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This year Epirus, a mountainous region in north-western Greece, celebrates its liberation from Ottoman rule and incorporation into the Hellenic Republic. Besides the attractions of its rugged natural beauty, Epirus is a land steeped in ancient myths, where the modern traveller can follow in the footsteps of Classical heroes.

Emptying into the Ionian Sea just a few miles south-east of the pretty seaside town of Parga, the Acheron, or 'River of Woe', was regarded by ancient and medieval writers as one of the principal waterways of the Underworld. Virgil described Charon the ferryman transporting the souls of the dead to the Halls of Hades across the Acheron, while Dante wrote of the river forming the boundary of Hell. Today the translucent water and reed-lined banks of the Acheron rarely appear woe-ful or threatening to modern travellers who can catch one of the small fishing-boats from the coastal village of Ammoudia, before chugging

upstream in the wake of Charon and the innumerable ancient Greek pilgrims who also made this journey in order to commune with the dead at the Nekromanteion, or 'Oracle of Death' (6).

Set back a little over a mile from the river, an 18th-century monastery now all but covers the site of the Nekromanteion, but the polygonal stone blocks ringing the complex date to the 4th century BC.



1. View of the Epirot coast from the crumbling battlements of Parga castle, with the clear waters of the Ionian Sea below. Picture courtesy of Jennifer Slot.

2. Local fishing boat on the River Acheron. Today we can follow in the wake of the wandering king Odysseus, sailing up the river to the temple of the Necromanteion.

3. Roman mosaic, showing Odysseus and the Sirens, 3rd century AD. Tunis-Bardo National Museum. Photograph: James Beresford.

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Epirus: land of legends

James Beresford follows in the footsteps of Classical heroes across a largely forgotten region of Greece where some of the great events of ancient myth and history were played out

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Although recent research has cast some doubt on the sacredness of the site, votive clay figurines featuring Persephone, the reluctant bride of Hades, dating from the 7th to 5th centuries BC, discovered nearby, strongly support the belief that this was indeed the ancient portal to the Underworld.

Today the focal-point of the sanctuary is found in the crypt of the monastery's church where the eerie lighting and frequently chilly atmosphere of the subterranean vaulted room still fuel the imagination (2). It is down here on the far wall of the chamber that the long vertical fissure is found; an opening that still threatens to open into a cruel maw that could devour the souls of the living and send them plummeting down into Hades.

The Nekromanteion's most famous ancient visitor was the wandering hero Odysseus (3) who, on the advice of the sorceress Circe, came to the threshold of Hades to seek the counsel of the dead seer,



5. Tiresias appears to Ulysses during the sacrificing' (1780-1785), Johann Heinrich Füssli (1741-1825). Watercolour and tempera on cardboard, 91.4 x 62.8cm. Albertina Museum, Vienna, Austria.

6. The subterranean chamber of the Nekromanteion in Epirus showing the crack in the wall leading to the Underworld. Photograph courtesy of TijsB.

Teiresias (5). While there Odysseus also encountered the wraiths of many of the greatest warriors of the Heroic Age – such as mighty Heracles and the recently murdered King Agamemnon. It was, however, the soul of Achilles who provided the bleakest impression of the afterlife: *'Subtle and overbold Odysseus, what venture will ever tempt your mind more reckless than this? What daring has led you down to the house of Hades, the dwelling-place of the dead who have no understanding, of the wraiths of mortals who have perished?... Odysseus, do not gloss over death. I would rather be above ground still and labouring for some poor landless man, than be lord over all the lifeless dead'* (Odyssey, 11.405-532). But long after his visit to the Nekromanteion, the fate of Odysseus continued to be intimately bound up with that of Epirus. Following the blood-soaked conclusion of the *Odyssey*, the king of Ithaca soon returned to his wandering, womanising ways; in the lost tale *Telegony* (a summary of which

survives in Proclus' *Chrestomathy*), Odysseus sailed to Epirus and married Kallidike, queen of the Thesprotians, with whom he had a son, Polypoites. It seems that Odysseus spent many years in Epirus and it was only when Kallidike was killed during a war with a neighbouring tribe that the old hero returned to Ithaca, allowing Polypoites to assume the Thesprotian throne.

