Temples, castles, tombs and a running track

More travels in Greece

David and Nicki Jervis

Our mid-summer Greek adventure took us to new places and some old favourites.

We dug deep into antiquity and also visited the middle ages. We explored temples, ancient stadia, churches, castles, a philosopher's classroom, an underground gold-filled museum, subterranean tombs, mountains and waterfalls.

From time to time we paused our immersion in days gone by and made sure we enjoyed the sea, sun, food and drink - all part of the rich experience of this wonderful land.

David and Nicki Jervis - 2019

Unusually, our account of this trip begins at the end – the omega rather than the alpha ! On our last day we were taken to a place we had never heard of – an ancient site that was so stunning and surprising that we wanted to place it in pole position just in case readers were distracted and failed to complete this volume.

Here follows our story of Ancient Mieza and the Tomb of Judgement. Hopefully, we capture the atmosphere as well as the images.

First, as if to whet the appetite, we came across this restored theatre of Mieza, originally built 4,000 years ago then developed and changed over the years. There is evidence that the theatre was in use until the 4th Century AD.

Over 700,000 Euros have been spent on its restoration since 2007.

Wherever you go in beautiful Greece there is the land on which you walk and then there is the ancient land underneath – a forgotten world of mystery and mythology.

There lies theatres, streets, houses, market places, temples – places where people lived, played, worshipped and were buried. Places that thrived and then died.

Greece is not alone in having hidden civilisations beneath its fields and pavements but it does seem that wherever a pickaxe or digger turns over the earth, evidence of life in antiquity is revealed.

Ancient Mieza is such a place although you will not find its name on any map.

In a fertile plain at the foot of the Vermio Mountains excavations have revealed the remains of the city of Mieza. All you will see now is acres and acres of fruit trees, mainly peach and apple, but these hide one of the major cities of the Kingdom of Macedonia which reached its height of prosperity about 2,300 years ago.

Mieza is encircled by remarkable places which have featured in previous writings and will be referred to later – to the north is Edessa, that place of magnificent waterfalls. To the south is Veria, where St Paul preached after being ejected from Thessaloniki, and the tomb of Phillip 2nd, father of Alexander the Great, at Vergina where amazing golden artefacts can be seen in the underground museum.

To the east of Mieza is Pella, birthplace of Alexander, and the location of a remarkable museum with excavated houses featuring colourful and dramatic paintings on floors and walls.

Close to Mieza is Naoussa, famous for the best of Greek wine, but also the peaceful, leafy site of the School of Aristotle, where the great philosopher taught the young Alexander.

To the east of Naoussa are two little villages called Lefkadia and Kopanos and it is in this area that, it is believed, Ancient Mieza was centred. Found there has been a wonderful theatre and six Macedonian tombs.

Now let us tell you about the day we were shown two tombs.

It was so hot . Even the air con in our taxi was struggling. We stopped under the shade of a plane tree and climbed out, to be greeted by a limping dog called Pluto and a friendly hound named Persephone.

With them was a rather excited and enthusiastic woman called Christina. We had no idea who she was but she began to lead us up a dusty road between endless rows of peach trees.

We arrived at the top of a wide, concrete staircase leading to what looked like the front of an underground, metal air hanger. Christina disappeared only to emerge through a small door and she beckoned us to enter.

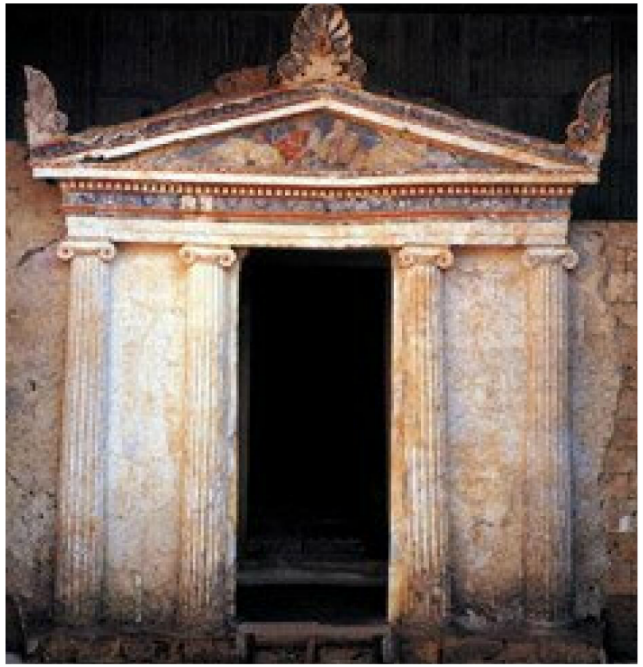
Well, you've seen them in the films and books but to come face to face with a massive Ancient Greek mausoleum in its natural surroundings - underground and dusty but complete with sarcophagus (coffin) and with colours preserved for thousands of years, was just stunning.

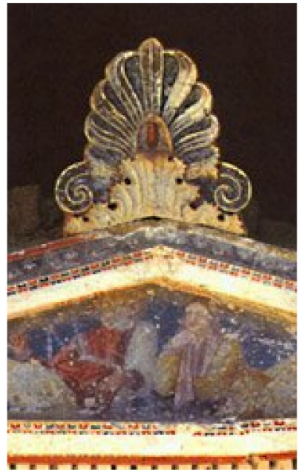
This was the 2,350 years old Tomb of Palmettes (a design of radiating petals) also known as the Tomb of Flowers.

When created it must have been breathtaking, featuring a beautiful ceiling painting – now fading – of six flowers alternating with water lilies on a blue green background, as if floating on the surfaces of a pond.

The tomb was excavated in 1971-73 and consists of two vaulted chambers (an antechamber and burial chamber). It is covered by an earth mound or tumulus 17m in diameter.

A large marble door had fallen into the tomb and the burial urn containing the ashes of the anonymous deceased was stolen by grave robbers.





Journey to the underworld: the steps down to the Tomb of the Palmettes.

Breathless from our unexpected visit to this ancient place of the dead, but more from clambering up the steep steps, we walked back down the track to somewhere even more astonishing.

We now understood that Christina worked for the Government as a guide to ancient sites in the area.

She led us down more steps and, passing through another metal door we found ourselves in the Tomb of Judgement.

The very name conjures up images of Greek mythological mystery and this two-storey underground mausoleum had plenty.

