

HIDDEN TREASURES OF HOMER'S THESSALY

A NOSTALGIC JOURNEY

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Little did I think when as a high school student in Daytona Beach, Florida when I wrote a research paper on the beauty of the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens, that some forty-five years later in my retirement years I would be engaged in the “real thing.” The turning point to at last follow my passion, after years as a researcher and professor in business and management, came in 1999 when I and my son Chris, who just graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy, visited Greece with a side trip to Troy site of the legendary Trojan War. It was Henry Schliemann who in 1871 discovered Homer’s Troy in present day Turkey, an event that for many people put to rest that the Trojan War of 3250 years ago was a myth.

Four hundred years after that war it was Homer, a blind poet, who recited in extraordinary detail the savagery yet human emotions and battlefield honor in his famous ILLIAD. His hero was Achilles. What a rare honor for me through my maternal grandfather, Achilles, and my parents both from the homeland of Achilles, the province of Thessaly northwest of Athens, to myself call Achilles my ancestor. As a child reared in the Greek section of Manchester, New Hampshire my grandfather Achilles would tell me stories of ancient Greek heroes as well as stories of what it was to be treated as a new immigrant in this new land called America. I also grew up believing that Thessaly was not only a poor province but a back yard to the grandeur of ancient Athens and Sparta. How mistaken I was!

Present day Thessaly, the size of Connecticut and Rhode Island combined, is a vast plain surrounded like a fishbowl by several mountain ranges. To the north is Mt. Olympus site of the legendary Olympic gods; to south are the Orthys Mountains home of the legendary Titan gods; to the East is the renown Pelion Mountain Range home of the mythological Centaurs, half man half horse; and to the west and southwest the rugged Pindus Mountain Range ancient homeland of the Dolopian tribes who fought with Achilles’ Myrmidon troops at Troy. This setting typifies my roots, roots which as I began my research in earnest ten years ago in 1999 after my visit to Troy became as grand as the grandeur of Athens and Sparta some 700 years before the rise of these great powers.

In 1250BC eight kings (kingdoms) from ancient Thessaly brought thousands of troops and 268 ships to fight in the Trojan War – 25% of the total contingent of the Greek armada. In antiquity the region extended further south to the Sperchios River valley to the current southern gateway city of Lamia near the coast. Throughout Thessaly there are literally scores of archaeological sites, “Hidden Treasures,” known with pride by the locals but virtually

unknown elsewhere. Our journey will focus on some of the treasures of “Homer’s Thessaly,” the Mycenaean period, the Late Bronze Age, also known as the “Heroic Period” of Greece.

EASTERN THESSALY – VOLOS TO PHTHIOTIC THEBES

The city of Volos, a beautiful cosmopolitan seaport on the Pagastikos Gulf, is the starting point of my nostalgic journey. It was from here, ancient Iolkos, that Jason and the Argonauts sailed to find the golden fleece. Jason’s crew included Peleus, the father of Achilles, and the infamous Hercules. It was my cousin (second cousin) Vasiliki whose great uncle was my grandfather Achilles, who reaffirmed to me back in 2001 that Peleus married Thetis, a sea goddess in her city of Volos. And it was in the Pelion Mountains surrounding ancient Iolkos that Achilles, she said, was educated by the centaur, Chiron. According to Homer, warriors from this region were part of the contingent from the kingdom of Admetus whose son Eumelus fought at Troy.

Just west of modern Volos at the site of ancient Iolkos, a Mycenaean tholos tomb dated from 1500BC has been excavated. While not a “hidden treasure” it is mentioned because archaeologists originally believed that Mycenaean culture was nonexistent in Thessaly except possibly at Volos which had access to the sea. In other words, Homer’s writings were not to be believed. This earth-covered tomb has a 40 foot walkway leading to the entrance of its canonical beehive shaped domed rock enclosure measuring 25 feet high with a floor 25 feet in diameter. Robbed in antiquity, like most ancient tombs, it is an imposing site to behold.

