



This August and September, I spent three weeks exploring mainland Greece as part of the British School at Athens' course in Archaeology and Topography. The Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies generously supported me with funding towards the cost of the course, making it possible for me to take part in an opportunity I otherwise may not have been able to experience.

The aim of the course was to explore the archaeology and topography of Greece, and to understand how the two work together to shape our interpretation of the ancient world. The first part of the course was based in Athens, before we travelled throughout the Peloponnese, visiting archaeological sites, museums and monuments and attending lectures from specialists in their respective fields.

As an Open University student, I had never experienced university teaching in this way before. I had studied extensively through books, articles and online materials, but suddenly found myself standing at the very sites I had previously only encountered through photographs and academic texts. Even more importantly, I was able to discuss them in depth with tutors while standing within the landscapes and monuments we were studying. I became something of a sponge, absorbing as much of the knowledge, insight and enthusiasm of our tutors as possible.

One of the sites that made the greatest impression on me was Delphi. Having studied the site previously, I was already excited to visit, particularly because of my interest in Greek theatre and ancient religious and cult practices. However, nothing quite prepared me for actually walking along the Sacred Way, passing the treasuries and eventually reaching the sanctuary where the Pythia delivered her prophecies. Experiencing the landscape in person gave me a completely different understanding of the site. Learning from Ben and Georgios about the Sacred Wars fought over Delphi, the practices associated with the Oracle and the functions of the theatre and stadium made the experience even more meaningful. Being able to connect the physical remains of the site with the historical and religious context we had been discussing reaffirmed my desire to explore ancient religion and cult practice further, particularly within the Classical period.

Perhaps unexpectedly, another major highlight of the course was discovering Bronze Age Greece and the Mycenaeans. Before the course, this was an area of Greek history that I knew relatively little about. Our lectures on burial practices and Tholos tombs completely changed that. By the time we visited sites such as Mycenae and Tiryns, I found myself becoming increasingly fascinated by the period and eager to contribute to discussions.

At Mycenae, we discussed Heinrich Schliemann and the ways in which his pre-existing expectations may have influenced his interpretation of the archaeological evidence. This raised fascinating questions about how archaeologists approach a site and how preconceived ideas can shape the narratives we construct around the past. After visiting the site, I approached Rachel, one of our tutors, with an interpretation of my own: that the form of Mycenaean Tholos tombs could perhaps be understood in relation to the shape and imagery of boar-tusk helmets. The idea developed from the funerary and military material we had been studying, alongside the examples of grave stelai we had seen in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. Rachel described the interpretation as inspired and told me it was one of the best interpretations she had heard on the subject. It was an incredibly encouraging moment and one that gave me much more confidence in my own ability to develop and communicate archaeological ideas.

What made the experience particularly special was not simply the opportunity to visit these sites, but to experience them alongside other students who shared my enthusiasm. Some of the most valuable moments came during the conversations between lectures, when we could debate what we had seen, question different interpretations and simply share our excitement about the ancient world.

Before this course, I never imagined I would have the opportunity to experience Greece in this way, nor that three weeks of visiting archaeological sites and discussing ideas with tutors would leave me wanting to pursue a PhD. I do not yet know what my research would focus on, but the experience has given me the confidence and desire to continue studying and, hopefully, one day undertake a PhD of my own.

Above all, I would like to express my sincere thanks to the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies for its generous support. The funding I received did much more than simply help me attend a course in Greece. It allowed me to take my education a step further, experience archaeology and history in a completely new way, and develop confidence in my own academic abilities. It has given me new interests to pursue, new questions to ask and, perhaps most importantly, memories that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

I am incredibly grateful to have been given the opportunity to take part in this course, and I hope that this experience will be the beginning of many more years of studying, questioning and exploring the ancient world.