

Greece Travelogue  
(October 4 - October 18, 2017)

Mirela Roznoveanu

The sky had a cerulean color I had seen only in my dreams. The air was clean and smooth, with no humidity at 80F and no pollution (there were not many cars on Greece's roads, as one liter of gasoline cost €1,49, or about \$1.75). Yet I felt a tremor, a sort of irrational awareness. I knew that the Greek land had always called for tragedy.

Wandering in Attica and Argolis Peninsula I had as companion and guide my cousin Stella from Thessaloniki, an art historian with a Ph.D from France in the 1980s and other accomplishments in this field. Our grandfathers, born in Livadia or Călivei (Northern Greece) into a Vlach family, were brothers separated by history's tribulations at the beginning of the 20th century. My grandfather felt he had been first *Armân*, Vlach, and secondly Greek. He sent his children to Romanian schools in Bitola and Livadia. The Greek nationalists punished him to such an extent for doing this that he decided to leave Greece in the 1920s. By contrast, his brother acknowledged he was Greek first. He didn't leave Greece, and while my grandfather lost everything he had in his exodus to Romania, his brother prospered in Thessaloniki. Stella's mother and my mother, first cousins, parted when they were three or four years old. We reconnected after almost one hundred years, as per the last wish of my mother. Greek after her father, a successful doctor in Thessaloniki, Stella doesn't know Vlach, or *Armâneashte*, and I don't know Greek. We talked in English, a sin for *Armân* people, whose national anthem is a curse on those who have forgotten their mother tongue.

## **Acropolis**

Looking from afar at the hill of the Acropolis, I've tried to summarize the ancient Greek frame of mind, in comparison with my travel experiences in India and China. If Asians' mind

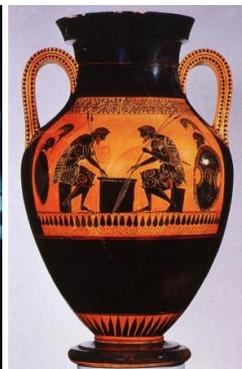
seemed trapped mostly in an adored past, the Greeks appeared inclined to work within the reality of their minds. The approach to and the understanding of reality, the concept of *what is real* and what is not, defined the ancient Greeks' art and philosophy. As historians of culture agree, Greek art started with pure geometric lines created by the artist's mind, *Geometric Art*, continued with *Archaic Art*, (divided into Early Bronze Age Cycladic Art (third millennium B.C.) and the Archaic Art of the 2nd millennium B.C.), as exemplified by the black-figure style of vase painting, between the geometric style and realism. The era of *Classical Art* (starting fifth century B.C.), the art of reality or mimesis that concluded with *Hellenistic art*, came next.



*Terracotta pyxis (box with lid)*



*Cycladic Art Museum, Athens*



*Ajax and Achilles Playing Dice*

In Book 7 of the *Republic*, Plato argued that only the idea, the thought coming from one's mind, is real, because what we see with our eyes is only the shadow of reality, not truth, but lie. The reality of the mind was for Plato the *real* reality; the real *real*, the ideal, it existed only as

pure forms, and lowest of all were "real" objects. Once created, the image of the *idea* — say, a temple, or a city — was waiting for future *artists* to copy.<sup>1</sup>

What if we go outside the cave we live in? I asked myself, ruminating on these thoughts. I once tried, and I saw myself in a sort of semidarkness, alone, unable to recognize anything around me. Scared, I reentered "the cave." In Plato's terms, it would be impossible to recognize our planet, as truly happened to me; we are born in the cave and are used to living in it, as slaves of shadows and lies. But can humans understand the world of ideas outside the cave? It seems that only philosophers and mathematicians could see it, a small part of it, because it is impossible for humans to live within theories.

The ancient Greeks loved geometry, harmony, rhythm, mathematics, and perfection — products of the mind. The stamp of this mind travelled through the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and modern eras of culture. I asked myself if there are remnants of that kind of mind in our genes. If today's civilization has been shaped through geometry, rhythm, mathematics, and love for harmony and perfection, it means we live in a world created by the human mind, and my city, New York City, could be considered the epitome of this kind of mind.

From roots belonging to ancient Greek words, we continue to name countless aspects of reality. How many remember that the word θεωρία, theory, for example, comes from θεός = God plus ώρα = hour or time ("time" in ancient Greek also meant φροντίδα - care)? *O* and *ω* were both pronounced the same as *o*; θεωρία/theory meant *something that was taken care of by God*.

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<sup>1</sup> Jakub Wujek, "Tradition and Innovation," in *Companion to Contemporary Architectural Thought*, ed. Ben Farmer and Hentie Louw (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 185: "Plato's division of the world into perfect ideas and their imperfect representation was taken up and developed by his great pupil, Aristotle. To the latter, form was what the idea had been for Plato. Aristotle considered it as the real counterpart of every concept. An artist's task was to extend the life of the form into the future. . . . Ancient vision of the world of art was based upon the hierarchy of values: a graded order defining with mathematical precision the different levels of meaning."

