

**Bronzing in the Greek Sun:  
CLAS 390 Abroad**

by J.M.McPherson

It was the best of times. The sea was blue, the sun was warm, the people were happy, and mysterious ruins were ours to explore. We climbed mountains, rode along *exciting* roads, sailed fabled seas, laughed, ate, swam, talked, and learned many things, scholarly and otherwise. "We" is a group of fortunate students who explored Greece this May with the University of Waterloo's Department of Anthropology and Classical Studies. Although many of this group were associated in some way with the Department itself, there was also a cheerful contingent from Adirondack College in New York State, and two charming southern belles.

While the tour officially focused on Bronze Age Greece, it took in a great deal more besides, with forays into the Classical and Hellenistic periods, and subject matter that was not always strictly Classical Studies. This accommodating and flexible approach took advantage of the strengths and enthusiasms of individual participants when they gave their required presentations. Historians lectured on history, geologists on geology, anthropologists on anthropology, artists on art. Our lone metallurgist spoke of metal. Joyce, a delightful librarian from Rochester and serious bird watcher, delivered a very funny and educational talk on Greek birds, in which she not only tied her topic to our course work by discussing the swallows on a Bronze Age fresco, but fixed the lammergeier (a *very* big bird) forever in our minds when she got two young men from the group to demonstrate its wingspan.

Almost all these talks were given at sites with some connection to the subjects—a pottery dump for a talk on pottery, a beach for a talk on sea trade and piracy, and even a tomb for a talk on burial customs. Those of us not speaking got to stretch out under the olive trees and take in the distant sea and mountains while we listened. There was always the smell of thyme and other aromatic plants, and a great many spring wildflowers were in bloom just then. Insects and birds and even the odd lizard regularly attended class,

and on more than one occasion bleating goats and sheep competed with a speaker. All this was very different from the usual classroom environment, but rather than distracting us, it added a timeless quality to our lessons. After all, this same flora and fauna prevailed in antiquity. As we headed for the Gorge of the Dead on Crete, a goat (who knew a good thing when he saw it) actually tried to get on the bus with us.

Crete was the starting point for our trip, and an excellent place to gain some understanding of the palaces, villages, artifacts, and cultural norms that existed in the Bronze Age. Almost every site we visited was spectacular, because all were situated on commanding heights of land for reasons of defense, and within easy reach of the sea for purposes of trade. Probably our most exhilarating adventure on Crete was a trip up a steep serpentine track to a ruined village called Kavousi, very high on a seaside mountain. We roared up in a small convoy of pickup trucks, ten or twelve people per truck, everyone singing and laughing and joking in adrenaline-charged terror. The site and its outlook were very nearly as exciting as getting there.

We had all read a lot about volcanoes, but none of it had prepared us for Santorini, our next stop. The towering cliffs of pumice and blast debris were far more terrifying than the charge up Kavousi, and awe-inspiring besides. A day-long tour of the caldera in a glass-bottomed boat gave us a very close look at the destructive and creative forces of the volcano, and we had an opportunity to climb up an actively smouldering volcanic island now forming, and to swim in a warm, sulphur-tainted bay. A walk through the ghostly ancient town of Akrotiri, destroyed in the Bronze Age by an enormous eruption, put these geological events into human terms. Everything was made more poignant when we toured the museum in Fira, where much of the exuberant artwork retrieved from the ruined city is displayed.

Our time on the mainland was fairly short, but we still managed to see Mycenae and Tiryns as well as the Acropolis of Athens, the Corinth Canal, and two very important museums. In fact, the whole trip was a miracle of compression, a great deal seen in three all-too short weeks. It says a lot for the tour's organizers and instructors that we managed a lot of very focused learning very easily, and in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere.

Besides our studies, we had opportunities for swimming, hiking, shopping and eating. Such is the nature of Greece, however, that recreational sites are

often juxtaposed with archeological ones. You just cannot avoid the past in Greece. It was a thrill to swim at Matala, Crete, where an ideal swimming bay is overhung by rock cliffs in which the openings to the many rock-cut tombs carved out in antiquity are clearly visible. We slept just feet from the wine-dark sea of Homer, walked on paths shared by ancient travelers, ate within sight of the Acropolis of Athens. Most of these meals were eaten out of doors, because that is the way of life there. It was not hard to adjust to eating out of doors at small tavernas, watching the sea, enjoying the sun, and smuggling scraps under the table to the ever-scrounging cats—always a great floor show.

In other show-biz news, the students from Adirondack College performed several selections from Classical Greek theatre to loud applause, but the closest we got to *locally* staged theatre was the (Greek) chorus of roosters who performed a pre-dawn song cycle at exactly four a.m. *right outside my window*. It would be sheer paranoia to think that the same party of roosters followed me around Crete, over to Santorini, and then around the mainland as well, but the tone, volume, and effect each morning was the same at every hotel, including the one in downtown Athens. Looked at positively, it was a nice bit of local colour, reminding me that roosters had undoubtedly been doing exactly the same thing in the Bronze Age agrarian society we had come to learn about. Learn about it we did, and we also had a great deal of fun besides. It really was the very best of times and, happily, the memories linger on.