The twin-chambered Tomb of Judgement was discovered in 1954 when a new road was being built. With a facade of 8.6m high by 8.68m long, it is the largest Macedonian tomb to have been discovered. Explanation of the paintings on the front can be found overleaf.

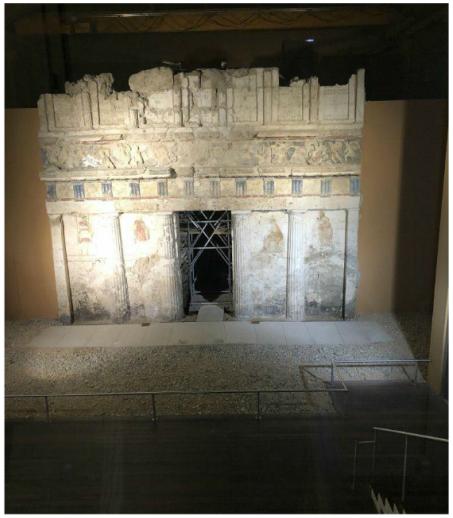
The tomb is adorned with four coloured paintings. The first is believed to be of the deceased - the occupant of this burial place – possibly one of Alexander the Great's faithful generals.

A reproduction of the paintings, as seen opposite, is placed on a side wall to illustrate the explanation.

The second image is that of Hermes, the soul sender and escort, leading the dead man into the underworld where he meets those depicted in the two other images – the sons of Zeus, Aeacus and Radamanthys, who are there to judge whether the soul was to be plunged to eternal damnation in Hades or delivered to paradise.

We don't know the decision of the judges but whatever his fate, he was buried in magnificent style.

On the left, an example of an information board outside the tomb and right, showing the steps down to the tomb.



We go back in time now - not thousands of years but about 16 days to the beginning of our trip.

Moments after the hire car was delivered to the airport hotel we made a speedy getaway along the Odos Attica motorway, round the top of the magnificent white sprawl that is Athens and readied ourselves for the regular toll stops – all with different fees requiring a dig around our tin of coins for denominations rarely used.

We aimed south towards Elefsina, Corinth and our goal, the Peloponnese.

Over the Corinth Canal – an astonishing cleft in the earth and a remarkable piece of engineering but one that never achieved its purpose because in the end it was too small for the ships that grew too big – we began a keen lookout for the signs to Ancient Nemea.

We had been down this road many times but had rarely made any right or left turns as we took advantage of the new, quiet motorway to Kalamata.

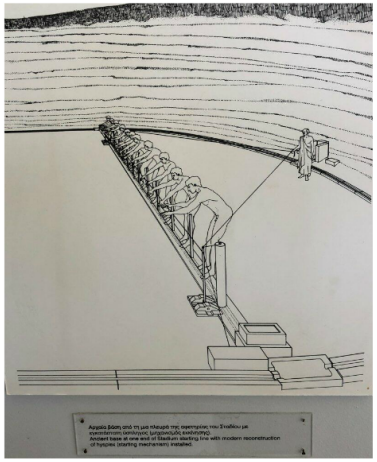
The sign arrived, we turned off and our first adventure began.

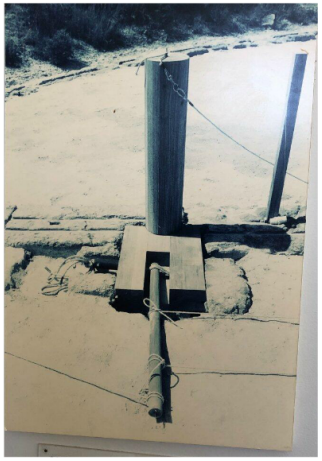
The site of Ancient Nemea is in two parts – the stadium and Temple of Zeus, together with a small museum.

The Nemean Games, alongside the more famous ones at Olympia and Delphi, was a great event in the Greek world.
It is said the games were established in 573 BC as a memorial to baby Opheltes, son of King Lykourgos of Nemea. A maid momentarily lay the sleeping child down in a bed of wild celery where he was attacked and killed by a serpent.

This is why winners at the games received a wreath of celery leaves whereas at Olympia it was olive leaves; Delphi chose laurel and Isthmia awarded a crown of pine leaves.

Modern visitors follow in the footsteps of athletic predecessors into the stadium through an entrance tunnel. Almost 2,600 years since their creation, it is still possible to take part in the games which have been revived and next take place in 2020.





The starting line at the Nemean Games was a complicated affair.

Even though it was a long time ago, a sophisticated piece of engineering had been created - a sort of catapult-like contraption called a Hysplex. This controlled the start by releasing two taut ropes/wires stretched in front of the naked, bare footed runners.