In speech, the pronunciation was the same as saying *I see God*. The word *idiot* derived from the Greek *ιδιώτης*, *idiōtēs* meaning working only for himself, a selfish person. For ancient Greeks, a true citizen had to work together with others and for others; the selfish one was an *idiot*. Another precious word for all of us, *idea* comes from *ιδειν* (*idin*), the past infinitive of the verb *εἶδα* (*ida*), meaning *to see*. It is an abstract *see*, related to the world of the mind.

Crossing the Roman Agora while going up the hill, the old city of Athens opened its beauty. Lord Byron's house was nearby. My heart throbbed at a normal pace. This was supposed to be my first trip out of New York with my mother more than twenty years ago. When she went on a respirator our plans were ruined. I postponed visiting the south of Greece until the thought that what had happened to my mother could happen to me made me jump on the first available flight to Athens, where all my health problems mysteriously vanished.

Passing through the gate -- Propylaea -- a vortex of light engulfed all beings confined within the wall of the Acropolis, 760 meters long, up to 10 meters high and ranging in width from 3.5 to 6 meters. The powerfully dazzling bright light, reflected by the white marble of the temples and the translucent stones of the ground, polished by millions of soles, blinded me at first. Stella, also blinded, slipped and broke one of her toes. She heroically continued the journey on the Acropolis and over the next days with a numbness surely produced by her mind.

Something I considered a metaphor as material here. The glaring blue of the sky and the white flashes of marble were creating a magic vortex in which all beings moved graciously. A healing light: in that small space of a few temples on the top of the hill I drank light, I was taken over by light, I became light. The joy of being there was overwhelming. Light had become the key to understanding myself and everything else. Didn't Genesis start with light? And doesn't the light play a dramatic role in the Gospel of John too?

Indeed, one must be there to understand how the game of light creates pure forms of the mind. One of them is geometry. Not only on the Acropolis, but in the whole of Attica, bounded on the east by the Aegean Sea and on the west by the Saronic Gulf, all temples play openly with brightness, shades, and angles. From a distance, each column looked straight. But up close, the columns tilted, creating a sort of mirage. It is said that today's architects have calculated the point where the tilted columns of the Parthenon virtually meet, and that point is half the distance between the Earth and the Sun. Why the tilting? The ancient architects didn't want the temples' columns to look colossal; the tilting effect gave them the mirage of a humanly perfect shape.



The shafts, the main part of the columns, are fluted and indented. The movement of the Sun across the sky gives the columns' concavities different shadows depending on the hour of the day. The ancient architects planned the concavity of the indentations in such way that the

tilting mirage could be improved. The concave flutes came together in razor-sharp edges. There is a relation of inversion between the convexity of the round shaft and the concavity of the channels embedded in it.<sup>2</sup> In the Aegean something, the game of sunlight, blue sky, and marble gave birth to one of the oldest forms of art –geometrical art.



The Parthenon's roof, made of thin, translucent marble through which the light came inside, creating other geometric mirages, vanished long ago. In the Athena Nike, the Goddess of Victory temple built around 420 B.C. – I discovered another mirage game: the one of mortals with the divine.

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<sup>2</sup> Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, *Classical Architecture: The Poetics of Order* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986).



The Goddess of Victory on the Acropolis, contrary to the Nike of Samothrace, was carved without wings because the Athenians didn't want her ever to leave Athens! The ancient Greeks used to play tricks on immortals; they even competed with them! Remember how Arachne defied Goddess Athena and Marsyas challenged Apollo! No doubt, the courageous were punished; Tartarus was filled with mortals who had outsmarted gods. But the ancient Greeks did not stop thinking that pain and happiness were in the end shared by all, humans and gods.

Dedicated to Athena and Poseidon, the Erechtheion (421-413 B.C.) is right across from the Parthenon. Why is it devoted to both gods? To appease Poseidon's fury after he lost the competition for the patronage of Athens. The Athenians preferred Goddess Athena, who gave them the olive tree, and rejected Poseidon, who produced wells (for a city suffering from the absence of potable water!) unfortunately filled with salty water. The Caryatids, marble statues of young women, uphold the south porch of the temple. The ones on display on the Acropolis are

copies of the originals stored in the Acropolis Museum. The degradation of the marble in the past fifty years was so dramatic that they had to be removed for reasons of preservation; twenty-five centuries were not as harsh on the Erechtheion's ladies as the past fifty years of pollution.



*Erechtheion, Caryatid replicas*

### **Archaic Agora (ΑΡΧΑΙΑ ΑΓΟΡΑ) and Cape Sounio**

The large square on the northwest slant of the Acropolis had been the very heart of the ancient city, and of Athenian democracy. Administrative, judicial, political, social and religious activities, commerce, theatrical performances, and athletic contests took place in the Archaic Agora. The important roads ended here too (the Piraeus street, the Areopagus street, etc.). Destroyed by Persians (480 B.C.), Romans (86 B.C.), Herulians (267 A.D.), and Slavs (580 A.D.), the Archaic Agora is still full of surprises. To the south and to the west, it is bounded by Areopagus and Kolonos Agoraios hills. Athens's oldest judicial court, the sanctuary of the *Semnai* (the vengeful ones) and of the *Eumenides* (the kindly ones), are on the Areopagus. On Kolonos Agoraios was erected a colossal temple dedicated to Hephaistos. Not too far away from

this Agora, the *Roman Agora* was built during the Roman occupation, less impressive and a kind of testimony to the difference between civilizations.

