

Archaeology Today

A Little Good News

by: P.Y. Forsyth

Much of the news coming out of archaeology of late has been gloomy: unique monuments falling victim to acid rain and other forms of environmental damage; neglect (and inadequate protection of sites from plunderers) caused by a chronic lack of funds; natural disasters, such as earthquakes, doing major harm to already unstable monuments, etc. Fortunately, not all the news is bad, and in an attempt to cheer the hearts of would-be archaeologists I would like to report on some very positive recent developments in archaeology in Greece.

First of all, Nemea: the site, in the northeastern Peloponnese, is most famous as the home of the Nemean Games, allegedly founded by Herakles and held every two years in honour of Zeus. American archaeologists began excavation on the site back in 1926, but when I first visited Nemea in 1972 there was little save a few columns of Zeus' temple to gaze upon; indeed, the site was badly overgrown and it looked as though what few remains existed would not survive much longer. In 1974, however, a new phase of excavation began, under the direction of S.G. Miller, and now (I am pleased to report) the entire sanctuary of Zeus is being cleared of brush, re-studied, and even prepared for partial restoration. In fact, on my visit to the site in March of this year, large cranes were hovering over the ruins, ready to move huge blocks of stone all very carefully numbered and arranged. In addition, one of the best "on-site" museums I have ever come across has now been built on the ancient site; it is especially praiseworthy for its models of the ancient site and its fine collection of coins found during excavation. While this museum is still fairly empty in terms of major artefacts, it is clear that it will in the future house significant finds in a most pleasing atmosphere.

The single most significant find of late at Nemea, however, has been its impressive stadium, complete with a well-preserved vaulted entrance tunnel. This tunnel is most important since, in the history of architecture, it has been traditional to give credit for the development of the arch and vault to the ancient Romans; however, graffiti discovered on the wall of the tunnel includes the name of a Greek boxer who lived in the 4th century B.C., and pottery found in the area is also dated to that century. Thus, we now know that the Greeks were in fact using the arch and the vault before the Romans.

A second encouraging development is presently taking place at Bassae (in the western Peloponnese), where the badly-listing Temple of Apollo Epikourios is at last being stabilized. The poor condition of this temple, erected in the fifth century B.C., has now been attributed not only to the passage of time, but also to an unusual architectural error: it seems that Ictinus, the architect also responsible for the Athenian Parthenon, designed a foundation that was far too weak to support the superstructure. To quote the Greek expert I. Travlos, "Architecturally it's [the temple] an innovative, but unsolid temple The foundations are made of irregular stones that were too small to support the weight of the columns." Professor Travlos, in fact, is the chairman of a committee set up to save

the temple, and about seven million dollars (Canadian) have been allocated for the ten-year project. The first step will be to cover the entire structure with a giant awning to protect it from further weather damage; then the repair proper will begin.

Another temple in urgent need of repair is also scheduled for attention: the Parthenon itself. Its condition has been deteriorating quickly, thanks to the combined forces of pollution, earthquakes, and tourism, but the Greek government now seems determined to restore at least enough of the structure to stabilize it. Construction equipment was very obvious on the Acropolis last March, so one can hope that this unique masterpiece will be saved from further damage.

Greece today is not a wealthy country, so it is especially encouraging for archaeologists to see such projects being funded. Let's hope that other countries with vast but neglected archaeological remains will also recognize our obligation to preserve the heritage of mankind.

Just as the sons of Homer,
Singers of interwoven lines,
Often begin with a prelude to Zeus,
So this man also
Has taken the first instalment of victory
In the holy Games
In the far-sung wood of Nemean Zeus.

- Pindar, Second Nemean Ode,
tr. C.M. Bowra