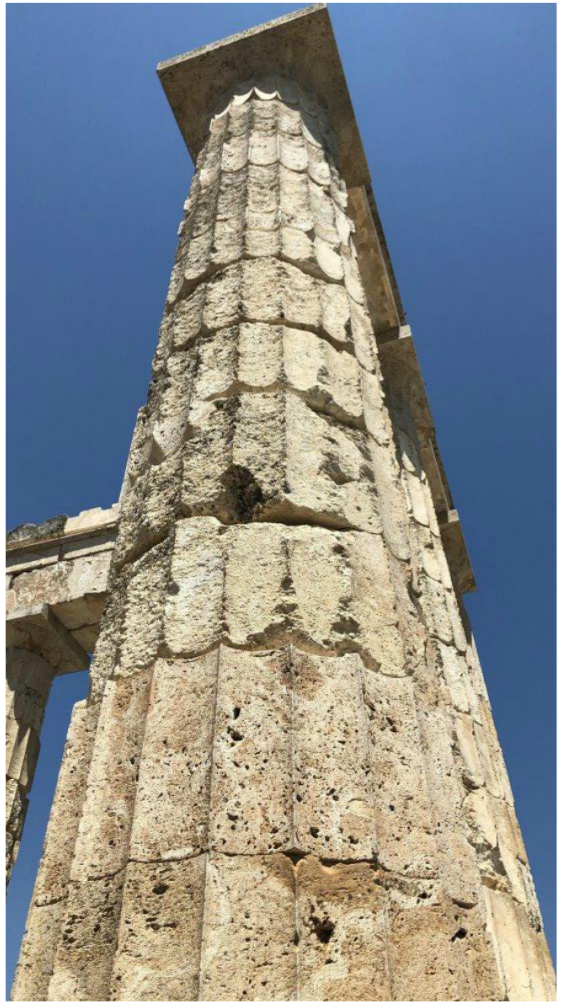
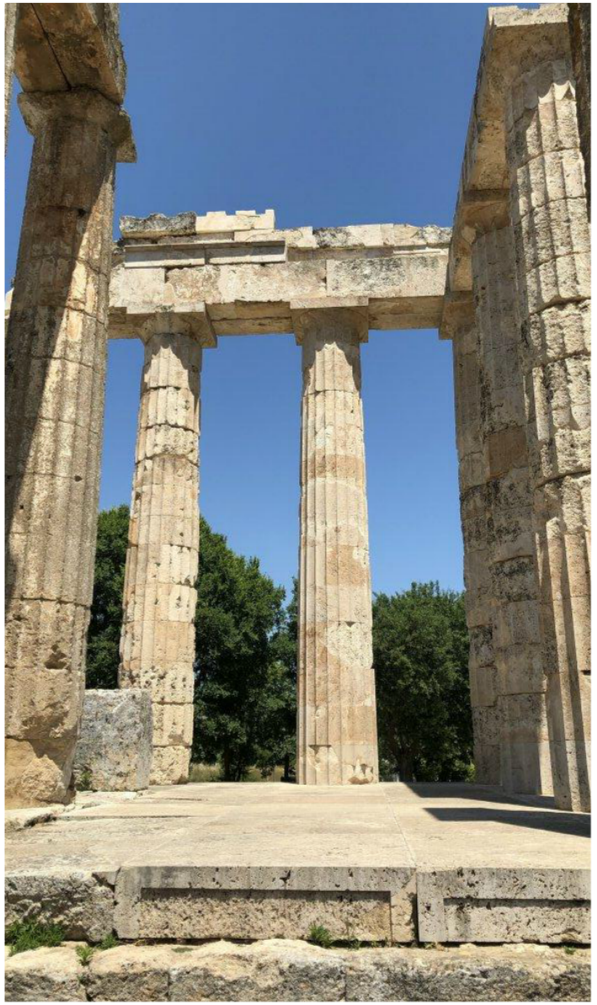
If a contestant false started, he tripped on the wires, was disqualified and flogged.

The games consisted of many different events including a number of foot races, boxing, wrestling, javelin and pentathlon.

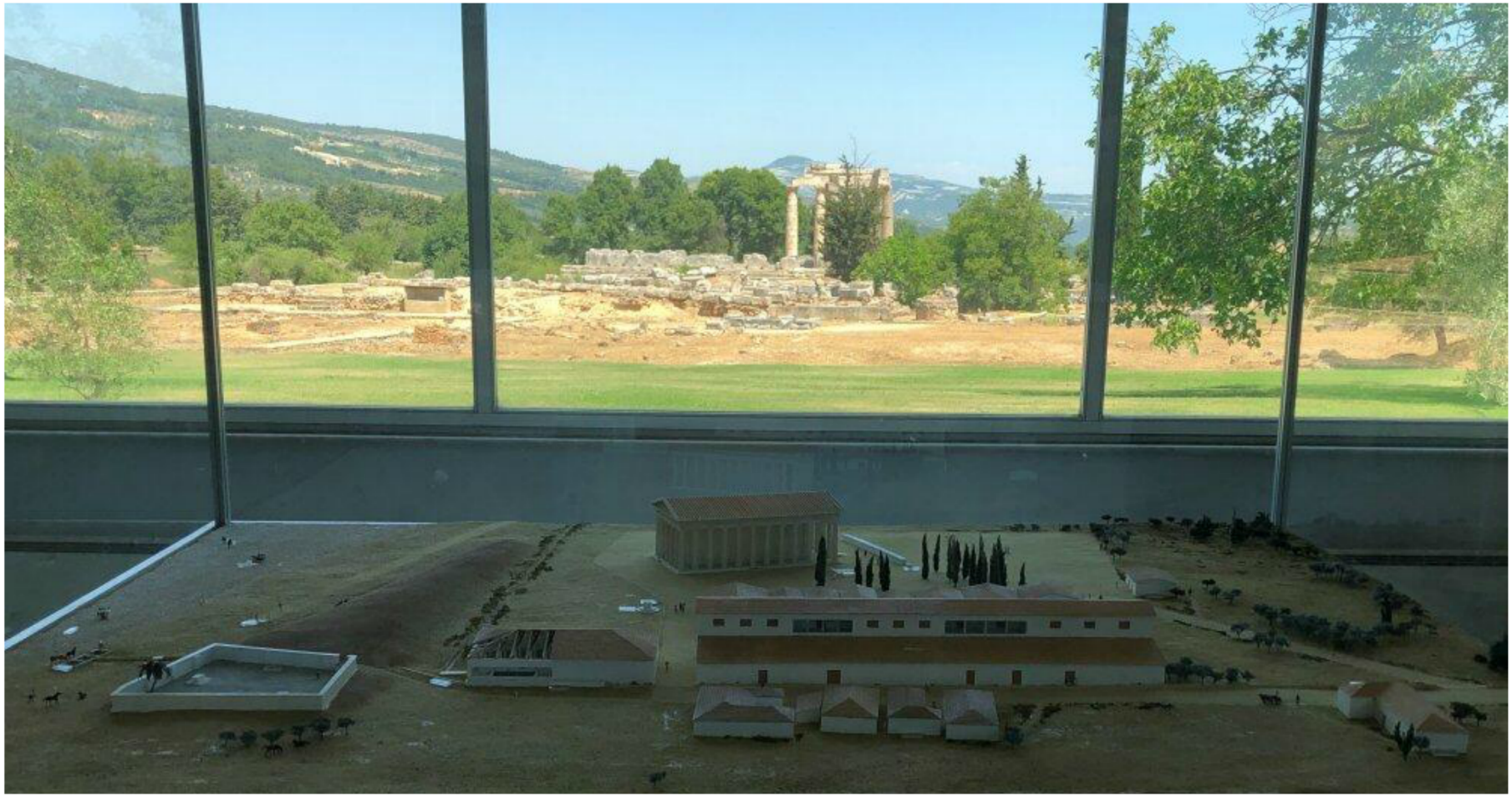
Nemea is famous as the scene for the first Labour of Hercules (or Heracles) - the slaying of the ferocious, wicked Nemean Lion. It is also the site of the wonderful Temple of Zeus - a place of much excavation, especially since 1964.

Constructed in 330 BC (in place of a previous temple destroyed by fire), three of the columns have never fallen down.