The Hephaistos temple is one of the best preserved from Greek antiquity. The light is at work here, superbly doing its job. The Acropolis and the city could be seen in a grand landscape from the temple guarding its surroundings. Not too far away, the reconstructed *Stoa* (covered walkway or portico, a place for meetings and for trade), built by King Attalos II of Pergamon in the 2nd century B.C., hosts the *Museum of the Athenian Agora*. The most important objects in the Museum are related to the way Athenian democracy worked: public measures written on clay tablets, official bronze weights, a marble ballot box, jurors' ballots, a clay *clepsydra* (water clock) for timing speeches, *ostraca* or engraved pottery with names of ancient politicians banished from the city, inscriptions about Demos and Democracy with decrees of the Assembly of the Deme against tyranny.



*Acropolis seen from the Ancient Agora*

Outside the museum, in an olive orchard, a small inscription points towards the house where Saint Paul lived when visiting Athens; he also taught in the Agora. Around that perimeter there was an alley, the favorite walking place of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. They came here to exchange ideas and find new disciples. Wandering on that path, I asked myself how challenging it must have been for Saint Paul (Saul of Tarsus) to reason with the disciples of the most famous philosophers of the land. Perhaps not too difficult. Before converting to Christianity, Saint Paul had studied the Hebrew Scriptures in the city of Jerusalem with renowned Rabbi Gamaliel, who trained his mind to become a powerful tool of eloquence and interpretation, a tool he used before his conversion to destroy Christians! On Mars Hill (the Areopagus), the meeting place of the aristocratic council of ancient Athens, Paul was asked many questions before he delivered his memorable address to the "men of Athens" (Acts 17:19), and there I heard as in a dream: "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?"



Diogenes Laertius wrote that when Socrates met with pupils too young to enter the Agora, he would see them near the square of Simon the Cobbler.



Light on the ancient Agora

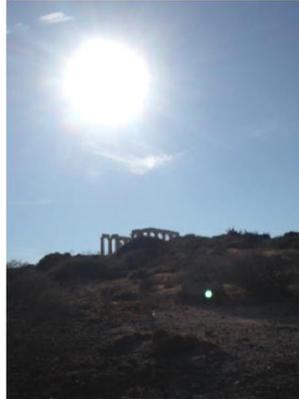


*Light in front of the temple of Hephaistos*



*Cape Sounio*

*Cape Sounio(n)* (43 miles south-southeast, about one hour from Athens) had been the strategic military point of Athens from time immemorial. Theseus (with two fathers, the mortal Aegeus and the god Poseidon) left for Crete from Cape Sounio. He killed the Minotaur in Crete and, coming back home, forgot to change the black veil of the ship to the white one (Tristan did the same!). Convinced that his son had died, King Aegeus jumped off the cliff, more than 200 feet down into the sea that took his name: the Aegean Sea. Built on a wild promontory in 444 B.C., around the same time as the Parthenon, Poseidon's temple is one of the most majestic in Attica. The pillars of the temple dominate the rocky ridge of Cape Sounio. The view is breathtaking; the temple is facing the Aegean Sea and the Cyclades. Incredibly powerful sunlight and strong winds shower the marble. The Sun's dance (an element of the architectural ensemble) with the columns is a daily performance in an eternal play.



## **The Cycladic Civilization**

Once in Hydra (a little island two hour away from the Port of Piraeus), I became truly convinced that the light here, in the Cyclades, gave birth to geometry.



But the most interesting finding came from a little statue in a shop window that reminded me of the *Hamangia Thinker*, belonging to the Late Neolithic Hamangia culture (c. 5250–4550 B.C.) from Dobruja (Romania). The little statue in Hydra was a replica of a statuette made about 2800–2300 B.C during the Cycladic civilization (around 5,000 B.C.); the Cyclades were first inhabited by settlers from Asia Minor and lasted from 3,200 B.C. to 1,100 B.C.). The original belongs today to the Collection of Cycladic Antiquities of the National Archaeological Museum of Athens. I didn't know anything about this world, but I soon learned that during the fourth and third millennia B.C. Cycladians were renowned navigators and traders.



