 years proving that there is a great deal of fantastic archaeological material waiting to be uncovered in northern Greece. While most Greek and foreign expeditions have concentrated their work in Attica, the Peloponnese, and the islands of the Aegean, Andronicus has quietly worked his own archaeological pasture, patiently looking for evidence

of the ancient Macedonian culture, especially from the short-lived empire of Alexander the Great and his father Philip in the 4th century BC.

Anyone who saw the PBS series The Search for Alexander or had a chance to see the exhibition that recently toured major American museums knows that Andronicus's dedication really paid off. At Vergina in 1977, he discovered an incredibly rich tomb buried beneath a huge funeral mound, containing a king's treasure of gold, silver, glass, and ivory objects, which he plausibly identified as the funeral offerings interred with Alexander's father, Philip II of Macedon.

In addition to his good luck, Professor Andronicus has a flair for the dramatic; we were greeted at the entrance to the work area by his assistant Georghis and we followed him down a steep path into a suitably funereal gloom. The entire excavation is encased under a corrugated metal roof and surrounded by thick styrofoam walls. But Georghis assured us that the enclosure was not just for atmosphere. "When the winter storms start here in Macedonia, the rain drives side-ways," he said with a smile.

The first tomb we saw was robbed in antiquity, and although all the precious objects were removed by the ancient looters, enough of the skeleton remained, Georghis told us, to identify it as the tomb of a teenage girl. In the small burial chamber about 10 feet by 12 feet in size and now illuminated by a single bare light bulb, Georghis had set up a drawing table to copy the graceful fresco still dimly visible on the wall. The subject, appropriately enough in the burial place of a princess of the Macedonian royal family, was the abduction of the maiden Persephone by the underworld god Hades, a favorite Greek theme of the tragedy of death.

No sooner had we finished admiring the delicate pastels of this fresco than did Georghis lead us to the real centerpiece of the excavation, the tomb of Philip himself. As we stood on a balcony above the entrance ramp, Georghis flicked on a bank of floodlights to illuminate a doric facade of white Macedonian marble decorated with red, blue, and gold paint.

The colors on the facade of the tomb were really shocking, not so much for their bright colors, but for the fact that they were perfectly preserved. The magnificent tomb, covered with earth soon after its construction and the burial of Philip, still maintained the brilliance it was given by the team of Macedonian artists hastily assembled in the wake of Philip's assassination in 336 BC.

A long black curtain extended above the facade and Georghis drew it back with a flourish to reveal the most spectacular element

in the decoration of this tomb. Painted on plaster applied to a brick face was a long and elaborate hunting scene extending across the entire width of the facade. On the extreme left were several naked figures spearing a frightened deer. Next came more of the same naked figures, who, together with their hunting dogs, had cornered a vicious-looking wild boar. At the center of the painting were the mounted figures of Alexander and Philip spearing an appropriately regal lion, and at the right end of the panel were more naked hunters taunting a huge, standing black bear.

This impressive painting was never intended to be left open for the benefit of casual admirers; it, like the grave goods found inside the sealed burial chamber, were intended for the benefit only of the deceased. In fact, there were so many objects inside the tomb that Andronicus and his team had to resort to the techniques of underwater archaeology just to get them all out.

Georghis explained the process. First the capstone was removed from the burial chamber's vaulted ceiling and the offering-strewn floor was photographed from above. A rectangular grid was then drawn on the resulting photograph and the team then descended into the tomb and sliced up the thick layers of offerings along the lines of the grid squares so that they could be reassembled in the laboratory and peeled off layer by layer.

If there had been only gold vessels, pottery vases, and metal weapons, such a complicated procedure would have been superfluous. But Philip was laid to rest with offerings of a far more perishable kind. A room-sized plywood table in the nearby excavation laboratory is covered with the still incompletely dissected organic layers, from which Andronicus and the team have distinguished the remains of wreaths of flowers, leather objects, wooden furniture, and dozens of fragments of fabric, to which hundreds of delicate gold ornaments were once sewed.

