FIRST INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ACHILLES:

**HIS HOMELAND, LEGACY, AND CONTROVERSIES**

20 and 21 June 2014, Lamia, Greece

Sponsored by the Council of Achilles
THE MYSTERY OF HOMER’S PHTHIA: TEN YEARS
RESEARCH IN THESSALY AND PHTHIOTIDA – THE ROLE OF
AEGINA

Dr. James “Dimitrios” Brianas
President, Achilles Foundation
21 June 2014, Lamia, Greece

INTRODUCTION – Troy and the Trojan War

The Trojan War, fought 3200 years ago, continues to capture the imagination of students, scholars, and others around the world. In 1999, I achieved one of my boyhood dreams when I visited Troy (Ilium) on the shores of the Aegean Sea in Asia Minor at the mouth of the Dardanelles. The ancient ruins came alive when Heinrich Schliemann, following Homer’s writings, discovered the city 145 years ago, guided by Henry Calvert, an American ambassador based in the region. Since then I have been on the “Road to Discovery,” attempting to solve the mystery of Homer’s Phthia, location of the palace site of Achilles, hero of the Trojan War.

Over 100,000 Achaians, as Homer called the Greeks, representing 29 kingdoms, sailed to Troy in over 1000 ships. For 10 years the war was fought until Achilles, distraught by the death of his cousin Patroklos, finally led the Greeks on the road to victory, but not without the cunning of Odysseus and the Trojan horse.

Today the tomb of Achilles can be found 10 meters high on the NE Aegean coast outside the Trojan ruins. After the war, Aeolian Greeks from Thessaly and Boetia settled in the region and next to the tomb established the village of Achillion. Coins with Achilles have been found only there and three other locations in Greece: Pelasgia (Larisa Cremaste), city of Larisa, and at Epirus. The third major excavation of Troy was conducted by Turkish/German/American archaeologists and scholars – 1988 to 2008. The tomb of Achilles was excavated in 1999 but as is the case at ancient sites, grave robbers stole artifacts buried with the burnt remains. My contacts with the German leader of the team, Ernest Pernika, yielded a beautiful aerial photo of the excavated tomb cradled by the blue waters of the Aegean.

Returning to Achaia (Greece) after the Trojan War, Neoptolemos, son of Achilles and one of the soldiers along with Odysseus in the Trojan horse, brought treasures and women to his father’s and grandfather’s (Peleus) kingdom at Phthia.

AEGINA – Roots of the Family of Achilles

But the roots of Peleus and Aiakos, grandfather of Achilles, was not Phthia but the island of Aegina (jewel of the Saronic Gulf as Pindar 500 BC labeled it) one hour by boat south of Athens. Pindar, a writer of “victory poems” for Olympic champions, was enthralled with the history of Aegina. To paraphrase him, “While Achilles was born in Phthia, his real homeland, his roots are in Aegina – he is an Aegitinean.” With this I agree.

To understand Achilles, we must know some of the background of his father and grandfather both born in Aegina. History shows that Aiakos was a well-respected priest in Aegina. His wisdom was sought across the sea to Athens. On the highest peak of Aegina is an ancient temple in ruins, Zeus Elainious, at which he prayed. On
the northwest corner of the island on a ridge overlooking the Saronic Gulf towards Athens, is the Temple of Aphaia, similar but a little smaller than the Parthenon and standing just as proudly. It was built in 510 BC upon the burnt remains of an older temple. Mycenaean artifacts, particularly female figurines, have been uncovered on the temple grounds. On the east pediment of the temple were scenes of the “First Trojan War” with sculptures of Telemon (Achilles’ uncle), Hercules and prominent figures. On the west pediment were scenes of the “Second Trojan War” described by Homer in the ILLIAD. These “Aegean Marbles” were confiscated in 1811, quickly sold to the highest bidder, and can now be found in a museum in Munich, Germany. I have seen replicas and drawings of these pediments in the museum adjacent to the temple. Traditions of the Aiacides family (Aiakos, Peleus and brother Telemon, and Achilles) continue to this day on Aegina.