*Hamangia's Thinker* (5250–4550 BC)



*Cycladic Thinker* (2800–2300 B.C)



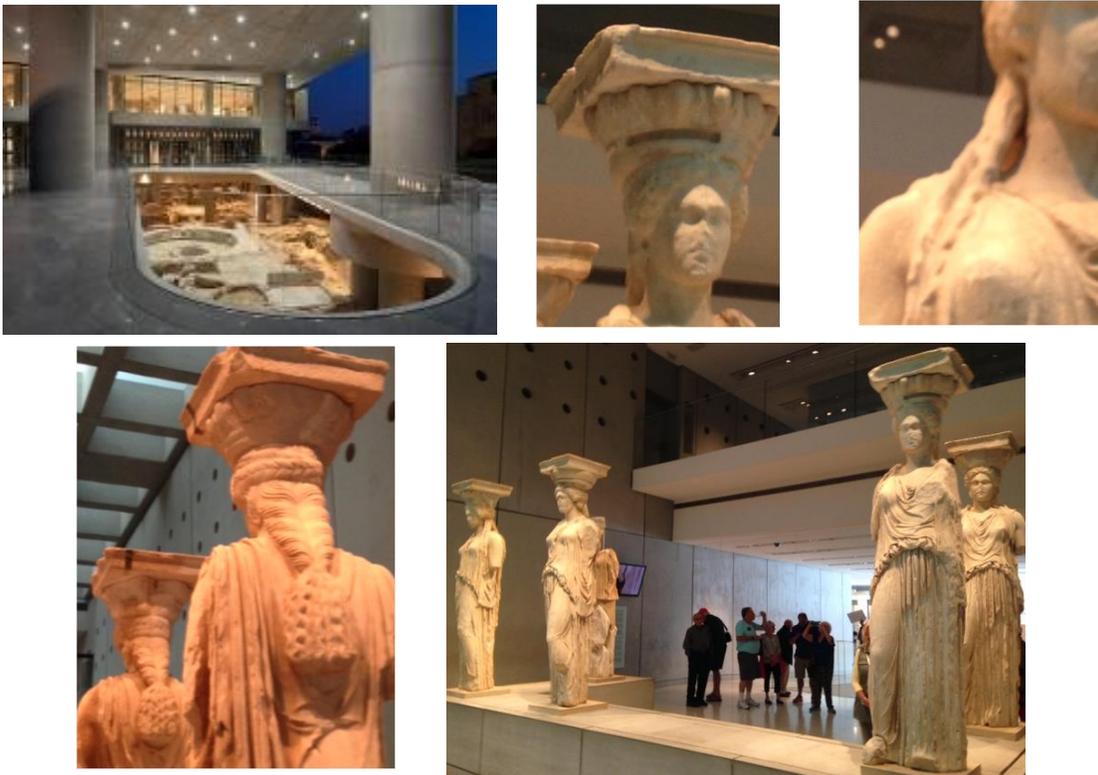
The height of both statuettes – that belonging to Hamangia and the one in my possession, a copy of the real one -- is 113 mm, or 4.44882 inches. Could this be just a coincidence? If the flood happened, according to Hebrew chronology, about 3000 B.C., and according to the Greeks' around 4000 B.C., I see no reason why we must reject the idea of a relationship between the Cycladic and the Hamangia worlds. Hamangia culture flourished from 5250 – 4550 B.C. and the Cycladic from 5,000 – 1,100 B.C. Were the two cultures possibly connected before the flood in 4000 B.C.? During my visit to Armenia, I realized that Ararat, the mountaintop where Noah's Ark landed according to the Biblical story, is not too far from the Black Sea. The imposing Ararat could be a symbol of landing and safety for all populations of the region. If we look at the map, we can see how close the Aegean and the Black Sea areas (the former land covered by the flood) are. I am not a historian or an archaeologist, but I think the ties between Hamangia and the Cycladic civilizations should be further explored.



### **The Acropolis Museum**

A movie running continuously documents acts of destruction from the Christians in the early centuries A.D. to the barbarian invasions after the 3rd century A.D., the Ottoman occupation,

and to modern visitors hungry for money. Today, the Parthenon Marbles (friezes), also known as the Elgin Marbles, represent half of the surviving statues that once decorated the exterior of the Parthenon. Between 1801 and 1803, Thomas Bruce, Lord Elgin and the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire removed and sent them to London, where they were acquired by the British Museum. In modern times, Greece has fought for the Marbles' return on the grounds that they were never legally obtained. The British Museum has denied this accusation and has advocated for the sculptures to remain in its possession.



*Original Caryatids, Acropolis Museum*

The Acropolis Museum owns only two or three original friezes. All the others displayed here are copies of the originals or copies of copies. The *Parthenon friezes* (1 meter-high and 160 meters long), the high-relief Pentelic marble sculptures that adorned the upper part of the

Parthenon, were carved between 443 and 438 B.C. under the direction of Phidias. The meanings of this huge continuous sculpture have been interpreted differently over time. A contemporary reading saw in it the terrible myth<sup>3</sup> of the foundation of the city, the sacrifice of daughters!

That day, Stella and I had lunch on the top-floor cafeteria of the museum, facing the Acropolis. The discussion turned to Athenian democracy and democracy today, a topic of conversation that continued over the following days. To eat a hamburger while contemplating the Acropolis . . . well, this is something unusual! However, the wind browsing the open cafeteria couldn't cool the heat of the conversation.