It is a peaceful place, enhanced by a small-but-perfectly-formed museum.

A dry and dusty place - a real sun trap - but regularly flooded during the winter months



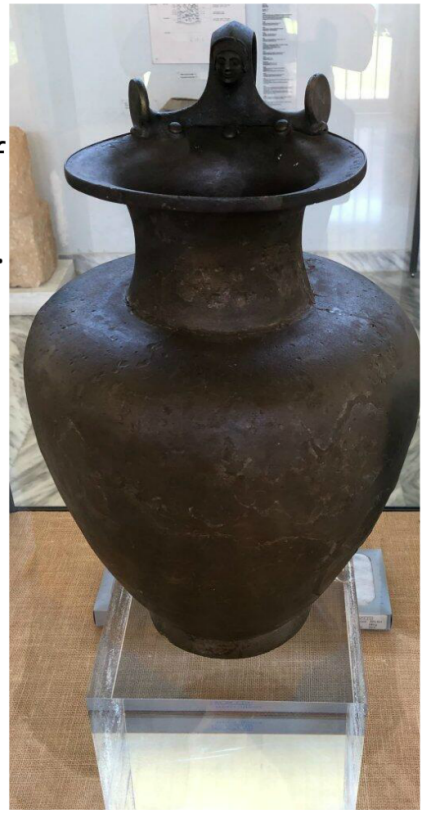
View from the museum - studying a model of the temple as it would have been, while looking through a window at the site today.

The north eastern area of the Peloponnese that includes Nemea, Mycenae, Tiryns, Argos and Isthmia, was thriving in the late Bronze Age and is peppered with buried towns and thousands of graves. Much of the buried treasure has been plundered and more has been legally excavated.

In 1993 many items from the area came up for auction in New York. The Greek government, through judicial review, successfully sought the cancellation of the auction and the items were eventually returned to Greece and Nemea.

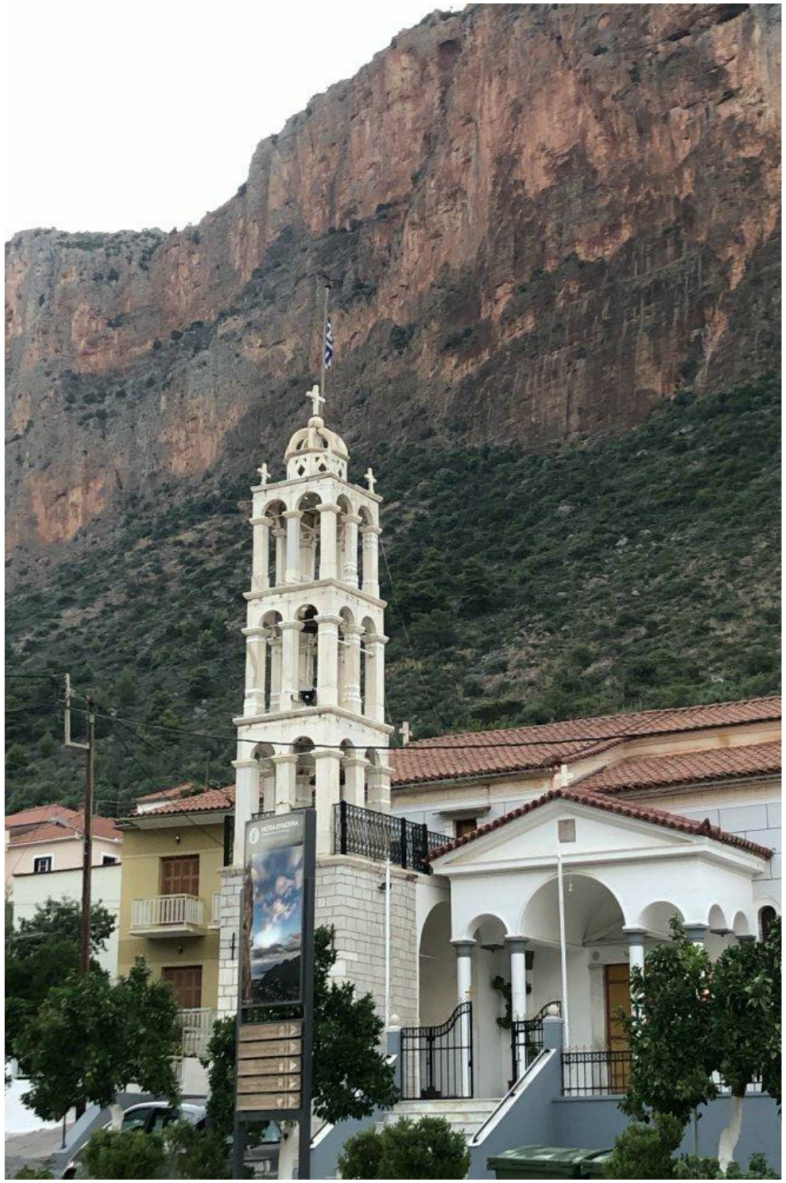
They included four gold rings pictured on the next page, all from 1600 - 1500 BC: a ring featuring a squatting monkey; a ring with three ornaments shaped like a chrysalis; another engraved with a chariot scene and one engraved with the scene of two women holding flowers.

The photos of exhibits (right) from the museum of Nemea include one showing all that is left of the marble statue of a dog - just the front and back paws.



Four gold rings - back in their rightful place in the Museum of Nemea

Saturated with history (for the moment) we drove east towards the coast and then south through Argos and Astros. With the beautiful Parnon Mountains on our right, we approached the town of Leonidion where we checked into our quirky hotel for a one-night stay. There we found plenty of space in the tavernas in the shadow of the giant rocks.



As can be seen, Leonidion, with its port of Plaka about 4 km away, is bounded by steep mountainsides. We had been here the year before but then the town and mountains were almost invisible in rain and mist.

This repeat visit did not disappoint as we were blessed with more traditional Greek weather.

After visiting Plaka we drove up and over the spectacular mountains, past the lovely town of Kosmas. descending to the bustling town of Gythio and across to Areopoli, capital of the mystical Mani.

From one mountain range across to another - we drove north in the shadow of the towering and mighty Taygetus Mountains, around the beautiful Bay of Limeni, towards Stoupa – our home for most of the next two weeks.

Stoupa has become a very popular place but still retains great charm. It takes little effort to leave the busy seaside and find great tranquility in the mountains.

Capturing a perfect moment prior to an early morning swim as the sun climbs up and over the mountains behind.