But Odysseus was not the only Homeric hero to put down roots in Epirus. After the end of the Trojan War, Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, came to the region, bringing with him the captive princess, Andromache. It was their son, Molossus, who gave his name to one of the most powerful of Epirot tribes, the ruling dynasty of which would ever after claim descent from these mythological ancestors. By the mid-fourth century BC, one of the most prominent members of this Molossian royal household was Polyxena, more famously remembered as Olympias, the name she

assumed when the horse of her husband, Philip II of Macedonia, triumphed at the Olympic Games of 356 BC; the same year in which their son, Alexander the Great, was also born.

Given his mythical family connection to Achilles, it was of little surprise that Alexander should so readily identify with the greatest of Homeric warriors. Sleeping with a copy of Homer's *Iliad* under his pillow, Alexander visited Troy at the very beginning of his Persian campaign, bearing away with him the sacred arms and armour of Achilles. While at Troy, he also *'offered sacrifice to Priam upon the altar of Zeus to appease the wrath of the Trojan king against the progeny of Neoptolemus, from whom Alexander himself was descended'* (Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, 1.11).

The rumours that Alexander





was the son of Zeus, rather than of Philip, may also derive from Epirus and the nearby? sacred site of Dodona where it was claimed Zeus communicated with mortals. It was possibly here that Olympias first began her strange relationship – be it as acolyte or lover – with the Father of the Gods. While the sacred oak tree in which Zeus was said to reside has long since vanished, the impressive Hellenistic ruins of Dodona provide clear testament to the wealth and esteem of the sanctuary's oracle and priesthood.

The greatest of the Epirot kings was also born from the royal line of Achilles. Second cousin to Alexander the Great, Pyrrhus (319/18–272 BC) would prove himself one of the most astute generals and statesmen of the early Hellenistic period. From 280 BC until his death eight years later, Pyrrhus inflicted a string of defeats on the armies of the Roman Republic, victories that were, however, hard won and costly in the lives of his own soldiers, leading to the famous phrase, 'Pyrrhic victory'. Yet Pyrrhus was not just a warlord, his building activities can still be seen at Ambrakia (modern Arta) that he established as his

7. The theatre of Kassope. Over the centuries boulders have broken away from the rocky outcrop towering above, tumbling through the lichen covered limestone benches before coming to rest in the area of the orchestra. Photograph: courtesy of Razvan Orendovici.

8. The Late Roman/ Byzantine walls of Nikopolis. Photograph: courtesy of Thomas Quine.

9. Battle of Actium, Lorenzo Castro, 1672. Oil on canvas. National Maritime Museum, Greenwich.

10. Katagogeion of Kassope with 17 ground-floor rooms facing on to a central peristyle court. Photograph: courtesy of Razvan Orendovici.

new capital in 295 BC. Visitors to the site can still see the remains of buildings, such as the temple of Apollo, the theatre, and parts of the circuit walls all of which date to this early Hellenistic period.

The most evocative ancient city in Epirus is, however, that of Kassope, dramatically situated on in the Zalongo Mountains and reached by a narrow road that twists and turns up the pine-covered slopes. First excavated in the 1950s, with later archaeological research carried out between 1977 and 1983, the fine state of preservation and regularity of the street pattern makes Kassope one of the finest surviving examples of an ancient city laid out using the theoretical principles formulated by Hippodamus of Miletus, the 5th-century philosopher who is considered to be the founder of urban planning (10).