Stella praised the 2,500-year-old Athenian democracy and turned vitriolic remarks on American democracy. Moreover, what happened to Greece recently, she said, was not Greece's fault but Troika's (the European Commission, the European Central Bank, and the International Monetary Fund) and Germany's greed fault. I stayed quiet in front of the Acropolis. As it has happened many times in my life, when I am challenged verbally or physically I cannot react immediately. I am still not sure if this is out of politeness or a mental handicap.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/07/04/science/new-analysis-of-the-parthenon-s-frieze-finds-it-depicts-a-horrifying-legend.html?pagewanted=all>

## Delphi

I asked Pythia this question over the next day in Delphi and got no answer. The town on the slopes of Mount Parnassus in the southern Greece, the site of the Temple of Apollo with its centerpiece the legendary oracle Pythia, allowed me only a glimpse of the Gulf of Corinth. Close to the temple of Apollo, the son of Zeus and Leto, rests the Omphalos, the center of the world. It is cool to be in the center of the world, a world of ideas coming to us in unique, inimitable, and stunning forms.



*The Omphalos*



*Temple of Apollo*

Delphi's name comes from "dolphin:" Apollo took the form of a dolphin to escape from Crete. The shrine shines at the bottom of majestic Parnassus, the place of poetry and the home of Apollo and of the nine Muses. The epitome of glory, the emblem of literature and the arts! The mighty dream of any writer is to enter the "Parnassus Republic of Letters." In time, the Parnassus Allegory of seventeenth-century France had created a transcendental, idealistic place of poetry and political contests.



A poet who enters Parnassus loses his or her mind. I lost mine on the spot, climbing a steep hill to the top on a hot day of October. Looking back, the mountain forests all around bullied my imagination. The Muses were there, I didn't want to leave, and I promised

myself to come back and sleep a few nights on those slopes. Oedipus was raised by a family in nearby Livadia (Livadeia). On his way to Thebes (thirty miles away), Oedipus met the Sphinx. Somewhere around here Oedipus killed the Sphinx. Antigone was also here. They all were with



me, alive; it was impossible to depart from them. And then I met the friend of my teenage years, Plutarch, who lived as a priest in Delphi, a place revered from 1500 B.C. on. His statue, at the entrance to the first exhibition room of the Delphi Archaeological Museum, assured me that what I saw on my way here was the real *real*. I imagined Plutarch walking every day

through the Sacred Alley toward Pythia's sanctuary, the portal to the unknown energies of the universe. On his way, he passed by the impressive buildings of treasuries built by Greek city-states to thank the oracle for advice. These buildings were as rich as any bank today: the Athenian Treasury honored the Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C.; the Siphnian Treasury was erected by the city of Siphnos; those of the Sikyonians, the Boeotians, the treasury of Argos, and that of the Thebans stayed side by side. Legend has it that Pericles used a money scheme that helped him fulfill his architectural projects. First, he took over the treasury of the *Delian League*,

funded in Delos by the Greek city-states allied against the Persians, and moved it to Athens. After that, he “borrowed” a lot of money from the League’s fund and from Delphi treasuries and never repaid it. I made a smiling comment about Pericles “What if my present President were to do the same?” I asked loudly. “Wouldn’t you label him a dictator?” I was out of line; in Delphi nobody could ask these questions. Plutarch giggled and asked me to stop. “Double standards are normal,” he said, “and don’t forget that in 2,500 years any tyrant becomes a deity!”

## Corinth



The Corinth Canal links the Gulf of Corinth with the Saronic Gulf in the Aegean Sea through the Isthmus (which separates the Peloponnese from the Greek mainland), making the peninsula an island. In ancient times, when the actual canal didn’t exist, the ships

were pulled with ropes over the land from one side to another. I wondered how Emperor Constantine of the Eastern Roman Empire didn’t remember this story by the time he built the giant chain under the water of the Golden Horn that connected Constantinople to the sea! But his rival, Mehmed the Conqueror, did: he used this ancient technique when he took over Constantinople on May 29, 1453.

On the way to Mycenae, the Thirasian Plain and the town of Eleusis beckoned us to plummet deeper into legend. Eleven miles from Athens, at the northern end of the Saronic Gulf, appeared Eleusis, the place where Demeter and Persephone were honored through fertility rituals in ancient times. Historians recorded that the initiates of the Eleusinian Mysteries were forbidden by Athenian law, on penalty of death, from revealing the secrets of the Mysteries. There are many versions of the story of how the Eleusinian Mysteries came to an end. One of them, Stella summarized, suggested that the Council of Athens, worried about what went on inside the *Hall of Mysteries* during festivities, sent to the sanctuary of *Eleusis* a group of young men disguised as girls. They were supposed to report afterwards. Unfortunately, all of them were exposed and killed except one. Without a doubt, what the surviving one reported was so disturbing (women in trance killing male children, tearing them with their teeth, etc.) that a decree ended the very existence of the *Mysteries*.

## **Epidaurus**



The ancient theater, famous for its perfect acoustics, escaped the ravages of history and came to us almost intact, being even today a place for exquisite performances. Down in the middle of the “stage” is a marble stone. One’s whisper there is heard by those in the most remote corners of the amphitheater. The marble stone is also the place for asking gods in a loud voice to fulfill wishes. While there, I heard a girl summoning the ancient gods to bring peace on the planet; another one to help Earth by cleaning up pollution. I did my part, but I will not disclose my requests. Close to the amphitheater is the Sanctuary of Asclepius, the god of medicine. To place the hospital near the amphitheater was not a random decision. One of Asclepius’s therapeutic methods had been theatrical performance; his practice took note that the sick who performed in the theater got better faster!

