

### ***Thursday, June 13th -- Day One***

***Natalie Wei***

Today we visited the Acropolis and its museum as well as the ancient agora. It was hot enough to melt and the stones of the path up to the acropolis were well-worn, and slippery. When you arrive at the peak, the Parthenon is just... right there. I think everyone in my generation was introduced to Greek history and mythology through the Percy Jackson series, and that one large blue mythology book (with the gold meander on the edges and the stone in the center?) -- seeing the landmark in person was surreal, not only for its immense size and impossible-to-fathom age, but also because until yesterday, I had always seen Greece as a thing of legend and fiction. Standing foot here does not entirely register as reality.

Much of the Parthenon is covered in scaffolding, which lent to the feeling of artificiality, almost as if a movie set were being constructed. It is much more interesting to see a structure rather than piles of rubble, but I get a sense of unease about restorations. It will never be the same--how could we know? Besides, for materials, techniques, tools, etc there will always be a disparity. It was kind of sad to see just how much of the structure was lighter stone that had been replaced in modern times.

I especially liked seeing small scale reproductions of the pediments and the layouts of these locations. There's no way to know what being in these spaces would have actually felt like, but the repro's were helpful for orienting and imagination. There was also a display of all the rocks used to make pigments, what they looked like crushed to dusts and applied with wax. In imagination of the period everything is white, but from an art appreciation standpoint I would've liked to see the pieces in their original vibrant color.

After the Agora a few of us went to a local bar. It is interesting to see how such history and the remnants of Ancient Greek architectural style mixes with modern urban life. There is bright graffiti everywhere, but you can see ruins in the distance. To get down to the bar, a quaint outside hangout, you walked through a dark tunnel and down neon stairs plastered with stickers. In one day I had walked both these steps, and ones dating back to at least the 5th century BC.

### ***Friday, June 14th -- Day Two***

Today we went to the Kapnikarea church, the Metropolis and Little Metropolis, and the Benaki Museum. The Kapnikarea was interesting because of the way the city was built around it--it sits at an angle in the middle of an intersection, almost like a roundabout or an island. People drove around it in cars and motorcycles on roads I couldn't even make out. On the walls outside people sat to talk on their phones or have coffee. The walls enclosing the church were covered in graffiti. It makes you wonder how much novelty/mundanity plays into the reverence of objects. We visited the church as one of the best preserved examples of byzantine architecture in Greece. Locals drive past it every day, perhaps thinking of the intersection as a nuisance, and leave their names on it's walls in blue paint by night.

Though it was small and unassuming from the outside, the inside was beautiful, the domes creating an enhanced feeling of space, and every inch of the walls was covered with saints, angels, apostles, and Christ at the peak. As I was leaving, I decided to light a candle. While I gave my donation a sister gathered a handful of lit candles and snuffed them, dropping them in a box. It was interesting to me that part of her job was to take the embodiment of someone's prayer and decide it had been there long enough. It is equally as interesting that we

find it comforting to light the candle in the first place--we need some tangible task to ground the spiritual.

The Metropolis was absolutely stunning, again covered in renderings of holy figures. The ceilings were a rich blue with gold stars, which looked like a fantastic night sky. People walked around crossing themselves and kissing the images of Christ and many saints. You could see the marks from people's lips on the glass in front of these paintings.

The Little Metropolis was interesting for the nature of its composition--every part of it was taken from something previously standing. When we had visited the Acropolis the day before there were employees with whistles chastising anyone who came too close to the stone of the monuments. The interaction with old structures has moved from appropriating and repurposing the materials to barring anyone from touching them and attempting to reconstruct as much as possible.

The Benaki Museum was the best part of the day. There were so many gorgeous pieces of jewelry and examples of traditional Greek dress. There was a lot of rich red and plenty of gold. There were even weapons completely plated in metals and gems. Many rooms showcased an extreme level of opulence. It was amazing to see the textiles and examples of the machines used to make them.