Philip's Tomb was discovered in 1977 and the analysis of its contents is still obviously far from complete. In the meantime, another, even richer tomb has been discovered nearby. But the layers of offerings on the floor are so thick and so compacted that, in Georghis's words, "We just decided to forget about it for the time being."

We were almost finished with our tour of the site when Georghis suddenly remembered something else that he wanted to show us. "I want you to see some finds that will disprove all the anti-Hellenistic propaganda that is coming from Yugoslavia these days," he said. I didn't realize that the Greek archaeologists here were even aware of the patriotic theories of their Yugoslav colleagues, but I sud-

denly learned that the claims I heard at Stobi were just the tip of the archaeological iceberg, so to speak.

Georghis brought us into a dark storeroom, filled with shelves of pottery and at least a dozen marble funerary stelae. Some of these ancient tombstones were decorated with bas-reliefs, some were plain, but all were inscribed with the name and pedigree of the deceased. As we walked among the stelae, all found at the edge of the great burial mound, Georghis pointed out some of the individual names-- Demetrios, Antigonos, Eugenēs-- all well-known Greek names.

"These people were Greeks," he insisted, trying to counter the theories of certain Yugoslav archaeologists that the Slavic presence in Macedonia went back at least as far as the time of Alexander the Great. "And since these stelae are dated to the 4th century BC, the appearance of the Greek names of grandfathers brings the date back at least a century before that." Georghis was determined that there would be no question in our minds to which cultural sphere the builders and occupants of the cemetery at Vergina belonged.

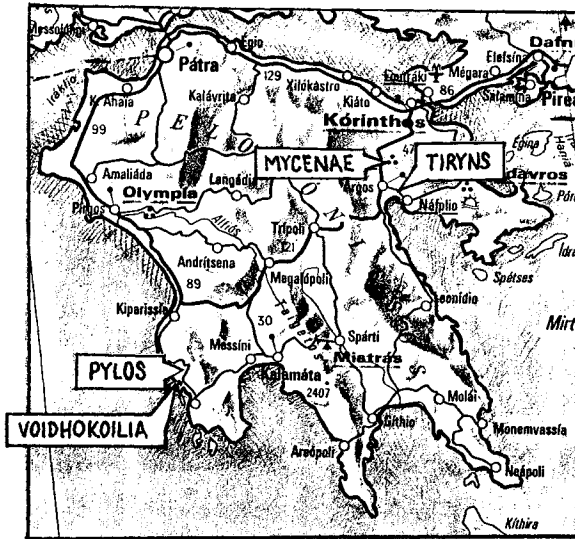
But that was not the only point of political interest that the excavations at Vergina provided. As we were walking back to our car I commented to Georghis the sheer scale of the excavations and their importance must require a substantial budget. Georghis assured us that financing was not really a serious problem. When the discovery of Philip's Tomb was made public, Constantine Karamanlis, the leader of the "New Democracy" party now campaigning so hard to regain power, was Prime Minister, and he took it upon himself to provide Professor Andronicus with government funding to continue the dig.

And Karamanlis, it seems, had another, more personal interest in proving that Macedonia could boast an ancient Hellenic culture as impressive as that of the cities further south. Karamanlis was himself a native of Macedonia, born in a small town northeast of Thessaloniki five years before southern Macedonia was annexed to Greece.

Patriotism and local pride obviously played as important a role in the excavations of Vergina as they did in the excavations of Stobi several hundred kilometers to the north. And as Ellen and I continued our trip southward into the Peloponnese, we visited some excavations at which "Greekness" in the 4th or 5th century BC was not nearly ancient enough.

* * *

One of the main reasons that I wanted to spend some time in Greece before coming to the Middle East was because I had never been to the centers of the Bronze Age Mycenaean civilization in the Peloponnese. It will come as no news to anyone that slightly more than a



Inset 2:
The Peloponnese

century ago that raconteur, publicist, money-maker, dreamer, and self-taught archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann changed forever the accepted understandings about how far back Greek civilization actually went.