### **Arcadia’s Brothel**

The Arcadian ideal traveled steady through time to the modern world. During the European Renaissance, Arcadia was celebrated as a pristine, harmonious wilderness and the place of platonic love. Pastoral literature was set here. Pan, the god of the wild, good-looking shepherds, and flocks of sheep tended by divine maidens heated the imagination in French, Spanish and Italian pastoral novels. The untouched nature of remote mountains, hunting and rustic music, love and songs in the company of nymphs were described incessantly. Who doesn’t know Nicolas Poussin’s famous painting (1637–1638) *Et in Arcadia ego*, its beautiful pastoral landscape populated by nymphs and shepherds?

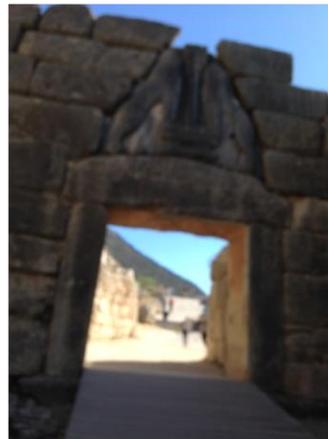
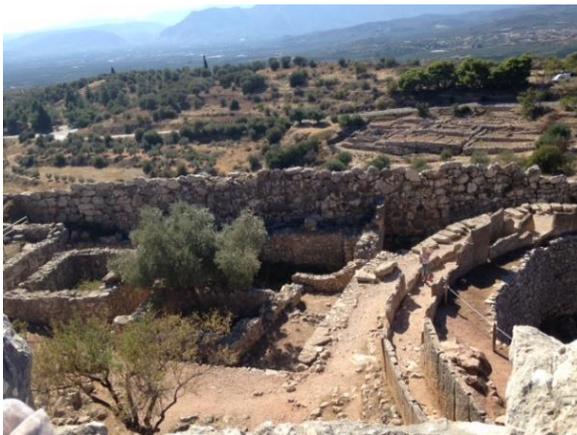


Arcadia (the highlands of the center of the Peloponnese), has been in ancient times the center of Pan's cult on Mount Maenalus, while the cult of Aphrodite was celebrated on *Acrocorinth* (High Corinth), the acropolis of ancient Corinth, a monolithic rock overseeing the ancient city. It was said that this temple of Aphrodite was once so rich that it had more than one thousand vestals practicing ritual prostitution. Why here? Looking at the bigger picture, the reason becomes obvious. The temple of the goddess of love atop the *Acrocorinth* had been the dream of all sailors in the region. To be surrounded by hundreds of women, to have sex with them after the lust of one's heart and not feel guilty, as everything was dedicated to the goddess, was a heavenly reward after months at sea. I think that *Et in Arcadia ego* meant, in the slang of ancient times, something like, "I too went to the brothel in Arcadia." For sure, it was one of the reasons Saint Paul lectured the Corinthians so harshly. What went on atop *Acrocorinth* in the temple of Aphrodite couldn't have been foreign to him. His letters debated, among other topics, moral disorders such as incest and religious prostitution. No wonder he spent a year in Corinth. Tired, perhaps, of beating the drum to deaf sheep, he left for Ephesus from the nearby Port Kehries.

## Mycenae

The Mycenaeans wrote in *Linear B*, the earliest attested form of Greek language, older than that of the Homeric texts. According to the Linear B texts deciphered in 1952 by Michael Ventris and John Chadwick, the Mycenaeans were the first to believe in the Olympian Gods. Nevertheless, the overwhelming bulk of Linear B does not contain poetry or legends, but administrative transcripts providing information about palace hierarchy, inventories, taxes, trade and manufactured goods.

Wandering through the ruins, the fragrance of the sweet October grapes of the Peloponnese I had for lunch didn't diminish the smell of blood. Inside the palace, with walls built on the edges of precipices, surrounded by ridges, enormous blocks of stone, and rare vegetation, I felt that the tragedies that happened here were normal. The fierce landscape called for ferocious acts.



*The Lions' Gate*

Among the wild ruins, the sea at the horizon, I imagined poor Menelaus, King of Sparta, climbing the steep hill to the palace of his brother Agamemnon! It surely had not been a pleasant journey. He came here to ask for help against the Trojans, only to dig the grave of his brother's family. We learn from the *Iliad* and from Aeschylus's *Oresteia* that Agamemnon, to get his fleet

sailing off to war, had to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to appease the fury of goddess Artemis. Clytemnestra killed her husband, Agamemnon, a hero of the Trojan war, with the help of her lover Aegisthus, to avenge the death of her daughter. Further on, Orestes killed his mother Clytemnestra for the killing of his father. Only the graves traveled through time from the extinct house of Atreus. In the vicinity, the so-called tomb of Agamemnon, discovered by Heinrich Schliemann, unveiled fabulous treasures, today in Athens's National Archaeological Museum.