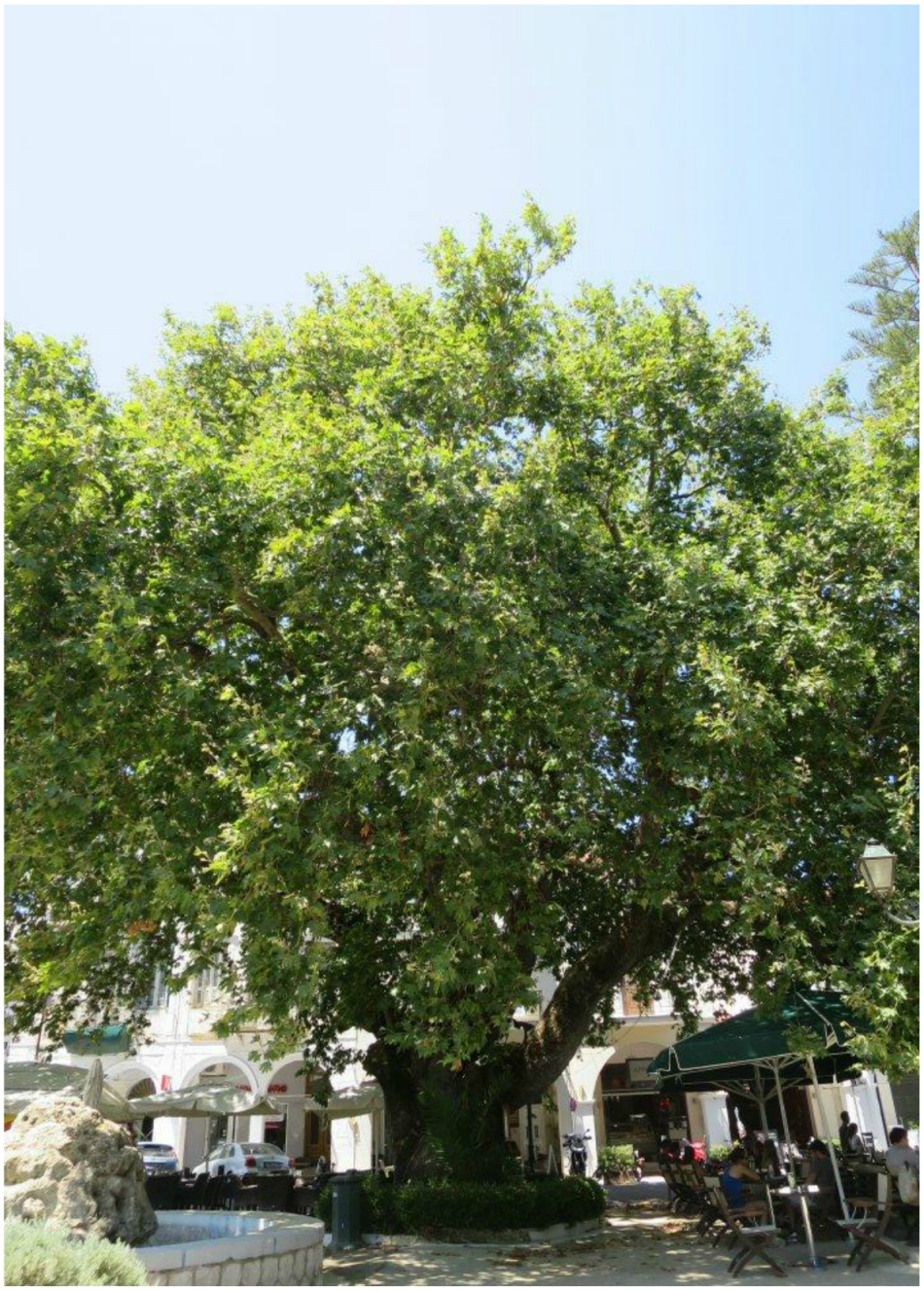
More images of Stoupa - a place we have been visiting for many years, making many friends especially at our favourite Lefktron Hotel.

After a few days enjoying the company of family and friends we burst forth from busy Stoupa and drove up the coast to Kalamata, across the plain to the land known as Messinia, turning south to Pylos – for us, a new place and a real jewel.

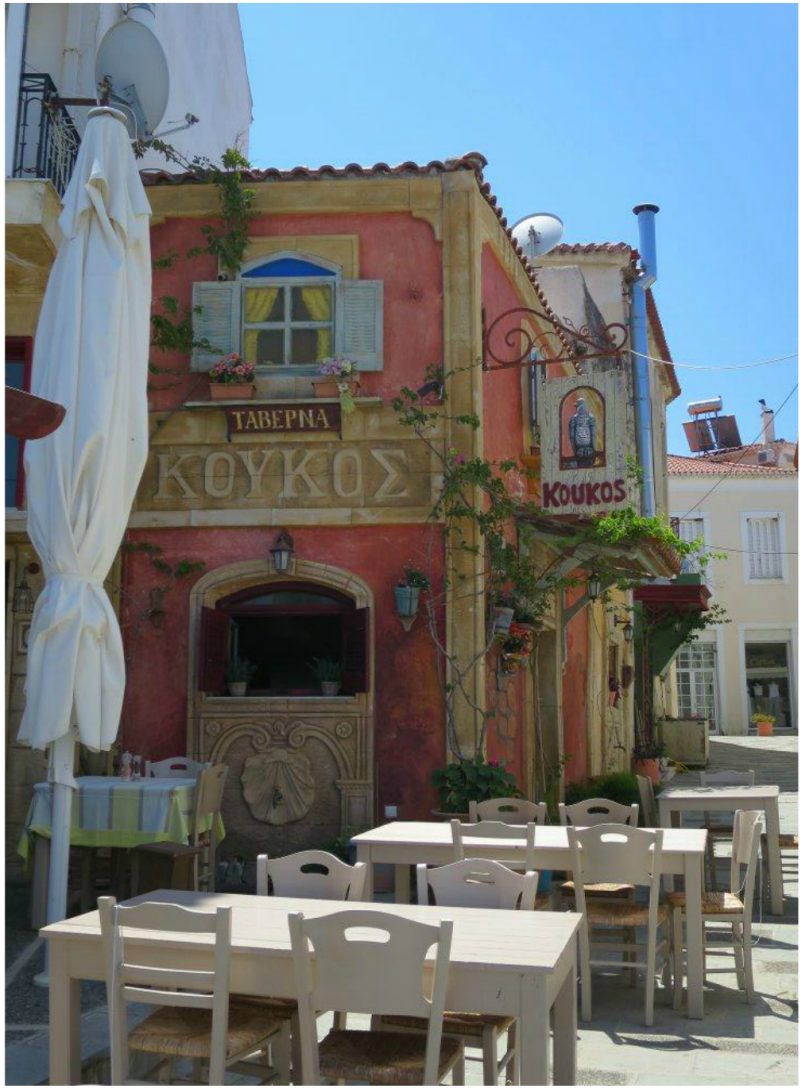
We popped into the town for a quick coffee under the massive Plane tree covering the town square but stayed for hours after discovering the amazing Neokastro fortress and finding out that this lovely town, once known as Navarino, was the scene of a famous sea battle which, some say, probably saved Greece from eternal Ottoman rule.