Aiakos’ first wife was Endeis, daughter of Chiron at Mt. Pelion, Volos. Chiron, who lived at the same period as Aescylus (whose two sons Podalirios and Machon were doctors at the Trojan War) was also a healer, collecting herbs from the mountain to use for medicinal purposes. He also was chosen by Peleus to be a teacher and mentor to a youthful Achilles soon to be the leader of Peleus’ Myrmidon troops. Chiron may also have been a “veterinarian” to the many horses for which Thessaly was renown for – hence the name “Centaur.”

From Endeis, Aiakos had two sons, Peleus and Telemon, father of Ajax. Aiakos took a second wife, Psamathe who bore him Phocus. Caught killing their half brother Phocus (who excelled in the discuss), Aiakos exiled Peleus to Phthia and Telemon to Salamis.

Peleus as a young man was an adventurous hero. As a wrestler he won many Olympic events at the Isthmian games at Corinth. He was part of the annual “Boar Hunt” at Mt. Pelion. In the Argonautica written 225 BC by Apollonius, librarian at Alexandria, Peleus along with brother Telemon, Hercules, and others including of course the leader, Jason, sailed on the Argo on the voyage through the Dardenells and past Troy to find the “Golden Fleece” off the Black Sea in what is now the countries of Georgia and Armenia. (Armenia received its name from the town of Armenio, located on the road from Volos to Larisa, a few of whose residents joined Jason on the Argo and remained in the Black Sea region.) Peleus, then King of Phthia, fought a grudge war against King Pelias of Volos, uncle of Jason, won, and brought the riches back to Phthia.

Achilles was born and grew to manhood in Phthia, though for a time at the island of Skyros. His mother Thetis has a temple said to be located at Thetidio, a village just northeast of the city of Pharsala. But where is Phthia? The ancients knew it was in Phthiotida in ancient Thessaly. In the 5th century BC Pharsalians would travel to Troy on pilgrimages to honor Achilles. They also dedicated an equestrian statue of him at Delphi, in front and to the far right of the Temple of Apollo (it no longer exists). Today, though, Phthia is a mystery waiting to be solved, waiting for another Schliemann and his love for Homer and his mythological writings, as many continue to believe today, like the myths of Hollywood movie heroes in the U.S.A. So let us search for this myth and in the process let us find the truth, let us discover Phthia, the capital city of the kingdom of Achilles.
After visiting Troy in 1999, I began my book and computer research on Achilles. I recalled that during my freshman year at the University of Florida, the Iliad and the Odyssey were mandatory reading. Such was the case for the ancient Greeks as well as the Byzantine Greeks. Homer’s writings definitely have had a hold on people’s psyche. Many military strategists consider the Iliad “The greatest war story ever told.” Besides the Bible, it is the most widely read book in the western world and the west’s first literary writing. But during my research I discovered that there were not only the Iliad and the Odyssey, but also six other books written around the same period, 700 to 800 BC, and by different authors all total of eight books comprising the “Trojan Cycle.” They are as follows:

1. Iliad — ΙΛΙΑΔΑ – Homer (Smyrna/Chios), 24 books, The Trojan War.
2. Odyssey — ΟΔΥΣΣΕΙΑ – Homer (Smyrna/Chios), 24 books, Wanderings of Odysseus.
3. Kypria — ΚΥΠΡΙΑ – Stanius (Cyprus), 12 books, Action before the war.
4. Aithiopis — ΑΙΘΙΟΠΙΣ – Archiilion (Milesian), 5 books, Death of Hector.
5. Little Iliad — ΙΛΙΑΣ ΜΙΚΡΑ – Leches (Mytilene), 4 books, Death of Ajax (Ajax), Neoptolemos comes from Skyros and later goes to Pharsala.
6. The Sack of Ilium — ΙΛΙΟΥ ΜΕΡΣΙΣ – Archiilion (Milesian), 2 books, Achaians at Tenedos, the horse is built.
7. Returns — ΚΑΘΟΔΟΣ – Agios (Troyzoon), 5 books, Death of Agamemnon, Neoptolemos goes to the Molossians (Epirus).
8. Telegony — ΤΕΛΕΓΟΝΙΑ – Eugammon (Kyrenia), 2 books, Odysseus is at Threspatia and later Ithaki.