*“Agamemnon’s tomb”*

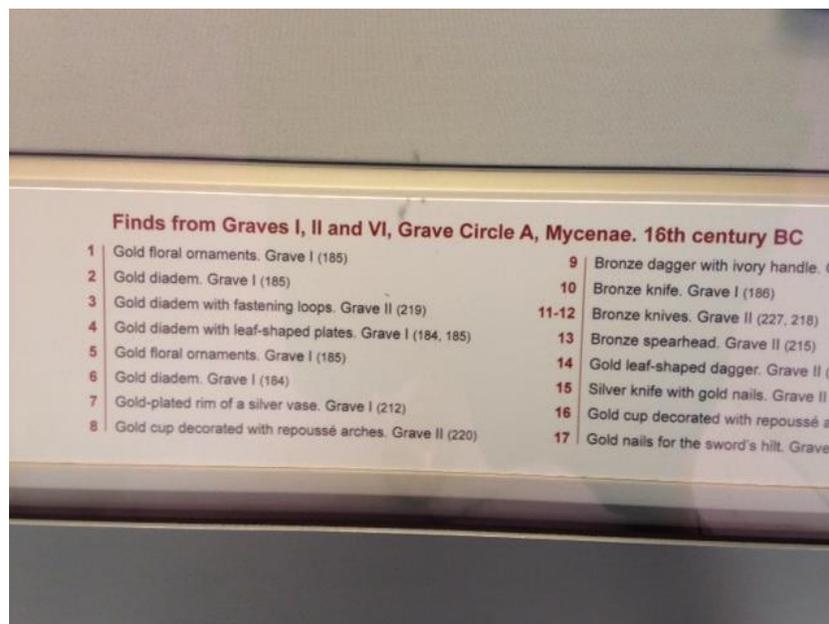
### **The National Archaeological Museum, Athens**

This museum gathers the Prehistoric Collection (Neolithic, Cycladic, Mycenaean), the Mycenaean art collection, Heinrich Schliemann’s discovery of the grave he believed was

Agamemnon's, and the "mask of Agamemnon" (actually 200 to 400 years older than King Agamemnon), etc.



*Gold death mask known as "the mask of Agamemnon" Gold diadems, belts and cult artifacts*



In the *Sculptures Collection*, two things shocked my eyes. The first one was *the smile* on the statues' faces, a subtle, enigmatic smile, like nothing real. That smile reminded me of Shiva's face in the Elephanta Cave Temple, in Mumbai, something Joseph Campbell defined as

the smile of eternity.<sup>4</sup> I saw that smile in person; I went to Mumbai after watching Bill Moyers's<sup>5</sup> PBS interview in which Campbell said those words (an interview PBS reran by the time I went to India in 2000 with my colleague and friend, poet Aurora Cornu).



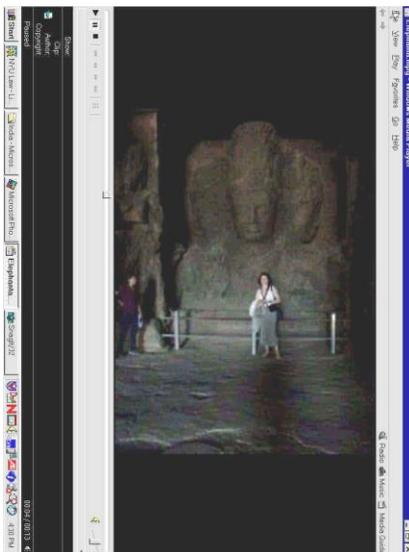
*The statue of Shiva with many faces.  
The calm “great lord,” central figure.*



*Greece Archaic Period*



*Mona Lisa*



*In front of Shiva at Elephanta Caves*

<sup>4</sup> *Asia and Oceania: International Dictionary of Historic Places*, vol. 5, ed. Trudy Ring, Noelle Watson, and Paul Schellinger (Abingdon, UK, and New York: Routledge, 1996), 254. “As Joseph Campbell describes it in *The Way of the Animal Powers*, “the presence in the center is the mask of Eternity, the ever-creating mysterium . . .”

<sup>5</sup> *The Power of Myth* <http://billmoyers.com/content/ep-1-joseph-campbell-and-the-power-of-myth-the-hero%E2%80%99s-adventure-audio/>

If Shiva's smile is unique in the Hindu world, in the Archaic Period of ancient Greece (600 B.C. to 480 B.C.) almost every sculpture displayed that smile, known today as "the archaic smile." The corners of the mouth with an upward turn were present on almost every face of ancient Greek statues. The raised corners of the mouth gave a sense of serenity and eternity—the same look we see on the *Mona Lisa*'s face, a smile I am sure Leonardo da Vinci translated from ancient Greek sculptures to the painting. From my point of view, Leonardo struggled to slide onto the canvas something he had seen in reality!<sup>6</sup> He didn't go to Greece; ancient Greek sculptures came to Rome. The Roman taste for Greek and Hellenistic sculpture has been noted by historians of art. We know that after conquering Greece, the Romans transported marble statues to Rome and that many copies of the Roman period, marble versions of ancient Greek art pieces, were around in Leonardo's time.

