



*John Bennet describes the Treasury of Minyas at Orchomenos*



*John Bennet awaits the BSA group at the entrance to the acropolis at Gla*



*Mike Edwards with the BSA group between the mountains and the sea at Thermopylae*

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## TOURING IN THE TIME OF COVID

*Paul Watkins remembers last autumn's BSA tour of Central Greece*

*A king sate on the rocky brow  
Which looks o'er sea-born Salamis:  
And ships, by thousands, lay below,  
And men in nations; – all were his!  
He counted them at break of day –  
And when the sun set where were  
they?*

The view of the ancient sea battle of **Salamis** (480 BC) from the 'Throne of Zeus' (Mount Aigaleo), celebrated so succinctly by Lord Byron, was shared by guests of the British School at Athens during their tour of central Greece last September. After quoting the words of the enraptured poet, the tour's guide lecturer Professor Mike Edwards (Royal Holloway) went on to delineate the geography of the battle, which had been – with the ensuing land battle of Plataea –

so decisive in the expulsion of the Persians from Greece.

The sense of history was reinforced by the absence of signage, walkways and tourist pavilion of the kind that nowadays can be appreciated at most of Greece's ancient sites. Instead we were treated to a chaotic, rubble-strewn mound with some remnants of rusty fencing and a view that – on a thankfully clear day – included the strait between Salamis island and the mainland. This was where the Persian fleet had appeared on the fateful day, the arena for the ensuing battle. We could also pick out the promontory that had concealed the ambush fleet of Greek triremes; the island speculatively identified as Psytaleia, captured from the Persians towards the end of the battle, and the 'dog's

tail' peninsula of Kynosoura that extended the island into the strait.

It was from Kynosoura, reached by ferry from the mainland, that we could envisage the Greek view of the battle, which would have been both enthralling and encouraging as the hoplite-loaded triremes – heavier than the Persian vessels – rammed and fought their way to victory.

Preceding Salamis by a few days, the epic battle of **Thermopylae** had taken place in the area of Malis to the north. In a narrow defile between mountains and sea, the allied Greek states (a force of some 7,000) had been matched against an insuperable (seven figure?) army of Persians, led by their king Xerxes. Even with these odds the fearless Leonidas, in the vanguard with his 300 Spartans, might have carried the

day had it not been for the betrayal of Ephialtes, who informed of the flanking Asopean path to the Greek rear successfully taken by the elite Persian 'Immortals'. The subsequent annihilation of the Greeks created the legend whose markers, ancient and modern, could be visited by those of us brave enough to cross and re-cross the national road which now carves through the site.

To the south of the road we ascended the low hill (Kolonos) which marked the last stand – and last resting place – of the Spartans, identified by the thousands of Persian arrow heads found at the site. The inscribed stone at the top (see illustration) has been variously interpreted. On the opposite side of the road, near the 1955 memorial to Leonidas and the Three Hundred, we visited the museum and small cinema where we were treated to an animated film of the battle, enhanced by 3D specs, which put the audience at the receiving end of lethal sword thrusts and flying arrows.

As the armies clashed, breast-plated Spartans feverishly slashed at pyjama-clad Persians. But what the film gained in bravura it lacked, our perplexed historian informed us, in detail. Where, for example, was the Phocian Wall, which had acted as a last line of defence for the Spartans?

## Persian defeat

The victory of the Persians at Thermopylae was later reversed by Salamis and (the following year) by **Plataea**. The last-named land battle had an almost theatrical setting at the foot of Mount Kithairon, on the plateau-like pass that connected the city of Plataea with its greatest ally, Athens. In 479 the surrounding plain was the scene of the final decisive battle of the Persian Wars when the Plataeans joined forces with Sparta and Athens and other allied city-states to rout the Persians. In future years the alliance between Athens and Plataea provoked the enmity of nearby Thebes, which twice destroyed its smaller neighbour (427 & 373 BC). Refounded after the suppression of Thebes by Philip II, the city was later refortified by Justinian.

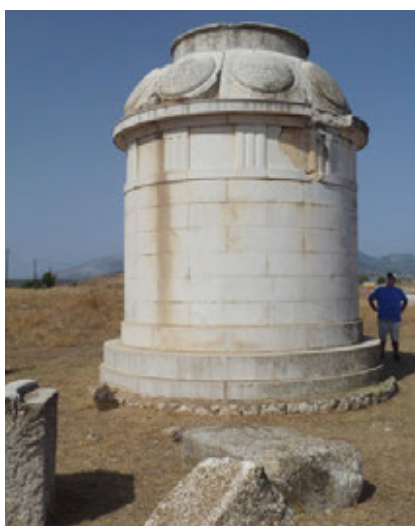


*Above: The inscription at Thermopylae which roughly translates: 'Go tell the Spartans, passer-by, that here obedient to their laws we lie'*

*Middle: Monument (Tropaion) at Leuctra*

*Below: Chaeronea Lion*

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After Plataea it would be 140 years before the next major invasion from the north, this one successful. Fellow Greeks from Macedonia, led by Philip II and his son Alexander, defeated a coalition of Athens, Thebes and other city-states at **Chaeronea** in 338 BC, imposing a Macedonian hegemony on Greece and – through the feats of Alexander the Great – on the rest of the Middle East.

