

Harding University Greece, Fall 2010 (Report #1)

Dale W. Manor

Our trip to Greece went without any hitches and all the plane connections (at least that we had to make) were on time. We met the group in Newark NJ for our transatlantic flight, arriving in Athens with enough daylight to travel to our facility (known often as the Artemis) and begin orientation. We went to Athens on Saturday after our arrival, part of the exercise to orient the students to the use of the public transportation system. We were planning to meander in the market area known as the Plaka for the afternoon before returning to the Artemis, but just as we arrived in Athens it began to rain—this was in the beginning of September! While I make no claim of exposure to all of the weather idiosyncracies of Greece, this is by far the earliest we have had rain; usually it does not come until maybe late October or early November. The rain curtailed our afternoon foray so we all rendezvoused at a local, large, and modern shopping center where we milled around and had dinner.

Our first real sightseeing trip was to Athens and the Acropolis with the agora. For a long time the Greeks have been working to reconstruct, restore and repair parts of the buildings on the Acropolis. Soon after my first trip to Athens in the 1970s, they began to build scaffolding along a number of the buildings, which has obscured the beauty of the buildings. They have worked through the Erechtheion and much of the Propylea. Work continues on the Parthenon itself, but much of the scaffolding has been removed and transferred toward the western end of the structure. The most recent focus of such work was the temple to Athena Nike, a quaint little temple that originally accommodated a statue of Athena with her wings removed. Just a few days before our arrival the authorities had finished the work on the Nike temple and removed the scaffolding, permitting a wonderful view of the structure.



Two theories exist to explain the presence of a wingless Athena in the Athena Nike temple. The modern pragmatists argue that the wings were removed to accommodate the statue simply because the structure was not large enough to house her with her wings. Pausanias, a second century “travel guide” narrator, however, says that the wings were removed to prevent Athena from flying away leaving the city vulnerable.

A visit to Mars’ Hill, also known as the Areopagus, gives an outstanding view of the Acropolis and the features of the Athenian agora to the west. A stroll through the area reveals the remnants of many of the religious shrines and foci to which Paul would respond when he said, “... I perceive that in every way you are very religious” (Acts 17:22). Paul’s success with the gospel in Athens was minimal (Acts 17:34) so Paul traveled westward to Corinth (Acts 19:1)—a town of significantly different character.

In addition to visiting the Acropolis and Agora, Sharon and I returned later and visited the Pnyx—the location where the men of Athens would convene to implement the democratic system that they developed in the 5th century BC. The area is now wide open with a speaker’s platform still standing. It was thrilling to be in Athens not only to visit the places that have such significance to the Bible student, but also to visit the place where democracy was born. So much of our rich western civilization finds its roots in practices from ancient Greece. The photo shows the corner of the speaker’s platform in the Pnyx with the Acropolis in the background and the Areopagus (the large mass of bare stone in the distance on the left).



Our trip to the Peloponnese took us to Corinth, Epidaurus and Mycenae. At Corinth we climbed the Acrocorinthus (the extremely high acropolis of Corinth) which provided an outstanding view of the ancient city below as well as the two ports that Corinth strategically guarded—Cenchraea and Lechaion. One of the sites that I investigated on the top of the Acrocorinthus was the springhouse of Peirene. It is a spring on the acropolis of Corinth (quite a rarity) and dates from at least the 4th century BC. In mythology, it was the location where Pegasus was drinking water when Bellerophon caught him. It was interesting that our guide said she had never been to the spring and did not really know where it was. We visited the standard sites at Corinth, but took in two other locations, which usually are not on the itineraries.



Lechaion, the northern port city of Corinth, preserves a huge basilica church dating from the 5th century BC. When I say “huge,” it really is! Its length is 3 meters (i.e., ca. 10 feet) longer than St. Peter’s Cathedral in Rome. It is not as wide as St. Peter’s, but it is longer! It is impressive to realize that Paul’s work in Corinth was successful enough that, in spite of the problems that the church confronted as indicated in 1-2 Corinthians, by the 5th century there were enough Christians in the area to warrant construction of such a large building! In the photograph, I am at one end of the building and the students are at the far end—barely visible!



The other site near Corinth was the location of the Isthmian games. The Isthmian games were one of four Panhellenic games of antiquity (Delphi, Nemea, and Olympia being the others). They occurred every two years, and given Paul's eighteen month stay in Corinth (Acts 18:11), he likely was exposed to the games or at least the reputation associated with them. Some have suggested that this association may have been part of the reason for Paul's occasional athletic allusions in his correspondence. A unique feature at the site is the preservation of a starting gate for the sprint. A photograph of part of it is to the right and shows a pit in which a person would hold the strings leading to a series of posts. The posts had hinged gates across the starting line and when the person let go of the strings, the posts would all drop at the same time and the runners would take off.



Epidaurus was an important site of healing in the ancient Greek world. Most notable at the site is the very well-preserved theatre. The acoustics of the theatre are so effective that one can hear the ping of a coin in the orchestra without artificial amplification. The acoustical "sweet spot" in the center of the orchestra is so well situated that if you stand on that spot and speak, your voice comes back to you as if you are surrounded by microphones and speakers.



A major site of non-biblical importance that we visited was Mycenae. The site was "excavated" by Heinrich Schliemann, the famous (or infamous as some would assess) archaeologist who excavated Troy. His major goal was to unearth the home of King Agamemnon who had fought against Troy. While it is not absolutely certain that the site is ancient Mycenae, the magnitude of the finds certainly lend strong credence to that identification. The excavation unearthed impressive gold and luxury items in the graves around the site. The stronghold was well built on a virtually impregnable hill surrounded by deep declivities on three sides. It was functionally only accessible from the west. The fortifications facing west were massive and impressed the ancient Greeks to such a degree that they referred to the fortification walls as "cyclopaean." They inferred that only the proverbial Cyclops of mythological fame could have built such a massive wall.



While Mycenae has no direct connections with the Bible, there are peripheral connections. There is strong evidence that the Philistines had their roots in the Mycenaean world. Our work at Beth-shemesh as well as more numerous finds from Ekron, Ashkelon, Ashdod and Gath (Tell es-Safi) have found significant finds demonstrating ties to the Mycenaean world. These are manifest in the Philistine ceramics, burial customs, architecture, as well as some words found in the Old Testament which show Greek backgrounds.



(the last two photos are 1] some of the gold from the graves at Mycenae, and 2] the main gate into Mycenae with Sharon and Beth James standing in the gateway)