As you ascended the levels of the museum you had a sense of moving forward into more recent history. On the walls of the staircases there were paintings of what the structures of the Acropolis would have looked like in the past. It was surprising to see figures painted working on the structures, lounging relaxed on the steps while working with a piece of marble or even just standing amongst the columns. The figures wore brightly colored traditional dress. Earlier Daniel mentioned how you could see details on parts of sculptures or works that were never intended to be seen and how it was amazing that such a high level of care could be immortalized through time. Seeing the depictions of those casually lounging and gradually toiling makes one wonder about the true level of care that went into raising each structure or if there was any irreverence in those doing the work, obliging simply for pay or for the sake of adherence to instruction. It is unlikely that most common builders are driven by the fire of constructing the next great skyscraper--that is the architect's vision. So in the construction of these temples did those doing the labor resent the work, or did they not dare for fear of the gods, or was their own faith so strong as to justify the labor?

### ***Saturday, June 15th -- Day Three***

Today we arrived in Sérres, which is where the monastery is. In the actual city we did a brief walkabout and discussed the history--how numerous wars and repeated occupations resulted in lasting political/social tensions and economic distress. The last handful of years that hit Greece financially further affected Sérres. They say its nature as an agricultural town has helped it survive the worst of the impact, but that's hard to tell just by walking around. Entire streets are lined with shut down shops, boarded up or with broken windows. People wander up to you on the street or during dinner, asking 50 cents for a disposable pen or a travel pack of tissues. We sat down and had a large, family style dinner, carried by laughter and ouzo, and people continued to ask us to buy small goods. I doubt that they must make many sales, if any. It's a wonder how these objects are chosen, how the hawking of a single pen is rationalized.

How much of that week's budget is used to purchase an object in a gamble for resale? Was cost weight with the objects utility to potential passersby?

The town apparently used to be the social and commercial center, but today feels quite small, and empty. Partially this is due to the holiday weekend, but I wonder if many younger people have left--I was surprised to see so many young people just waiting around in the streets. I wondered too if any of the children running around and riding bikes would grow up to talk about how run-down and empty their city was, in the same way I have heard about some boroughs of Pittsburgh.

After dinner we went to a bar to end the night--with limited to no ability to read the menu, everyone simply pointed to the neon advertisement for a beer brand that hung on the wall. Turns out pictorial communication is still as effective as ever.

### ***Sunday, June 16th -- Day Four***

Today we arrived at the monastery. The ride up was beautiful--the road wove through the mountains with many hairpin turns. We passed many horses and cows. When we first walked into the monastery it was the middle of the service, and you could hear the sisters' singing echoing through the courtyard. It was eerie, but very relaxing, too. Many churchgoers sat outside the church, and many children played--girls braided each others hair and young boys ran around stomping on flies and balancing on the uneven stones in front of the church. All the female attendees kept shoulders and knees covered with skirts, and many kept their hair concealed as well.

My favorite part of the day was visiting the belfry. You have a beautiful elevated view of the compound and of the olive groves and of the mountains. The sense of isolation within nature is inherently contemplative. I did not want to come down. The natural environment and the beauty of the masonry, gardening, and frescoes is something I wish could be bottled in a material manner, but the sense of beauty and peace is far too ephemeral.

I was surprised by the gift shop, though I knew there would be one. I am curious about the balance between business and service, and how much dissent there would've been at the advent of the shop. It is fun to think of the entrepreneurial nun who first thought of marketing their subsistence products. One nun had the job of leaving mass early to open the shop--this in itself was interesting, that you are excused from mass in order to sell things to the churchgoers. It was also fun to see a nun swing into the driveway in a large truck. It felt more out of place than it probably should have in a modern world--the sense of isolation I think adds to the feeling that it is not within the modern world, though nearly every room has artificial lights, speakers, security cameras, and there is an extremely large and industrial kitchen.

We spent a lot of time touring the church and the different chapels, discussing the various graves and wall paintings. There is a history of graffiti in sacred spaces, where visitors copy images they see on the walls, or leave prayers, names, and dates. It is interesting to consider if this graffiti is born of desire for reverence or relevance. If it is reverence, I return to my earlier question: why do we feel the need to physically indicate our worship? If we are comfortable enough with the spiritual to make it the basis of entire belief systems, why do we need to represent it in such a concrete manner?