The battle site, about a mile east of the ancient city (itself surviving today in vestigial walls and a small theatre) lies on a fertile plain which is part of the open passage running south of Thermopylae to Athens: our own viewpoint was from a bridge straddling the Athens-Thessaloniki rail line. A picnic lunch at the foot of the Lion Monument, raised by the defeated Thebans on the burial place of their Sacred Band, seemed almost profane.

The Thebans' own hegemony had already passed, thirty years previously, after the death of their leader Epaminondas. The great Theban general had achieved supremacy over the Greek states as a result of his crushing defeat of the Spartans at **Leuctra** (371 BC). The stone monument to the battle (*Tropaion*) on the vast plain south of Thebes, erected by the Thebans and restored to the site, is something of an oddity, a circular plinth on a pedestal supporting nine hoplite shields which may have been a base for a bronze warrior figure.

In addition to the events of the 5th and 4th centuries BC, the tour covered the earlier ground of the Neolithic and Bronze Ages. At **Orchomenos** we admired the majestic ruin of the Mycenaean tholos tomb, the 'Treasury of Minyas', built to enhance the city's status in the eyes of her rival, Thebes. At nearby Gla, once an island stronghold in the now drained and fertile Lake Copais, we hiked across the fortified stronghold to the prehistoric megaron, perched on its spur overlooking a panorama of green fields. The group was fortunate to have the guidance of Professor John Bennet, Director of the British School at Athens, at these two sites.

The invisibility of **Dimini**, a Neolithic and Bronze Age site near Volos, was such as to defy not only 'Satnav'

but the combined navigational technology of our mobile phones: in the end it was a phone call to the site – followed by a motorcycle escort, that saved the day.

## A challenge for travellers

The eight-day tour, postponed three times, was carried out against the background of resurgent Covid-19. Although it had started out well in March 2020 with a full lockdown and stringent restrictions on movement, Greece's situation by the following year was no better than that of other European countries, with rising caseloads concentrated in urban areas and some islands. After the ending of the lockdown in May 2021, anxiety about how the pandemic would affect the forthcoming tourist season was rife in the hospitality sector. The reopening of hotels in June was high-risk, given the hesitation among travellers brought on by fear of contracting the virus in transit and on location. Shortage of cash, resulting from the economic hardship of lockdown, was another factor. But with 20% of Greek GDP dependent on tourism, the die was inevitably cast.

The protocols of Covid tests and passenger locator forms were still in place in September, with a doctor in attendance at the hotel and many happy hours spent crouched over a PC in the lobby. Physical restraints were also imposed, with face masks (an essential part of the holiday wardrobe) mandatory in the hotel, particularly in the restaurant where they could be removed only for the consumption of food and drink. Woe betide any careless diner who might pick up a plate, or apply tongs to a fancy cake, without first donning surgical gloves!

On the coach, in our twenty-strong 'bubble', we had greater freedom. Plus, we had the advantage of being outside most of the time, roaming archaeological sites and dining blissfully in outdoor tavernas. The problem came when we visited museums, most notably the revamped and much vaunted Museum of Thebes, opened in 2016, which has done much to generate new interest in the region of Boeotia. The 16 clay *larnakes* from Tanagra (13th century



*Beehive tomb at Dimini*

BC) headed a list of treasures from the Mycenaean era, but to see them we had first to submit to the inspection of a phalanx of fearsome custodians. First in our queue, an Oxford student, was sent tearfully packing when the temperature gauge registered a

probable fever: only the concerted applications of cold water to her brow by the group enabled her to reapply for admission. Our professor of Byzantine History was similarly outraged when he too was rejected – on the grounds of insufficient ID – and obliged to spend precious moments scrolling through his smartphone for a recent portrait. All in a good cause, perhaps, but ruinous to the contemplative spirit.

*The 2021 BSA Tour of Central Greece was organised by Dr Pamela Armstrong, Senior Research Fellow in Byzantine Cultural History, Oxford University. The tour lecturer was Professor Mike Edwards, Honorary Research Fellow in the Department of Classics at Royal Holloway, University of London.*



*Gorgopotamos*

## The Gorgopotamos Operation

If there was any doubt as to the theme of the BSA Tour, it was dispelled by the thunder of low-flying Mirage fighters in the skies above our hotel: the wrath of 'polemos' imprinted elsewhere in the ancient battle sites.

In living memory we still had the Second World War, represented by the feats of British and Greek derring-do at the Gorgopotamos viaduct in the southern part of Phthiotis. It was certainly a master stroke to include this site in a BSA archaeological tour, and deservedly so when the achievement of a small team of saboteurs, blowing up the viaduct in November 1942, is considered.

A 12-man team from the British army, dropped in three groups at dead of night in the mountainous local terrain, had met up with their comrades and Greek partisans from both non-Communist and Communist groups (an achievement in itself) and set off for the secret cave from which they had launched an attack on the viaduct with the

object of cutting off the supply line for Rommel's army in North Africa.

After disposing of the Italian forces stationed in pill-boxes at either end of the viaduct, and sabotaging the line in both directions to block German reinforcements, a demolition party had, after two attempts, successfully blown the viaduct. Although it had cut the line for eight weeks, the result of this daring act of sabotage had not materially affected the outcome in the desert war, as the battle of El Alamein had already been won by Montgomery's army in Egypt. Its impact on the morale of the Allies, however, had been immeasurable.

An anecdote about the last survivor of the sabotage team, Themis Marinis (who died in 2018 aged 101) is irresistible: after the war Marinis, who had led the party that had blown the northern side of the track, became a successful transport economist and later Deputy Director-General of the Greek National Railways.