

## Kate Bracher — Travels in Greece

Ever since the year 2000, I have had to go to Greece every summer for 4-6 weeks. (I can hear you saying, “aw, too bad!”) This is because my partner, Cynthia Shelmerdine (Bryn Mawr '70) is an archaeologist working on a project in the southwest of the Peloponnese. They are digging a Mycenaean town, which dates to the Late Bronze Age (1700-1200 BC), near the town of Pylos. This is way before the time period we tend to think of for ancient Greece — the age of Socrates, Plato, Pericles, Sophocles — and is basically the period Homer thinks he's writing about 600 years later. The project is directed by a professor from the University of Missouri at St. Louis; he runs it as a field school, so most years there are about 30 students working on the dig. (You can see a slightly out-of-date discussion of it at the project website, [iklaina.org](http://iklaina.org).)

Cynthia is their pottery expert; so she is not in the field but in the lab room in the small town of Pylos, where we are based. The diggers collect potsherds and other artifacts, and bring them in each day; the pottery gets washed, dried in the sun, and then Cynthia can look at it and identify what the pieces are and when they were made. It's amazing how much you can tell from a 2-inch broken rim of a drinking cup or bowl!

At first I just tagged along (because who would turn down a chance to go to Greece!) But gradually I got roped in also, and worked for years as the lab's organizer, logging in bags of potsherds as they arrived, shepherding them through the washing, drying and study process, and eventually seeing that they were stored where someone could find them again if they need to. I also logged in other finds — animal bones, occasional bits of bronze, worked stone — and there are staff experts in the lab to study those too, and also to study plant matter (seeds and such). You can learn about the Mycenaean diet from these. And in the lab we have an illustrator who draws the important pieces, and a photographer, and a conservator who puts broken pots back together, if enough pieces have been found. This is sort of like putting together a jigsaw puzzle where you have a bunch of pieces from half a dozen puzzles, and you have no idea how many there are from any single puzzle, and what the end result should look like. Each student spends a couple of days in the lab so they can see how things are done. I finally retired from this last year, so I am once again just hanging around the edges, helping if I can.

Pylos is a small town (2500 or so) on the southwest coast of the mainland, and we stay in a hotel there, with a view from our balcony of the small harbor where fishing boats come and go (they tie up at the waterfront and sell fish right off the boat). Occasionally a cruise ship comes in for a day, and tourists are bussed up to a famous site not far away, the Palace of Nestor, where they can see what a Mycenaean palace was like. The town relies on tourism, fishing, and olives — it is in the middle of the area where Kalamata olives come from. It has a wonderful central square or plateia, with outdoor cafes and restaurants, and kiosks selling

everything from newspapers to cigarettes to suntan lotion, and a wide open space in the middle where Greek children ride their bikes and scooters up and down, and kick soccer balls around. I often walk down (the equivalent of a block or two) to sit in the morning and have an iced coffee and watch Greek life. My favorite cafe is under an enormous ancient plane tree that spreads wide and provides welcome shade. Nearby tables have groups of older Greek men sitting around with coffee, playing with their worry beads, and chatting with each other. Our project provides dinner at the hotel (very good, and enormous portions, so Cynthia and I in fact share one dinner on two plates). But occasionally we like to go out, and down to one of the restaurants on the plateia. At our favorite one, rather than looking at a menu, you go into the kitchen and the lady shows you what's in all the pots, and you choose from there — Greek salads, appetizers like tzatziki or artichokes or eggplant salad, and meats like lamb, pork, chicken or beef in yummy sauces, or fish (fish is expensive, oddly enough), vegetables (green beans, zucchini, eggplant) and potatoes (French fries or cooked with the meats). And of course a carafe of wine to go with it. They usually bring you fruit for dessert — right now there are wonderful melons in season. So we don't go hungry! And this whole meal has probably been preceded by a visit to our favorite place by the waterside to have a pre-prandial ouzo. Others in the group often go out after dinner for more to drink; we admire the sunset over the island of Sphakteria and then tend to retire early, since the lab people leave at about 7 a.m. to walk up to the lab. (The field people leave at 6 a.m. for a half-hour bus ride to the site, and are done around 1:30, since it gets really hot up there in the afternoon.)

The most exciting find of the project so far was in 2010, when students washing pottery found a piece of a Mycenaean clay tablet written in the Linear B script used back then. This script, which looks nothing like the modern Greek alphabet, was used by the Mycenaeans to write an early form of Greek in the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries BC. It was deciphered in 1952, and tablets have been found at several sites in Greece, but always connected with a palace. The Palace of Nestor, which I mentioned earlier, has the largest archive of these on the mainland. They have been extensively studied, and seem to consist entirely of administrative records — taxes, lists of workers in various crafts etc. — but no literature or history. Still, you can learn a lot about a society from such records, and Cynthia is one of the relatively few scholars who can read these things. So it was particularly exciting for her to find one, especially since it's the first one ever found at a non-palatial site. If you saw the recent PBS show on The Greeks, it was featured in the first episode. So does that tell us literacy was more widespread than was thought, or that the scribes traveled around more than we thought, or ??

Since we have been coming for so many years, we know several people in town, who are always happy to see us back. It's sort of like coming to your second home for a month in the summer, and seeing old friends again. The digging season ended this year on July 9; we had been in Pylos since June 5. So we

were ready to go home, nice as this place is. We closed up the lab, said good-bye to folks and flew home from Athens on July 12. We're already thinking ahead to next summer! And if anyone is interested in travel in Greece, feel free to get in touch with me with your questions.