The stuffy Oxford dons of the 18th and 19th century took Greek historians like Herodotus and Thucydides at face value and discounted just about everything in Greek myth as pure fantasy. As a result, they believed that Greek history had really begun only at the time of the first Olympiad in 776 BC.

But Schliemann had an almost childlike faith in Homer and his tales of the far earlier Trojan War. And almost miraculously, it seemed, Schliemann's peasant workers at the sites of Troy and Mycenae un-

covered the first evidence of the behind the Homeric epics-- at the same time neatly burying the accepted ideas of the Oxford dons.

So suddenly the Homeric epics were shown to have a significant basis in fact. Troy proved to be a strongly fortified city, destroyed after a violent siege. Mycenae, the Homeric city "rich in gold," capital of the legendary King Agamemnon, proved to be an impressively fortified citadel, with a palace, royal tombs, and the famous Lion Gate. Other Mycenaean centers were subsequently excavated by Schliemann and his archaeological successors at nearby Tiryns (birthplace of Herakles) and at Pylos on the other side of the Peloponnese (home of Nestor, peacemaker among the Greek leaders at Troy).

In recent years, the discoveries of Mycenaean artifacts throughout the Mediterranean have prompted a reappraisal of the cultural connections between ancient East and West. With Mycenaean pottery found as far east as Amman and as far west as Marseilles, it's becoming clear to archaeologists everywhere that the Mycenaean Period (c. 1450- c. 1200 BC) was an extremely important chapter in Greek history.

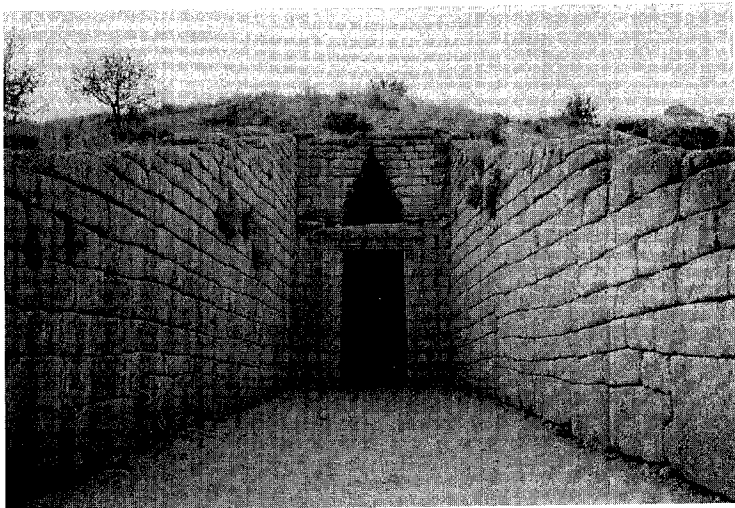
Unfortunately, I chose the worst possible time to make my first visit to Mycenae. After driving south from Athens, we turned up past

the souvenir stands and tavernas to enter a sun-baked parking lot filled with at least two dozen brightly painted tourist buses. My conventional wisdom about the seasonal flow of traffic to antiquity sites had failed me; although it was already October 7th, the summer tourist season at Mycenae apparently hadn't ended yet.

Pushing our way up the path to the citadel through thickly packed groups of visitors listening to explanations of the significance of Schliemann's achievement in English, German, Italian, and even Japanese, we managed to catch a glimpse of the Lion Gate and an obstructed view of the huge Grave Circle just inside the walls before deciding that it might be better if we found ourselves a hotel in nearby Navplio and returned for a more leisurely visit later in the day.

By 4:30 in the afternoon, we were ready to try Mycenae again and I was happy that we did. The sun was low, the air was cool, and the emptiness of the site allowed us to wander over it at will. Off to the south, we could see the blue water of the Argolic Gulf, from which, Homer recorded, the Greek forces set sail for Troy. To the west, beyond the mountains of Arcadia, the sun was setting and its weakening rays reddened the stone walls of Mycenae itself.