In 1827 the fleet of the Great Powers - England, France and Russia - wanted to persuade Ibrahim Pasha by diplomatic words to grant Greece independence. Instead of an exchange of words, a manoevre by the allies 'accidentally' started a battle and Pasha's fleet was blown to pieces.

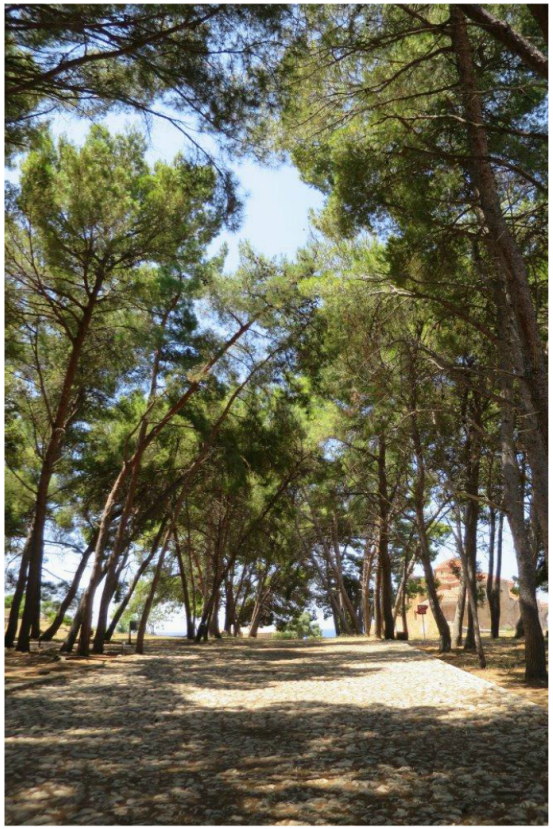
The three allied generals are celebrated on a memorial in the town square (pictured opposite). Another photo shows the home of famous Greek athlete Konstantinos Tsiklitiras who won two gold medals at the 1912 Olympics in the standing high jump and long jump events.

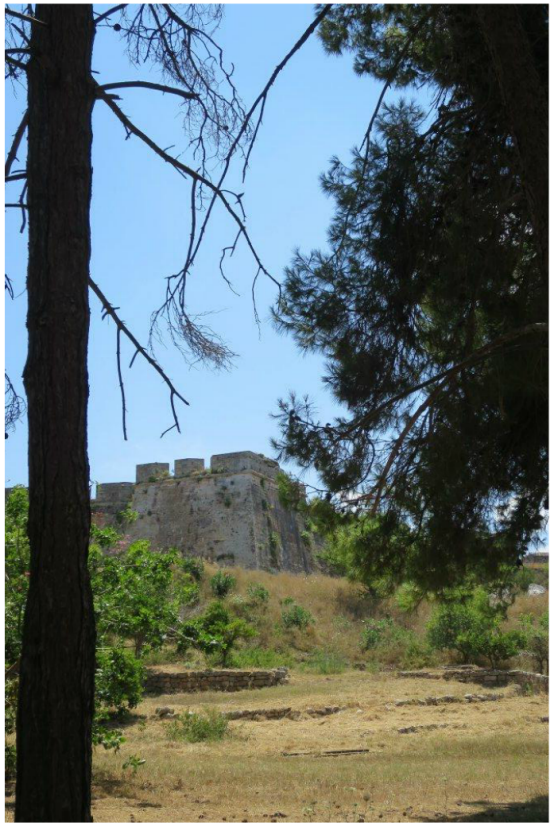


A steep street and colourful taverna in Pylos.



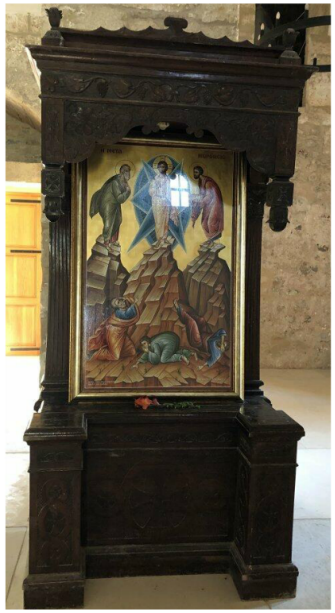
The scene of the famous sea battle of Navarino and one of the cannons used - now on display in the town square.





The magnificent fortress, or Neokastro, was built by the Turks in 1573 in a remarkable position overlooking the Bay of Pylos probably on the site of a previous fortification. Its ownership changed to and fro between the Turks and the Venetians until the late 1820s in the Greek War of Independence when ownership was finally decided.
It is a large site consisting of a fantastic archaeological museum and two other museums dedicated to antiquities found underwater.
Right is the view down to Pylos from the castle's front gate.

Within the huge Neokastro fortress is a church which started life as a mosque in 1573 when built by the Turks. Then, the Venetians converted it into 'The Church of Transfiguration of the Saviour'. Over the years it fell into decay but in recent times , 2011-2015, 1.4 million euros have been spent on renovating this simple building with the big name.