Twenty miles southwest along the gulf coast past the town of Nea Anchialos is the fortress of Phthiotic Thebes located in a region of Homer’s Pyrasos, in the kingdom of Protesilaus, the first Greek to die at Troy. During a hot day in June 2006 while traveling the byways in my rental car just to the south hunting for the palace site of Protesilaus I met Apostolos. An energetic man, like most Greeks, he told me, “Meet me here tomorrow at 2PM and I will show you.” I met him and he showed me the site, completely covered by underbrush, but very likely the palace site near the village of Phylaki, identified by Homer in the Iliad. It was then that he brought me fifteen miles east of Phylaki to Phthiotic Thebes, a “hidden treasure,” unrecognizable as a fortress from the highway. In ruins it is still a magnificent site. From the hilltop it has a panoramic view of the vast Pagastikos Gulf – a view fit for a king.

SOUTHERN THESSALY – KINGDOM OF ACHILLES AND PELEUS

Proceeding 25 miles west across rolling hills we approach the hilltop fortress site of Eretria. It was near here at the village of Paleomelos on October 6, 2001 (a date I remember clearly) after leaving the home of my cousin Vasiliki in Volos to begin my onsite research to locate the palace of Achilles and his father Peleus, that I stopped at a gas station. In my broken Greek Thessalian dialect I told the attendant, “I am looking for the palace of Achilles.” What

happened next could never be forgotten. Immediately he burst out laughing. Yelling to his wife he said, "Bring ouzo!" We all sat down around a small table in front of the gas station - he, his wife, and a few friends and I the loan American (on my mission to find the "holy grail" of ancient Greece) surrounded by boisterous and smiling village locals. And the ouzo came, the anisett flavored clear liquor drink of the gods. And we drank and drank as they laughed, happy to have me a Greek-American there. They told me of sites in the area. It was 3:30 in the afternoon, nap time for most Greeks. I was there about an hour. I visited the sites but they did not fit Homer's description of the homeland of Achilles, Phthia, a name lost in antiquity.

I drove further west. The vast plain of Thessaly slowly emerged. To the left as I approached the city of Pharsala a towering saddle-shaped mountain came into view. As I came to city center on that Sunday, October 6, 2001 at about 5PM, all was quiet. Nap time. I found a grocery store open. I asked the clerk about a village six miles from here called "Achilleo." He told me how to get there. "Why there," he asked. "To find the palace of Achilles," I said. "Oh," he said, "It is on our mountain top here," as he pointed to it. And the rest is history. (See my web site: Achilles-Thessaly.org)

The mountain top, again unrecognizable as a fortress from the highway, and its acropolis is a magnificent site – impregnable in ancient times. A large tholos and chamber tomb was also discovered 55 years ago outside the city. While the kingdom of Achilles and his father Peleus covered a vast area, my follow-up research points to Pharsala as Homer's Phthia, their ancient capital city. Homer says Achilles brought 50 ships and 2500 warriors to Troy. I have walked the mountain site many times over the recent years including many other sites in Thessaly, usually during hot summer days. Achilles was the name of the former mayor of the city. He and his family particularly his son Gregory have been a big help and quite hospitable in my journey of love to rediscover the ancient grandeur of Greece, the country of my ancestry, and Thessaly, the homeland of my parents and grandparents, and they continue to be supportive as other residents have.

SOUTHWESTERN THESSALY – FOOTHILLS OF THE LOFTY PINDUS MOUNTAINS

Heading west about 15 miles along a southern sweep of the Thessalian plain, the town of Neo Monastiri, ancient Proerna, comes into view. It has an interesting classical period (500BC) hilltop fortress. Ten miles to the north is the ancient hilltop site of Ktouri and a small village below of Helliniko, where many historians believe Greece received its name of Hellas. More historic sites come into view twenty miles further west of Neo Monastiri such as the fortress of Kierion just outside the city of Sofades and nearby another Mycenaean tomb at Agios Theodoros, similar but smaller than the one at Volos.