The site was scheduled to close at 6 pm and the modern guardians of Mycenae, I discovered, are very conscious of time. At 5:45, a shrill policeman's whistle sounded from the gatehouse at the entrance, warning the remaining visitors that they had better take their last few snapshots and get ready to leave. We were in no position to argue and we walked quickly down through the Lion Gate to get back into the car. Actually, we raced down to the parking lot, because before we left Mycenae, there was one more thing that we just had to see.



"The Tomb of Agamemnon"

According to the Roman writer Pausanias, it is the Treasury of Atreus, the private bank vault of one of the founders of the Mycenaean dynasty. According to Heinrich Schliemann, on the other hand, it is the tomb of King Agamemnon himself. But by whatever name one chooses to call it, it is by far the most imposing monument at the site: a stone-built bee-hive shaped tomb called a tholos, 43 feet high and almost 50 feet in diameter, approached by a forbidding entranceway 115 feet long. Although it was robbed of its original contents in ancient times, it has attracted the attention and wonder of visitors to Mycenae from Pausanias's time to this. And in the gathering gloom of the early evening when we entered the huge burial chamber, I was inclined to put away my skepticism and really believe that Schliemann's expansive attribution to Agamemnon might not be so far wrong.

* * *

At Mycenae, I really got into the mood of believing Homer, but when we traveled across the Peloponnese to visit the site of Pylos, I suddenly discovered that I was at least 30 years behind the times. Not the essential historical basis of the Homeric epics is no longer valued; it is just that the current generation of Greek archaeologists have moved on to other, more pressing concerns.

Pylos is famous as the site of the "Palace of Nestor," an amazingly well-preserved royal residence suddenly destroyed by fire toward the end of the 13th century BC. It was excavated for 15 consecutive seasons from 1952 to 1966 by the American archaeologist Carl Blegen who headed a large expedition from the University of Cincinnati. Blegen actually began the search for Mycenaean remains in this relatively remote part of the Peloponnese in 1938. He was convinced that the great centers of Mycenaean culture were not restricted just to the area around Mycenae, and, having noted some intriguing surface indications, he began to dig into the rubble-strewn hill called Epano Englianos on April 4, 1939.

Unfortunately, Blegen's timing couldn't have been worse. That was the day that Mussolini decided that it would be good time to invade Albania, plunging the entire area into the hostilities that would soon be called the Second World War. But if Blegen's timing was unfortunate, his luck couldn't have been better; within two hours of beginning the first day of digging, his workers uncovered a large archive of clay tablets inscribed in the undeciphered language called Linear B.

The problem of Linear B was, at the time, the central question of Mycenaean archaeology. Like its predecessor, the Linear A script of Crete (which is still undeciphered), the language used for keeping records in the ancient palaces was believed to hold the key to discovering the ethnic identity of the palace dwellers themselves.

While the Mycenaean civilization was seen to provide the historical basis for the Homeric epics, there were some serious scholarly doubts whether the Mycenaeans could actually be called Greeks. And if they were not Greeks, then their direct contribution to Classical civilization would be thrown into some very considerable doubt. But in 1952, the same year that Blegen resumed his excavations at Pylos, an English architect and amateur cryptographer named Michael Ventris demonstrated convincingly that Linear B was, in fact, an early form of Greek.

What does all this explanatory material have to do with archaeology and politics-- or, for that matter, with our visit to Pylos this fall? Actually more than I expected, since the current question among Greek archaeologists is just how far back one can find evidence of the arrival and settlement of Greeks in Greece.

One of the archaeologists most concerned with this problem is Professor Georghis Korres of the University of Athens, the son of a prominent conservative political leader. For the last several years Korres has been working in the area around Pylos, and at a small site called Voidhokoilia (pronounced "Voydokeelia"), he believes that he has found evidence of an apparent continuity of Greek tradition as far back as 2800 BC.