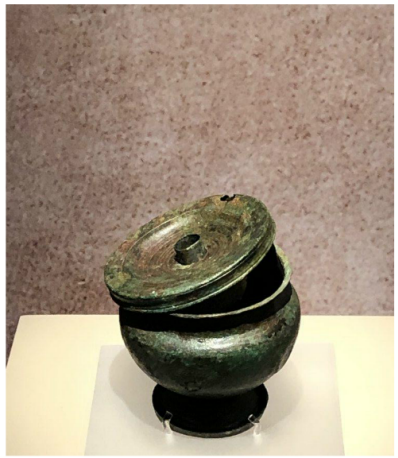
ΙΝΒΙ

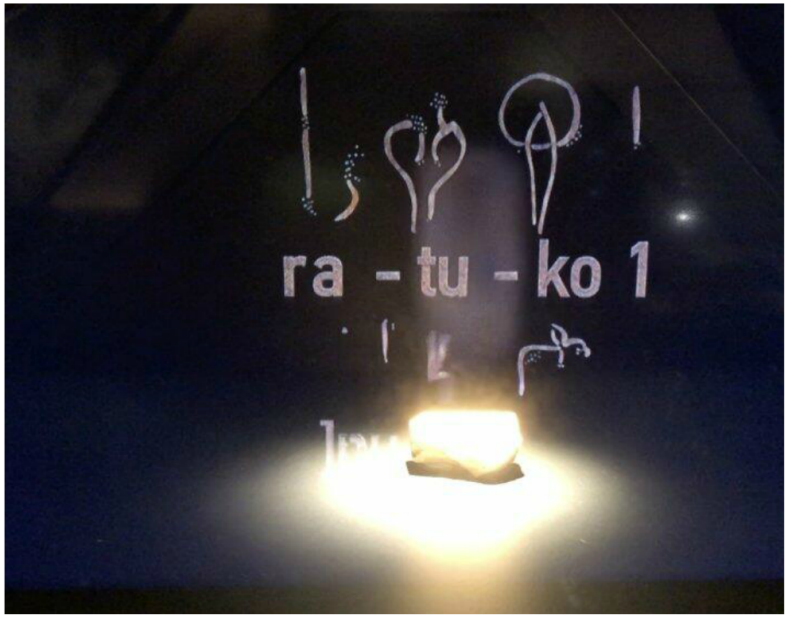
These two statuettes from the 4th Century AD welcome you into the immaculate archaeological museum which is a star attraction within the walls of the fortress.

One of the many superb exhibits is this multi-coloured mosaic glass bowl of exceptional beauty. Mosaic glass (millefiori) items were very popular in ancient times and were manufactured mainly in Alexandria, northern Greece.

Many of the items on show were uncovered from various sites, mainly graves, within the region and were dated between about 400 BC and 400 AD.

Overleaf are some other exhibits from the museum.





Time and time again the Greeks demonstrate the utmost love and care when presenting their antiquities.

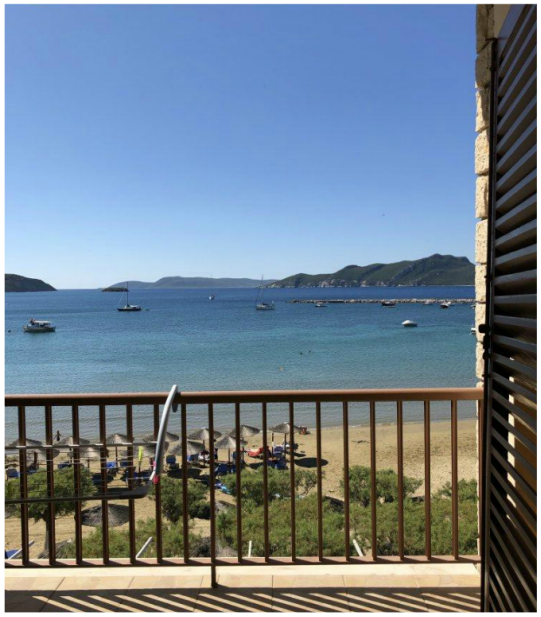
There is no better example of this than the small piece of rock presented in an oblong glass case with atmospheric lighting and music, accompanied by a superb holographic video.

This small rock is an amazing piece of history. It features Linear B - the script/alphabet used for writing in Minoan times on Crete and in the Mycenaean kingdom until about 1250 BC.

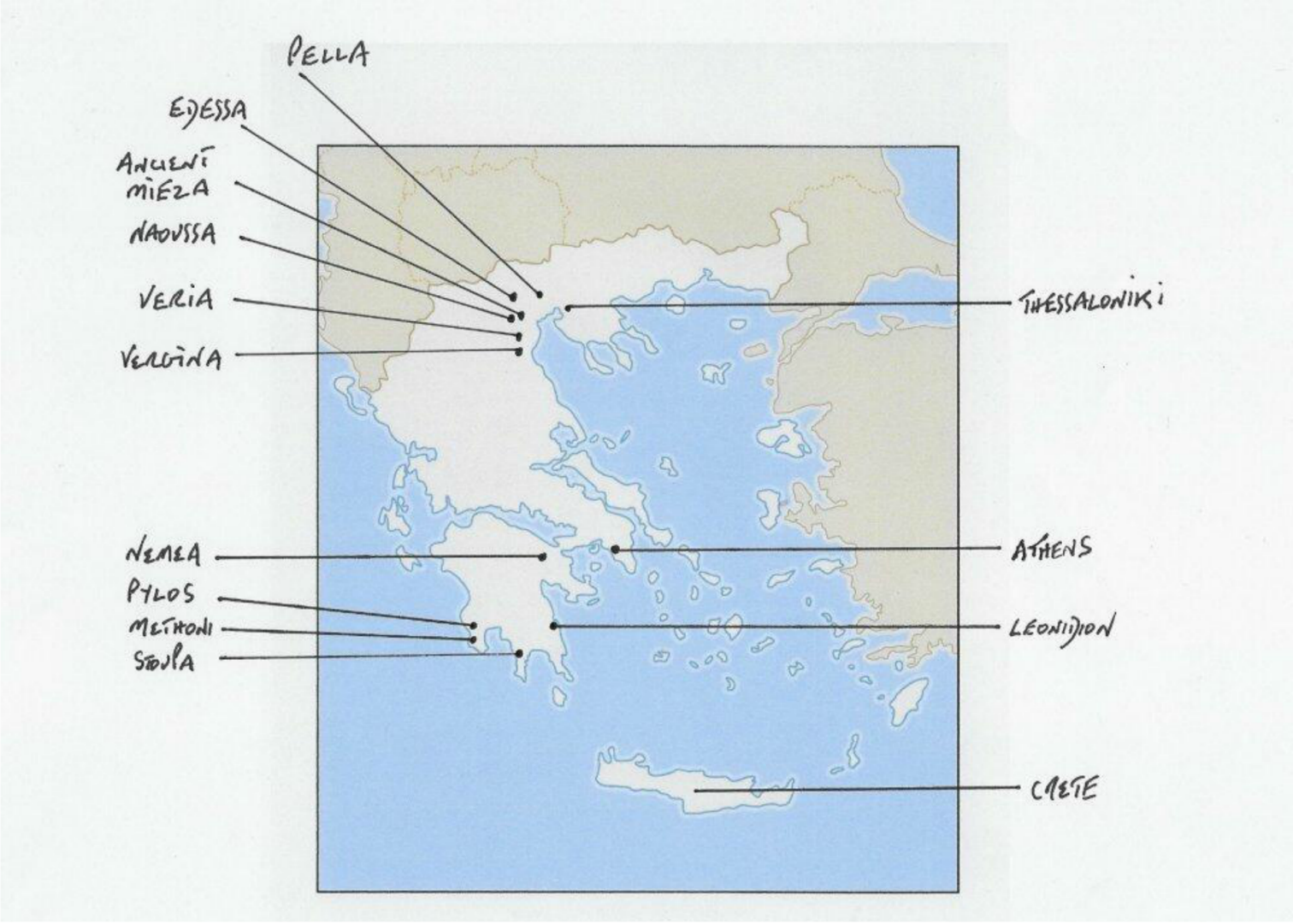
It is, if you like, the Greek version of Egyptian hieroglyphics found on the Rosetta Stone.