My favorite areas of wall art were those that had chipped away, leaving images from different areas cleaved together. The politics of what was painted, obscured, removed, or

degases was almost amusing, and it is mind-blowing to think that images in which so much care was taken to create were simply painted over when they ran out of room or when certain opinions became more dangerous than less useful.

### ***Monday, June 17th -- Day Five***

Today was the first day we really helped with work. We helped collect and clean dishes after evening coffee and then peeled and cut carrots. Each task has a process that is always followed and is completed in teams. While one person could wash, rinse, and dry, there were 4+ people: one to pre-rinse, one to wash, one to rinse, and the rest to dry.

To me, the joy in work, especially in rhythm with others, is the whole point--working in sync and laughing together is extremely satisfying. But here everything is done in quiet reflection and prayer. It seems like that takes the joy out of the work, but I think the point is that all their joy comes from God, and so it makes sense that prayer is like sharing the moment with a friend. There is a reason the word 'rejoice' is tied to worship. What seems like a certain level of somberness and abstinence from simpler joys may really not be that at all--it's just different in source.

### ***Tuesday, June 18th -- Day Six***

We started the day by visiting the ossuary. Outside the building there were six graces, and it looked like room for a few more. They held the remains of family of the nuns and community members. In the ossuary are the skulls and femur bones that have accumulated over the last 6-700 years, as well as the skulls of children. Some of the skulls were inscribed with descriptions of the deceased. It is shocking to see the bones just stacked and stacked and stacked upon each other.

Nikos said that when they were first establishing the ossuary they needed to dig up and scrub old bones and then place them in their neat stacks. At that time they were still young and giggly according to Nikos, so there was a bizarre assembly line of young, joking, giggling nuns scrubbing decayed flesh from the bones.

It is interesting that the body is buried just to be exhumed, though when I question why that would be I arrive at the answer of utility. Q: Even if you intend to just keep a couple of bones, why bury the body? A: In the ground it does the job of decomposition (because where else is more convenient, sanitary, or efficient to leave the body while you wait?).

Apparently in Greece, especially in cities, people are only buried for 3 or 4 years--because of space they are exhumed and put in a mausoleum with a plaque with their name on the outside wall. They said it is neither sad nor a celebration--the workers of the cemeteries perform the transition. I would think it would be sad or offensive to the memory, but it seems to just be the norm, though they also noted that families would not observe the process taking place because it would be upsetting to see your family member in a state of decay after death.

Another question: if the essence of who you are is your soul, when your body dies, what is the purpose of keeping the bones, besides for memory? A sister prays over them each day and lights incense to cleanse and bless the space. Nikos said that the nuns understand that their physical life is temporary, and that their real future is there in the ossuary. That seemed like a pretty bleak way to put it. But it is a guarantee that those that come after you will continue to honor and pray for you.

### ***Wednesday, June 19th -- Day Seven***

This morning we worked in the garden. The monastery is self-sustained, growing all their own vegetables and selling the excess. We got to help plant beans as well as tie up some growing vines. The monastery employs a handful of men as gardeners. Even though they didn't speak English and we didn't speak Greek, we had a lovely time together having coffee. They were loud and boisterous and laughing, and it was a jarring but welcome difference from the silent contemplative atmosphere of the monastery. No doubt both have their benefits, but this was the type of efficient camaraderie I had been missing the other day.

After lunch we left the monastery for Kavála, where we went to the beach, saw some historical sites, and got dinner. We passed the remains of an aqueduct, which was the background for speeding traffic around a small intersection as well as some shops. We visited the mosaic commemorating St. Paul's first steps in Greece, which is a glowing byzantine style mosaic, and also passed many unknown examples of modern murals--brightly colored and highly stylized graffiti. The inextricable coexistence of the old and the new in Greece is possibly the most fascinating thing about it.

### ***Thursday, June 20th -- Day Eight***

Before visiting the monastery we stopped by the archeological museum in Sérres. It is inside the old covered market where expensive goods were housed and sold. There were similar statues, jars, jewelry, and mosaics as we had seen in previous museums, but it was interesting to see the arches and domes of centuries-old architecture from the inside. There were also examples of contemporary art for sale inside the museum. It was interesting to see these pieces side by side with the artifacts and housed inside this historic mall. Besides graffiti on the outside walls of churches and ruins, this was perhaps the most explicit coexistence of the old and the new.