The digging at Voidhokoilia had ended for the season, but Professor Korres's assistant, a graduate student named Aphrodite, was still in Pylos finishing the registration of the most recent finds. She agreed to show us the site and give us an explanation of its importance, and we rode with her from Pylos across salt flats and marshes to the broad, semi-circular bay called "the cow's belly," from which Voidhokoilia takes its name.

The site itself was something of a disappointment, from its physical appearance at least. After scrambling up the steep, sandy slopes of the hill overlooking the bay, we followed Aphrodite through a large hole in the protective wire fence and walked around what seemed to be just a very large pile of stones denuded of all covering soil, except for a few pockets of brown earth still filling the crevices here and there.

But slowly, as Aphrodite began a very technical explanation of the methods and results of the excavation, the successive stages of building here began to make some sense. At the center of the rockpile were the remains of a Mycenaean tholos tomb-- missing its top but still recognizeable from its beehive shape as a smaller version of the "Tomb of Agamemnon" we had seen at Mycenae. This tholos too had its legendary associations; Aphrodite told us that according to Pausanias, that prolific travel writer of the 2nd century AD, this was the tomb of Thracimedes, son of Nestor, king of Pylos.

Professor Korres's teacher and pioneer of modern Greek archaeology, Spyridon Marinatos, excavated this tholos in the 1950's and found that it contained typical Mycenaean artifacts of the 13th century BC. Since the date of the Trojan War is now placed by most scholars at around 1250 BC, the legendary connection of this tholos with one of the sons of Nestor, from a chronological standpoint at least, is not unreasonable. But as I was beginning to discover on this trip to Pylos, Homeric discoveries were no longer enough for modern Greek archaeologists; the settlement levels that preceded the tholos were now the archaeological elements of greatest interest here.

The tholos, it seems, was constructed on already consecrated ground. Around 2000 BC, more than 600 years before the Mycenaean civilization first started to bloom, the site was already being used as a cemetery. Aphrodite pointed out to us the remains of several large storejars, also called pithoi, that were discovered containing skeletons and burial gifts. These pithoi were not buried haphazardly; they were laid on their sides with their bases radiating from a central point like the spokes of a wheel.

The central circular area within the bases of the pithoi was left empty, and it was here that the later Mycenaean builders constructed their tholos tomb. And it was very significant, Aphrodite assured us, that the Mycenaeans were careful to avoid damaging any of the pithoi or their contents.

This fact seemed to indicate a continuity in religious tradition, and if the Linear B tablets proved that the Mycenaeans were Greek speakers, then the "pithoi people" of the Middle Helladic Period might very well be Greek speakers too. This conclusion is a far cry from the traditional belief that the Greeks arrived here only with the Dorian invasion around 1100 BC. But Professor Korres believes that at Voidhokoilia there is clear evidence of even earlier connections.

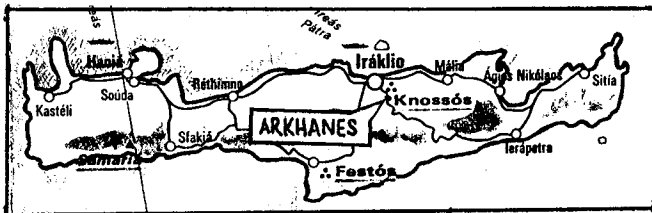
Beneath the level of the pithos burials were the walls and courtyards of a small village from the Early Helladic Period, dated c. 2800 to c. 2000 BC. Aphrodite showed us the remains of workshops, dwelling places, and kitchens and she delineated for us the village's circular perimeter. The central area, although still covered for the most part by the much later Mycenaean tholos, contained several unusual Early Helladic pottery vessels sunk into the ground as apparent religious offerings.

If further excavations confirm that this central area is actually what it seems to be-- a cultic area-- then, Aphrodite explained, the possibility of Greek presence here could be pushed back almost 1000 years.