Only fragments and some pages remain of the six books, Kypria through the Telegony. We know of them mainly through scholia, comments of others who have read them. The scholia are important in filling the gaps of the Iliad and Odyssey. The Returns, for example, that Neoptolemos returned after the war by land through northern Greece, in Thraki buried Phoenix, King of the Dolopians and mentor to Achilles, and came to his father’s kingdom, seeing Peleus (his grandfather) and became king of the Molossians in Epirus. The Little Iliad in turn states that Andromache and Aeneas (Hector’s wife and half-brother) were captured (at Troy) and given to Achilles’ son Neoptolemos, and taken away with him to Pharsala.

Stephanos Byzantinos wrote from Constantinople in the 6th century AD, “Myrmidon’s former city - Homer indeed says that Pthia, is the newer Pharsala.” And there are other scholia pointing to Pharsala as did ancient Greek playwrights such as Euripides (430 BC) who used past history as themes in his plays. And there are scores of other ancient authors mostly Greek and some Latin that directly or indirectly point to the region north of the Sperchios River in present southeastern Thessaly as the primary area of both the city and region of Pthia. This is particularly evident since Homer himself states that were also two other kings, Protesilaus and Philoctetes, who were Pthians their kingdoms boarding to the east of Pharsala towards Volos.
MY RESEARCH CONTINUES – Walking the Land of Achilles

Two years after visiting Troy, I in October 2001 continued my journey to search for Phthia, this time by car and foot. Before departing my cousin Basiliki’s home in Volos, I had drawn on a map a circle from Larisa to the north to Lamia and Sperchios River to the south. Within this circle is Phthia. From that time and several years since, I would fly from America and typically on hot summer days systematically climb, alone or with local friends I had made, the hills and mountains (some impossible to climb through the thick underbrush not to speak of snakes) taking photos of ancient walls and sites that my literature pointed to – scores of sites throughout ancient Phthiotida.

I would like to share with you some of the hundreds upon hundreds of photos I have taken, these principally of Pharsala, which my research has shown to be the capital city of Achilles and his father Peleus.

The mountain top of Prophetis Elias at Pharsala, part of the Narthakion range north of the Orthes Mountains, is configured in the shape of a saddle, high at its east and west ends and lower in the center. It is clearly visible from the southern main highway, 60 km. west of Volos about halfway on the road to Karditsa. To the north and west of the mountain lies the huge open plain of Thessaly where in Achilles time the best horses known roamed throughout, “the stallion land of Argos,” Achilles stated (now horses are virtually absent), crops grown (as today) in “the rich dark soil of Phthia” Achilles said, cattle grazed (absent today), and flocks grazed the foothills (as today). Immediately below the mountain to the north, lies the present day city.

The very top is 225 meters wide and 850 meters long in an east/west line. A dirt road curves its way 2 km. to the top. To the left of the current opening in the fortress, the citadel, is a huge cyclopean wall which during the Mycenaean, Late Bronze Age, the age of Achilles, surrounded the fortress making it virtually impregnable. Newer wall remains can be seen as renovations throughout the centuries were made during the Classical, Hellenistic and Byzantine periods. In that wall is the original main northern gate into the castle site. Another main gate easily accessible is the southern gate with two more lesser gates at the western and eastern sections.

As you enter the fortress, the land to the right lies flat except at the far west end. To the left it rises rather steeply. In front is the well, filled in over the centuries. As with all mountain fortresses, the wells were used as escape routes to a lower tunnel then parallel out the side of the mountain. As you walk throughout the ridge you notice how well fortified the site was with its huge walls and natural cliffs, these walls protected by a lower wall encircling the mountain top with lookout towers placed strategically. (See Stella Katakouta’s, “Fifteen Years of Archaeological Research, 1975 to 1990,” Conference at Lyon, France, April 17-22, 1990, documenting the layout of the entire ancient site at Pharsala.)