Today was our last day at the monastery. We spent most of the day doing small tasks and holding conversations with the nuns. It was inspiring that their faith was so strong that they always had an answer. It was disconcerting in equal measure how frankly they would say that moth paths that people can take would send you to hell. Somehow talking to these women both made you want to know God and practice faith while simultaneously being so offputting in the assertion that two belief systems couldn't be equally true, that abortion is murder, and evolution isn't real. I was comforted into thinking my questions had all been answered, but later looking back I wondered if I had gotten any answers at all.

Afterwards Nardeen and I began wiping down every stainless steel surface in the kitchen--spoiler: it's all stainless steel. Like every other task, this was done on a schedule and in a specific way. Three people worked together: one soaped, one rinsed, one rinsed again and then dried. When we were mostly finished, someone came in to tell us that the gift shop would close in 10 minutes, so we rushed over. As funny as it seemed that the nuns had a gift shop, we all still wanted way too many goods than our suitcases could handle to take home. It seemed everyone wanted to carry away as many little pieces of the place as they could.

After dinner we learned a song and a dance to perform and that night's synaxis. As we performed them, the nuns laughed and clapped along. We also each said a few words about how the experience affected us, which seemed to move them greatly. In turn, they showed us a

video of the history of the monastery, from the rubble it began as, through the fire that tore apart their hard work, to the tranquil beauty of today. When it was time to leave, each of us lingered, staring back at the church or up at the sky, not wanting to exit the walls. The seminar was to be an exploration of material objects, but I think the experience was much more about the immaterial. Yes, we saw icons and tapestries and even bones, but I think each of us was touched by something different that it would take much reflection to identify.

### ***Friday, June 21st -- Day Nine***

Today we returned to Thessaloniki. The city is alive and vibrant but felt run-down and dirty. As a port town, it is enclosed by beautiful blue water, but trash and debris collects along the edge of the boardwalk.

This time politics is the thread that will carry through the sights we've seen. First we saw an old bath house, which besides having the goal of cleanliness was also the locale for many social and political conversations and agendas. We also saw the Arch of Galerius, a symbol of the emperor's power and the unity of the tetrarchy, standing in the center of the city bearing images of battle and treaty. All the while we passed a constant slew of graffiti. There was scarcely any wall left uncovered. Graffiti would shout feminist messages, demand lower rent and higher pay, or simply proclaim anarchy. While these political messages don't quite reach the scale of Galerius's arch, they are quite prolific--turn a corner and there's at least two (but likely MANY more) on each street.

On the way home tonight we passed by a huge crowd lining the entire street, wearing all black and smoking, drinking, and hanging out on the edges of ruins we had visited earlier in the day. It is funny how growing up around these pieces of history renders them entirely mundane. I think this must be the justification for the amount of litter thrown over fences into historic sites or the graffiti on ancient walls.

### ***Saturday, June 22nd - Day Ten***

After you see so many beautiful churches, they all begin to run together. When I look back at my photos, each church has a distinct personality and feel, possibly differing in color schemes, mosaics vs murals, patterns vs narratives, but they are all intricate, and opulent. I remember yesterday being startled at the commercialization of one church--it had a gift shop, and a separate kiosk with goodies inside. To buy a candle you could donate greater and greater sums, up to €15 for the largest one. It turns out the different tiers of candles for purchase isn't uncommon in these churches, but I still find it strange. "For a down payment of 9.99, you can secure yourself a lakeside view in heaven!" we joked.

We also visited the Heptapyrgion, which was once a castle, then a jail, and now a location that hosts city social events. From the Heptapyrgion you could look out over the entire city, watching the buildings run down to the sea, and then beyond all the way to the hazy blue horizon. We stopped by many pieces of the old city walls, including the White Tower, which was cool to see how much the city had grown beyond its once quite permanent limits.

When we finished with our tour we took a boat ride across the bay--this gave us a different view of the city, a further out image of what you see approaching from the sea. From the boat we could trace together the pieces of the walls we had seen and locate a few

monuments. It was funny that one of the best ways to get a view of the whole city with its historical landmarks was to hop on a modern booze cruise designed to look like a pirate ship.