The arguments for the maintenance of a constant religious tradition at Voidhokoilia seemed to me to be based on a good deal of faith. Did the sanctity connected with a certain spot really mean that the same ethnic group has always been there? Although I politely refrained from mentioning the fact to Aphrodite, the city of Jerusalem, where Ellen and I were headed, has several sacred spots within its ancient walls that have been fought over for centuries by some very distinct ethnic groups.

Professor Korres would be the first to admit that his is just a theory and that it will take many more excavations at other sites before the archaeological theory is accepted as an historical fact. But for me, the most interesting element of our trip to Pylos and Voidhokoilia was what Korres's tentative conclusions say about at least one branch of Greek archaeology today. Having left behind the romantic quest for the historical basis behind the Homeric epics, today's generation seems to be searching for deeper Greek roots.

* * *



Inset 3: Crete

Our last stop in Greece was the island of Crete, home of the legendary King Minos and the site of the impressive Bronze Age Minoan civilization. Ever since the discovery of the palace complex at Knossos by the British archaeologist Arthur Evans in the first decade of this century the cultural level of the Minoan civilization has been idealized to an

almost absurd degree. Maybe it was Evans's own projection of his personal background; it seems uncannily coincidental that an aristocratic Englishman born while the sun still never set on the Empire would reconstruct the picture of an earlier island empire, advanced in all branches of the arts and sciences, serenely ruling a far flung commercial network through its undisputed command of the seas.

In recent years, Evans's conception of the Minoan civilization as an historical Atlantis have come under increasing attack. One recent critic, Professor H.G. Wunderlich, even termed Evans's reconstruction work at the palace of Knossos as "hypotheses in reinforced concrete." But having begun to criticize the theories of the father of Minoan archaeology, Evans's successors are now faced with the challenge of having to provide alternative reconstructions of the nature of the undeniably prolific Minoan culture.

The new reconstructions are as plentiful as there are scholars engaged in the problem, but one theme common to all of them is that

the Minoan civilization was neither as sovereign or as carefree as Sir Arthur Evans believed it to be. While Evans assumed that it was the Minoans of Crete who had "civilized" the mainlanders, certain Greek archaeologists today (mainlanders themselves) no longer place such great emphasis on the civilizing influence of Crete. Prominent among them is Professor Ioannis Sakellarakis of the University of Athens, now also serving as Director of the Heraklion Museum. His recent discoveries in the vicinity of Knossos seem to indicate that far from being peace-loving lotus eaters, the Minoans actually had a cruel and sinister side.

* * *

After arriving from Piraeus on the overnight ferry, Ellen and I met Nikos, a local inspector for the Greek Antiquities Service, outside the local kafenion in the central square of the village of Kato Arkhanes, about 15 miles south of Heraklion. We had come on the invitation of Professor Sakellarakis, who had left instructions with Nikos to show us the site of an extremely grisly event.

Since we spoke no Greek, and Nikos no English, we had to make do with a mixture of pidgin German and mime. Nikos got into the car and directed me to drive out from the village up a steep dirt path toward the summit of a nearby mountain-- past herds of sheep and goats and stinking piles of purple grape pulp, dumped there as the last stage of production in the local winery.

At a ledge high up on the mountain, Nikos directed me to stop. The view toward the north was truly spectacular; stretched out before us was the coast of the island with the buildings of Heraklion gleaming much brighter than they do at close range. Down in the village the day was oppressively hot, but here on the mountainside a brisk breeze brought the autumn chill of the Aegean Sea.

Leaving the car parked within just a few feet of the edge of the mountain-- Nikos told me to leave room for the local cars to pass-- we climbed slightly higher to approach the remains of a rectangular stone structure; the Minoan Temple of human sacrifice. Because the walls of the building were preserved to a height of about four feet, its floor plan was immediately clear. It was divided into three long parallel chambers with an entrance hall and three doors fronting their narrow ends.

Nikos indicated to us that he had supervised the workers when Professor Sakellarakis conducted excavations here. He then proudly sketched a high-footed chalice and the figure "480" in the dirt, indicating to us the number of complete Minoan vessels that had been recovered from the left and center rooms. But we already knew that the number of complete vessels was not the real attraction of this

site; Professor Sakellarakis had grabbed headlines all over the world about four years ago with his graphic, not to say imaginative, reconstruction of the desperate human sacrifice that had taken place here around 1700 BC.