As you climb the steep slope rising towards the east, one cannot help but visualize as you reach the top and then flattens out far to the east of the ridge that this elevated site with its panoramic view of the Thessalian plain below must have been the palace site of a might king and his family – very likely King Peleus and Prince Achilles commander of his Myrmidon troops and the forces from Alos, Alope, Trachis,
Phthia, and Hellas, as Homer stated, all fighting under Achilles at Troy. Remnants of the ascending steps up the slope remain leading to the “palace.” Also found are impressions in stone showing in these “rock carvings” that they once supported columns, possibly wooden columns. Only through systematic excavations can the site be properly identified and recorded for history, permits for excavation which have thus far not been possible despite years of groundwork by myself and the Achilles Foundation as to the importance of the site in attempting to solve the mystery of Homer’s Phthia including requests for joint ventures with the University of Florida at that time with the Ministry of Culture. Other foundation remains abound on the ridge.

The land steeply rises on all sides of the ridge as it does at the southern gate facing the farmlands with its rugged gaps in the land possibly from seismic activity (ancient volcanic eruptions) east at Volos and Nea Anchialos running along a fault west towards the Pharala region. The most recent minor earthquake activity occurred in 1985. To the southeast lies the village of Achellion, which may also turn out to be the terminal point of the escape tunnel from the fortress.

On the flat east side of the saddle-shaped mountain, passed the Greek Orthodox chapel on the northeast side, the ridge drops sharply. There, angling down to encircle the ancient city of Pharsala (Phthia) are remnants of a monumental wall, difficult to locate if not for the knowledge of a local young man, Gregory Goundopoulos (posing happily during my video taping in 2003), an ardent believer in his city as that of Achilles. The wall is lost as it approaches the city below, its stones appropriated, over these more than 2000 years, for construction purposes as can be seen in various locations in the city today. The city itself is built over ancient Pharsala/Phthia.

On the north end of the city across from some large rectangle wall remnants, is the spring of Apidanos. At the family’s Thetis Café in city center in 2003, Chrisoula, wife of the then mayor Achilles Goundopoulos, father of Gregory, related to me (also during my video taping) that the Apidanos was the site of Achilles’ baptism, his mother Thetis holding her infant son by his heel (pierced by Paris’ arrow 25 years later at Troy). The spring and the flow of its famous waters have dried last century, but the city has now provided for water access to commemorate the site, and last year unveiled a statue of Achilles at the city square.

On the northwest corner of the city, beyond where the ancient encircling walls once stood, a tholos tomb was discovered in 1952. The tomb with a 25 foot stone entrance, was built over an older Mycenaean burial site. There is a main chamber plus a smaller hidden chamber. A black-figure vase, a calyxkrater, was found, painted in the manner of Exekios in 530 BC. The vase is about one foot in height and is in excellent condition. On it was depicted the dead body of Patroklos being fought over by Greek and Trojan soldiers with stately horses painted on the reverse.

Another artifact found in the vicinity of Pharsala at the mountain site called Xtouri discussed earlier in the presentation by Athanasios Karatolias. Relating to Achilles, the artifact was a shard, a broken ceramic section from a large dinos vase. On it a chariot race was depicted representing games held for Patroklos after his death at Troy. “Sports fans” are shown on both sides of the stands as they clap their hands. On the upper right corner of the shard is written the name, ACHILLES. It was made
by Sophilos about 580 BC. It took over 2500 years for both vase and shard to be discovered by excavations. How many more years will it take for such few finds?