The second surprise came from *Athena's toes*. Almost all ancient sculptures displayed the second toe longer than the first one, and Athena's was so obvious that I cried out of excitement. My entire life I have felt embarrassed by having a second toe longer than the first. No open-toe sandals, banned from wearing them by my mother! To my amazement, cousin Stella said that this is normal for Greek people. Should I, then, consider myself Greek? Am I Vlach and Greek from my mom's side? Did my Vlach ancestors mate with Greeks? - I rhetorically asked. Stella didn't agree. For her Vlachs were wandering Greeks who had lost their way. Another topic of divergence between us. However, the never-ending topic of democracy, its eras, its real features, heated up in the National Museum of Archaeology. Could it be that the gold masks of Mycenae wanted to say something I couldn't hear? Stella's vitriolic monologue on America's

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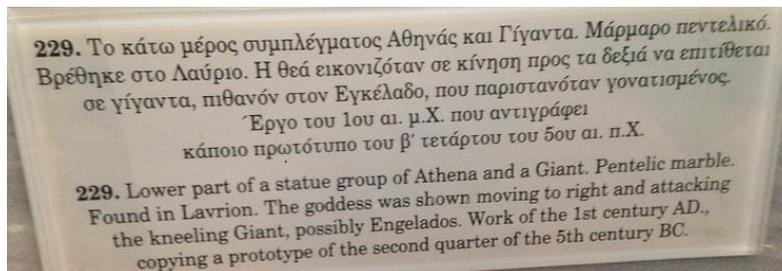
<sup>6</sup> Walter Isaacson, "The Science behind Mona Lisa's Smile: How Leonardo da Vinci engineered the world's most famous painting," *The Atlantic*, November 2017, 51–58.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/11/leonardo-da-vinci-mona-lisa-smile/540636/>

failed educational system, its tyranny over the world, Wall Street, her belief that one could see better what's going on from the outside than from inside, brought my disappointment to a climax. I exploded.



*Athena's toe*



“Why do you hate America?”

To tell the truth, I was annoyed that Stella smoked about two packs a day, it was hard to breathe around her and she just talked, like the rest of Greece. No action of any kind.

“I don't hate America,” she said surprised. “I hate money that discriminates against education.” I was astonished as she had paid a fortune for her daughter's education in a country where education is free!

“A smart American kid doesn't have to pay; the state will pay for bright kids.”

“This is discrimination against the less intelligent!”

“A kid doesn't need top test scores to make it to community colleges,” I said.

She was not convinced. Furthermore, she was upset that America didn't take in more refugees from Syria and the Middle East in general. I argued that perhaps this was not possible.

“You are a Nazi,” she concluded loudly; she stopped walking and pointed her finger at me.

“If I am a Nazi, you are a bloody capitalist!” I said in the same tone, a reference to how rich she was. “You repeat what you hear in left-wing journals. I went through a Communist genocide. I have nothing except my retirement money. How could a person who experienced genocide, and worked hard to survive in exile become a Nazi? And how dare you tell me how it is in the country I live in when you haven’t worked a day there? What if I tell you what Americans think about Greece? Would that cliché be the truth?”

“You don’t care about Greece’s sufferings!!”

I signed every petition she had sent me in the past year; I wrote emails to CNN, Fox, etc. about the realities in Greece, and I convinced my friends of the real reasons for Greece’s debt. But it wasn’t enough for Stella.

“Did you care for me and other Romanians under Ceausescu when I had no food on the table or heating in winter? Did you care that in only one winter about 35,000 old people died in one borough of Bucharest because the ambulances didn’t come for people older than sixty?”

We walked more than fifteen miles that day. Stella accused me of saying the opposite sometimes, and I replied that reality is not black-and-white but a myriad of nuances. I felt bad for her and for Greece. She defended the last dream of her country: democracy. And, as we headed back to the Acropolis, I made a plea for peace while in the Ancient Agora, where the exchanging of ideas has been the only way to discern the truth. We were in Plato’s, Socrates’s and Aristotle’s courtyard. And I said that we had to discuss our differences and perceptions, while thinking with our heads. Hate didn’t prove anything and didn’t bring any good. And strangely, Stella stayed quiet for the next ten miles. On the last morning in Athens, before going to the airport, I emphasized that she was my precious cousin with whom I share a huge past, that of the family and clan we belong to and, in addition, we shared travels and meaningful conversations. Once in New York, I had to accept that she didn’t want to give up on any piece of her truth. Even though she lived in the land of ancient philosophers who created Greek democracy through polemic and dialogue, she didn’t accept that absolute truth did not exist— most precious, perhaps being our path together toward it.

We exchanged a few messages afterwards, but soon Stella fell silent. I am afraid that the tragic split that divided the family 100 years ago will relapse. If my aunt, in her late nineties,

dies, the thread on which I returned to the other side of the family will vanish forever. But I still hope.

New York, November 2017