Throughout the entire structure, Professor Sakellarakis found evidence of the effects of a terrible earthquake, presumably the same natural disaster that leveled all the great palaces on Crete at the same time. In one of the rooms, he and his team uncovered three intact human skeletons, from whose relative positions and associated finds he reconstructed the desperate ceremony that had gone on here just moments before the shrine was engulfed in flames, its walls toppled, and its contents buried under the collapsed debris.

Near the entrance of the room was a slightly raised gypsum table that Sakellarakis identified as a table of sacrifice. On it he found the complete skeleton of a young man, contracted in a fetal position. In the far corner was the skeleton of a young woman and beside the altar itself were the remains of a middle-aged man with a gold signet ring on the finger of one hand, and whose other hand was clutching a knife. Professor Sakellarakis was convinced that this was the aftermath of a human sacrifice conducted during the earthquake in a futile attempt to make it stop. His most telling evidence for this conclusion was, strangely enough, the color of the bones of the young man on the altar.

While all the skeletons were burned in the fire that ravaged the temple and the bones of the young woman and the man were completely charred, only the bones of the young man that were resting directly on the altar were charred; the rest of his bones were white.

Consulting physical anthropologists about this strange situation, Sakellarakis received an explanation that the man on the altar was probably already dead by the time that his bones had been burned by the fire. The force of gravity had caused the blood in his body to concentrate on his lower side, leaving his upper side almost completely drained. Although there are many scholars who still take issue with this explanation of the facts, Nikos believed Sakellarakis's reconstruction implicitly and gave us a particularly dramatic rendering of it in mime.

Pointing to the altar, still preserved under a wooden and plexiglas frame, he put both his hands flat at his cheek, as if imitating sleep. Stepping to the corner where the woman's body was found, he crouched down and held up his hands in panic to shield himself from a phantom attacker, quickly pointing to the spot where the middle-aged "priest's" skeleton lay. Rising and stepping over to the spot

where he had just pointed, he stood in a threatening stance, scowling and with an invisible dagger clenched tightly in his raised fist. Ellen and I nodded in appreciation of this performance, trying to stifle a giggle, and Nikos himself began to laugh. Once again he indicated that he had been at the excavation when all these things were found. We smiled, thanked him, and drove back with him down the steep road to Kato Arkhanes again.

At the Heraklion Museum later that day, we talked with one of the curators about Professor Sakellarakis's revisionist Minoan theories. It seems that the peak sanctuary at Arkhanes was not the only instance of human sacrifice that he believes he has found. In one of the newly excavated houses at Knossos itself, he uncovered a large pile of children's bones, some of them bearing the deep incisions of a knife.

"But this matter of Minoan human sacrifice is all very hypothetical," the curator warned us, tactfully not wanting to contradict Professor Sakellarakis, but at the same time not wanting us to accept the theory as fact. "My husband is a doctor here in Heraklion," she told us, "and he and his colleagues believe that the knife marks could be the signs of an ancient attempt at surgery, not necessarily a religious ritual."

Local pride in the wonders of Minoan civilization has turned slightly defensive these days. "The doctors here are all very upset with this idea of human sacrifice," she said.

* * *

That was our last experience with the current trends in Aegean archaeology; at the end of the week, after visiting the major sites of the island, Ellen and I boarded a rusty Cypriot car ferry for the two day cruise to Israel.

If fulfillment of expectations is a measure of a trip's success, then our trip was a dismal failure. I wanted to visit the sites of Classical and Mycenaean civilization before coming to the Middle East because I wanted to find some archaeological stability. What I found was just the opposite. But if the realization that archaeologists everywhere bring a great deal of patriotic and psychological baggage with them to work every day is worth anything, then I suppose the trip wasn't such a failure after all.

All the Best,

Neil

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