Fifteen miles further west is the large city of Karditsa. It is the home of my cousin (second cousin) Lambro, a soon to be retired medical doctor, whose great uncle, Demetrios, was my paternal grandfather. On a hot Saturday in June 2008 Lambro and I headed five miles south to the village of Georgiko to find a “hidden treasure,” the 3250 year old tholos tomb reported to be that of Queen Laidas who reigned nearby at the town of Mitropoli. As we drove through the village we headed south to a large earthen mound covered with trees and underbrush. Circling to the left we saw the opening covered with a temporary tin roof and wooden planks on the floor of the outer 30 foot dromos (entrance). A second 30 foot dromos leads to the door within which is another large canonical shaped stone dome about 20 feet high with a floor of similar diameter. A rectangular stone grave site is located at one side. As usual it was robbed in antiquity with the robber’s hole still visible to one side a few feet off the floor. At the new museum the following week at Karditsa Leonidas Hadziaggelakis, the supervisory archaeologist of the region, showed me plans at the museum to display artifacts discovered. But it is clear, robbers continue to harm the country’s ancient heritage.

Fifteen miles to the southwest past a Byzantine and Venetian fortress town of Phanari is another “hidden treasure,” Prygos Ithomi, called by Homer “rocky Ithomi terraced high.” Located in the foothills of the Pindus Range, it amazingly to this day remains as Homer identified it: a precarious rocky mountain fortress. I first met Pavlos there, an elderly gentleman who though uneducated (as he told me) spoke eloquently and proudly of the village’s ancient history. I later met Alexander, a young electrician, who took me to see the huge “platanos” trees at the foot of the fortress. It was at Athens, a year before, while lunching with another cousin, Melina an archaeologist, who introduced me to the young waiter serving us to whom she was the godmother. “He comes from Prygos Ithomi,” she told me smiling. “He’ll tell you where to find Homer’s rocky Ithomi,” she said. I felt then as I do now, “I love all my cousins. Second they are but they are second to none!”

WESTERN THESSALY: ANCIENT GOMPHI AND TRICCA

In June 48BC Caesar crossed through the Pindus Mountain Range with 11,000 troops plus cavalry and entered the western plain of Thessaly at Aeginium, modern Kalambaka, on his way to what became the final round of the Roman civil war: the defeat of his rival, Pompey, a month later outside Pharsala making him “Caesar” of the entire empire. Needing provisions he proceeded to Gomphi, some fifteen miles northwest of Prygos Ithomi. Being refused entry, he captured and burned the town. Today Gianni, who I met seven years ago while researching the site, waits patiently amid the fortress ruins for the resurrection of his beleaguered town. While not part of Homer’s Thessaly, Gomphi is a “hidden treasure” which time has forgotten.

This entire region including Prygos Ithomi was identified by Homer as part of the kingdom of Asclepius, famous physician whose sanctuaries throughout ancient Greece and the

cities of the Greek Mediterranean laud the miracles of his cures. His two sons, Podalirius and Machaon, doctors to the Greeks at Troy, led the contingents from their homeland of Tricca, modern Trikala twelve miles north of Gomphi. Back in 1982, my fraternal twin cousins from Trikala, Niko and Maria, took me to what was identified as a Byzantine castle on the hilltop site overlooking Trikala. A wedding was taking place at the restaurant situated on the hill. The traditional music with dancers brought back memories of my father, Georgios, who emigrated to America with his dad, Demetrios, and his brothers in 1910, one hundred years ago. As a child I marveled how my dad at the church picnics in Manchester would dance the “tsamiko” jumping, twirling, with everyone in a circle moving to the rhythm of the main instrument, the clarinet. My father would hold onto the handkerchief of the second man in line whose strong right arm would allow my father to gyrate like a pretzel and amaze the crowd. I always wished I could. But then, I don’t eat grilled innards wrapped in what seems like miles of intestines served as a delicacy at Easter time. But I do love roast lamb.