Located in the south-east section of the city, not far from the entrance to the archaeological site, is the agora, or market-place, the beating heart of commercial and civic life in Kassope. Next to it are the remains of the *bouleuterion*, where the city council met, and *prytaneion* (administrative centre) within

which once burned the holy flame of Hestia, goddess of the hearth, whose fires ensured the continued survival and well-being of the city. Nearby are the well-preserved remains of a large building usually interpreted as the *katagogeion*, the hostel that provided accommodation for dignitaries and their retinues visiting Kassope (10). On the western edge of the city, a large theatre with seating for 2,000 spectators (7) has been carved into the mountainside. Over the centuries, the southern and western edges of the city have eroded and tumbled over the steep cliffs that gave the city a naturally fortified position. But even these precipitous crags could not save Kassope in 167 BC when the Roman army of Lucius Aemilius Paullus arrived, sacked the city and enslaved at least 100,000 Epirots.

Kassope offers wonderful views across to where the Gulf of Ambrakia meets the Ionian Sea and it was on this stretch of water that perhaps the most important battle in history took place on 2 September, 31 BC. One of the largest naval engagements ever fought, the battle of Actium pitted three





of the most famous figures of the ancient world against each other: Octavian, nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar, versus the ill-fated lovers, Cleopatra and Mark Antony.

While Octavian's fleet contained at least 400 warships and about 40,000 soldiers, Antony and his Egyptian queen were able to muster only about 230 ships and 22,000 soldiers, but many of the ships of their combined force were huge, described as *'rising high out of the water with towers and platforms that resembled floating fortresses and cities, the sea groaned under their weight and the wind laboured to move them along'* (Florus, *Epitome of Roman History*, 21.11.5).

It was, however, partly a result of the size and cumbersome nature of their massive war-galleys that led to the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra. The smaller, more manoeuvrable ships of Octavian, led by his capable general Agrippa, proved too agile

for the unwieldy behemoths ranged against them. After only a couple of hours of fighting, Cleopatra ordered her 60 ships to raise sail and make for Egypt and Antony, seeing her quit the battle, fled after her, leaving the majority of his armada to be destroyed (9).

At Actium the curtain closed on the Hellenistic period: within a year of the battle both Antony and Cleopatra had committed suicide, bringing an end to three centuries of Ptolemaic rule in Egypt and gifting control over the wealthy grain-producing lands of the Nile to Rome. The way was also clear for Octavian to dominate the entire Mediterranean; less than four years after his victory he would proclaim himself 'Augustus' and 'Imperator', bringing an end to five centuries of the Roman Republic and initiating an era of empire that would last another 500 years in Western Europe and span 1500 in the Byzantine East.

Actium also had vast repercussions for Epirus. Following the battle, Octavian ordered the establishment of a new settlement, Nikopolis, 'Victory City' (modern Preveza), overlooking where the fighting had taken place. The four-yearly festival of the Actia, which included athletic competitions, musical contests and horse races was revived there by Octavian. Nikopolis also grew into an intellectual centre – the great Stoic philosopher Epictetus established a school there near the end of the 1st century AD. Modern visitors to the



11. One of the many narrow paved streets and alleyways that criss-cross the site of Kassope. Photograph: courtesy of Razvan Orendovici.

site can still see sections of its monumental architecture: the theatre, *nymphaeum*, sections of an aqueduct that originally stretched 30 miles, and the circuit walls of the city (10). With the establishment of Nikopolis, Kassope and Arta were abandoned and their inhabitants forcibly resettled in Octavian's new city. Just to the north of Nikopolis a monument was built to commemorate the victory at Actium, constructed on the spot where Octavian had pitched his tent before the battle and dedicated to Neptune and Mars. Originally decorated with the rams removed from Antony and Cleopatra's captured warships, the bronze beaks that once adorned the monument have long vanished, but the sockets on to which they originally fitted are still visible.

To most ancient Greeks, Epirus was a frontier region; the home of wild peoples that the civilising influence of the Classical states to the south never really influenced. But now, as Epirus celebrates 100 years as a part of modern Greece, is the perfect time to explore a land that retains its mysterious archaic character and an archaeological heritage that speaks of the rich mythology and history of this region. ■

The pretty coastal town of Parga is the most convenient base for exploring Epirus. The Rosanea Hotel (www.rosanea.com) offers attractive, reasonably priced rooms and its knowledgeable staff can advise visitors wishing to explore the sites.