THE FINAL ROAD TO DISCOVERY

Extensive literature research, particularly of ancient texts, analysis of current scholarly thinking on Achilles and the Trojan War, onsite visits and documentation of existing ruins throughout Phthiotida, and my discussions with colleagues and people of good will (and despite those who weave webs of doubt and deception and attempt to create roadblocks for their own purposes) it is clear the time is now to find the truth about the hero who walked these lands, the same lands we now walk on. The time is now to solve the mystery of Homer’s Phthia. **3200 years is long enough.**

We have heard speakers at this conference talk about the history of the region of the Sperchios and Lamia, the palace sites of Achilles, and along the road to Pelasgia. Some say Domoko and Melitea are the sites. And we have heard divergent talks on Hellas the site where the Greek nation received its name. Achilles and his Myrmidon troops can lay claim to being the only contingent among the 100,000 and more Achaeans to be called Hellenes, from Phthia and Hellas, a very important fact in our historical analysis. All presentations showed very impressive thinking, very thoughtful analyses. I am very much impressed with a site just northeast of Lamia, that of Narthaki at Limogardi. As at Pharsala, it has an extensive mountain ridge(s) with massive building blocks on its east façade overlooking the entire mountain side and the coasts beyond, providing a magnificent, panoramic view of the Maliakos Gulf. The road off the National Road takes about ½ hour to reach the village center. Excavations and preservation of the site followed by tourist visits would be an enormous economic boost not only to Limogardi but to Lamia and the entire region.

ACTION TO TAKE

I have stated that this conference is a conference designed to take action, not only of speech making, but also follow-through to achieve planned results. Therefore, I propose as a first step that:

1. Together we move forward as a unified force.
2. We identify a willing organization(s) capable of securing permits for survey research and excavations and conducting the work (with possible joint ventures), an organization preferably with access to radar support to maximize our results as efficiently as possible.
3. We chose a site that initially is most likely to be that of Homer’s Phthia.
4. We develop a time-phased plan of action and systematically execute the plan.

*If after 2 or 3 years we see that the site does not yield sufficient results, we move to a secondary site. I have been focusing on Achilles for 15 years, others much longer including for over 50 years dedicated people like Athanasios Karatolias, and others. We here represent the best hope for Achilles. Our road has been long and many times weary with little support, if any, along the way. Particularly for me and my Foundation, the last eight years have been very difficult as I have been moving forward in my own small way as a Greek-American, who loves the homeland of my father and grandfathers, my own homeland, to give back to that homeland something*
that may be of benefit, historically plus economically. Excavating and preserving historic sites, sites that foster tourism is one major way such as done at Troy, Mycenae, or Delphi. There, tourists flock bringing valuable financial resources, filling hotels, packing cafes and restaurants, buying souvenirs, taking tours, making friends with locals, and so much more. I would like to help. Most villagers have given there heart and soul to me in discussing the historic past of their region. But with many officials in authority, where it required positive action, I have been faced with many roadblocks from false promises, bureaucratic run around, bribes solicited, and egos so big they can fill an Olympic stadium. I want to be alive to see the fruits of our accomplishments. For me and others, I am not sure that will be possible.

But I believe there is hope. First, in our keynote speaker Friday, Dr. Christofilis Maggidis, Professor at Dickinson College, we have a scholar with “boots on the ground,” not afraid to stand up for what is right and not afraid to speak out. A distinguished supervisory researcher and excavator at Mycenae and other sites, a utilizer of state-of-the-art radar equipment, President of the Mycenaean Foundation, and a member of the prestigious Archaeological Society of Athens, he is equipped, I believe, to take on the important tasks I have identified in my action steps. In the Achilles Foundation with its eight board members with skills in Project Development and Management, Strategic Planning, plus Greek archaeologists on the board, we have a second strong team member. And third is the Council of Achilles, sponsors of this conference, with the vision of divergent ideas focused on achieving results. All together we can not fail.

Ministerial support can not be understated as are finances critical to the project. A building, temporarily donated to serve as an “Achilles Research and Education Center” to serve for summer accommodations, seminars, research documents, storage of files and equipment, etc., would be important. Without that we loose much cohesion, a central focus from where we can conduct our work. Finally, and very important to me, each of you here is to be commended for your participation in this historic “First International Conference on Achilles.” I believe we finally are on the “Road to Discovery.” Let us move forward together.