Hidden within the remains of the Byzantine castle at Trikala is a strategic Mycenaean fortress which had a 360 degree view of western Thessaly, the passes from the west and south, the hills to the north and to the east the entire plain of Thessaly. At its base was found what is reputed to be the workshop of Asclepius who tradition has it took many of his medicines from the flowers on the lofty range to the south. A Greek Orthodox cathedral occupies the adjacent site making excavations there impossible. Twenty miles to the south, Costa, who was baptized in 1925 by my grandfather Achilles, brought me in 2007 up and up on the mountain hillside village of Pialia and showed me the type of flowers Asclepius had access to. Further up I saw a small odd walled fortress difficult to reach but definitely man made. A few years earlier he wanted me to take a picture of him on the donkey he still takes to work in his advanced years. He said, “I want to make sure my grandchildren do not forget their grandfather.”

NORTHEASTERN THESSALY: TEMPI PASS, LARISA , TO PHERAE

Heading back now east along the highway 60 miles to the largest city in the plain, Larisa, are several “hidden treasures” principally following the historic Peneios River. They include Pellineion, 9 miles east of Trikala, then Klokotos, Farkadona, and Zarkos. Farkadona was the most difficult to locate. Finally finding locals who knew, my cousin Maria’s husband Georgios, a medical doctor who spent decades practicing in Germany, and I found the site in 2007 with remains of columns lying in the Peneios River itself and the fortress ruins above - truly hidden but on the surface less of a treasure. Here again these sites and so many others throughout Thessaly cannot rise to their glory days without site surveys and sound excavation plans – both necessitating qualified staff, money, and high interest in the project (if not resulting prestige).

While I have not spent much research time in the Larisa region in the northern area 40 miles to the foothills of Mt. Olympus numerous Homeric sites are located there. They include

Argissa just west of Larisa, and to the north Grytone, Orthe, Elone, and Olooson. Homer said that King Polypoetes was in command of this region and sailed forty ships to Troy. Thirty five miles to the northeast of Larisa is Tempi Pass where the Peneios River empties into the Aegean Sea. From this area and further east according to Homer King Tenthredon's son Prothous also sailed forty ships to Troy with his contingent of Magnesians troops.

At Larisa the recently excavated classical theatre in the heart of the city has brought back local pride to this once rather forgotten part of ancient Greece. "Two more years," the former supervisory archaeologist of the region, Athanasios, said to me in June 2008. "Then our work at the theatre will be complete." Their hope is to host ancient dramas which 2400 years ago included annual festivals and theatrical competitions.

Coming full circle on this nostalgic journey to capture in some small way the grandeur of my ancestors particularly during the Mycenaean Bronze Age of Greece, we travel southeast 60 miles back to Volos. Forty miles into the trip we come to the hilltop fortress site of our last king who sent a contingent to the Trojan War, King Admetus of Pherae, modern Velestino. According to Homer they were commanded by the king's "favored son, Eumeles, born to Admetus by Alcetis, queen of women, the most radiant daughter Pelias (king at Iolkos) ever fathered." Also representing the city of Iolkos, Admetus gave troops and eleven ships to the Trojan War effort. While a "hidden treasure" only remnants of this hilltop's former glory are visible. Its beauty lies several feet underground.

EPILOGUE

Homer's ILLIAD has provided an invaluable blueprint in my quest to examine the homeland of my ancestors, northwest of Athens in north central Greece, and assess what they may have contributed to the western world. It continues to be a journey of love – not without its problematic encounters along the way but the goal of unearthing the past of a Thessaly I as a child believed contributed little to humanity I now have found the contrary. There was a grandeur there some 700 years before the rise of ancient Athens or Sparta, a prominence which continued for some 1000 years. The ancient sites are still there, and like Gianni at Gomphi, waiting for their resurrection.