Would you believe that this piece of rock was found on a rubbish tip..

Having enjoyed our new discoveries in Pylos we drove a little further south to revisit Methoni with its remarkable Venetian Castle - we covered details of the castle and a history of invasion and bloodshed in a previous book.



Views from our hotel room in Methoni

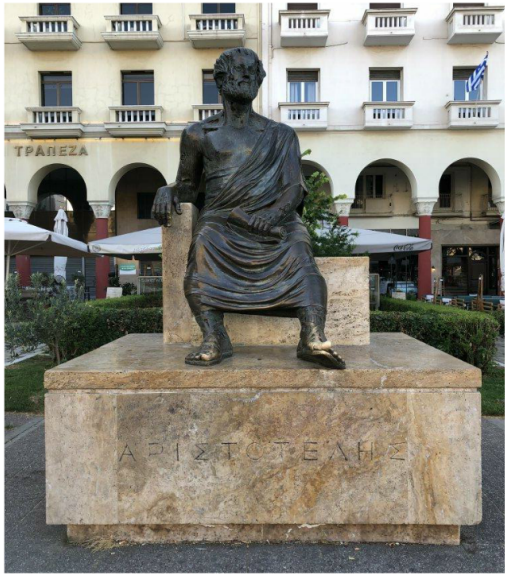


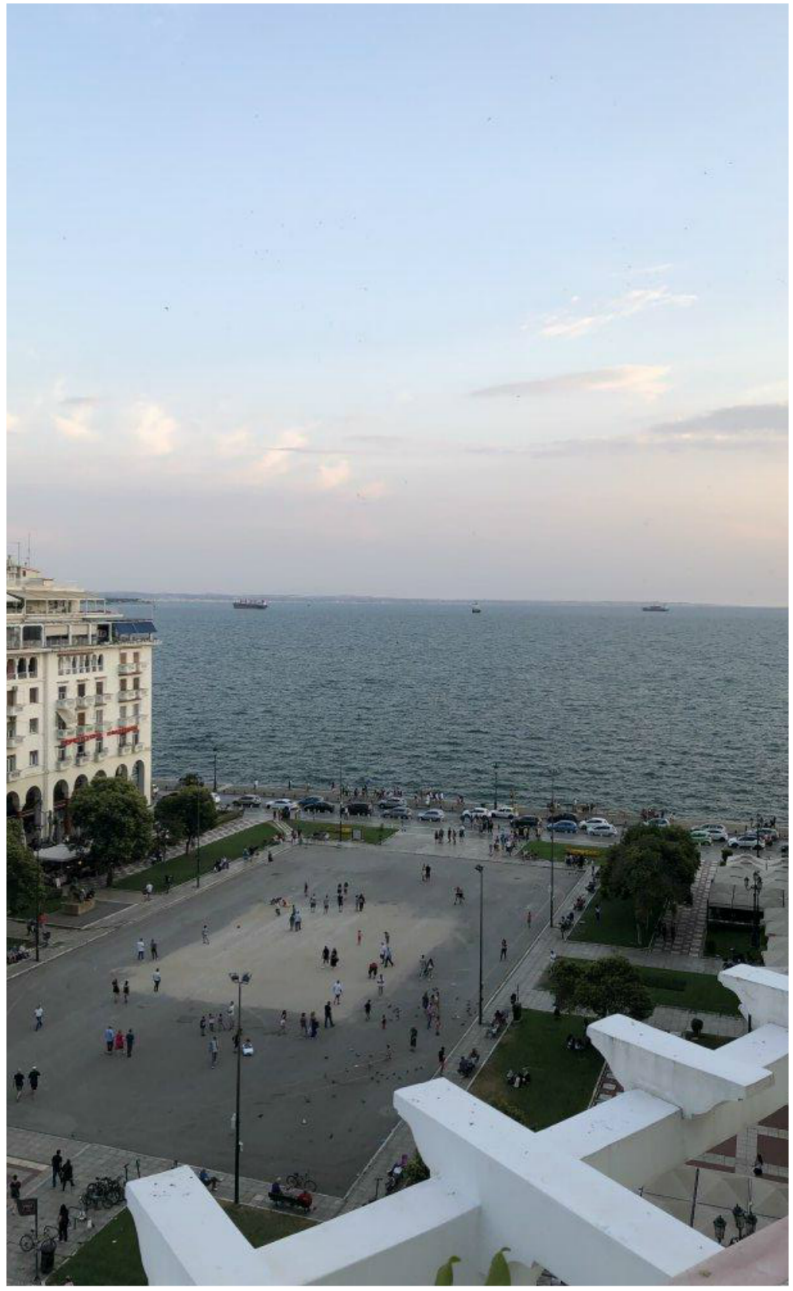
We returned for a few more days in the familiar and friendly surroundings of Stoupa before driving back to Athens and flying north.

There is great anticipation as we land at Thessaloniki Airport "Makedonia" (to give its full title) and are driven by taxi driver Stratos to the excellent Electra Palace Hotel in Aristotelous Square - right in the centre of the city's seafront.

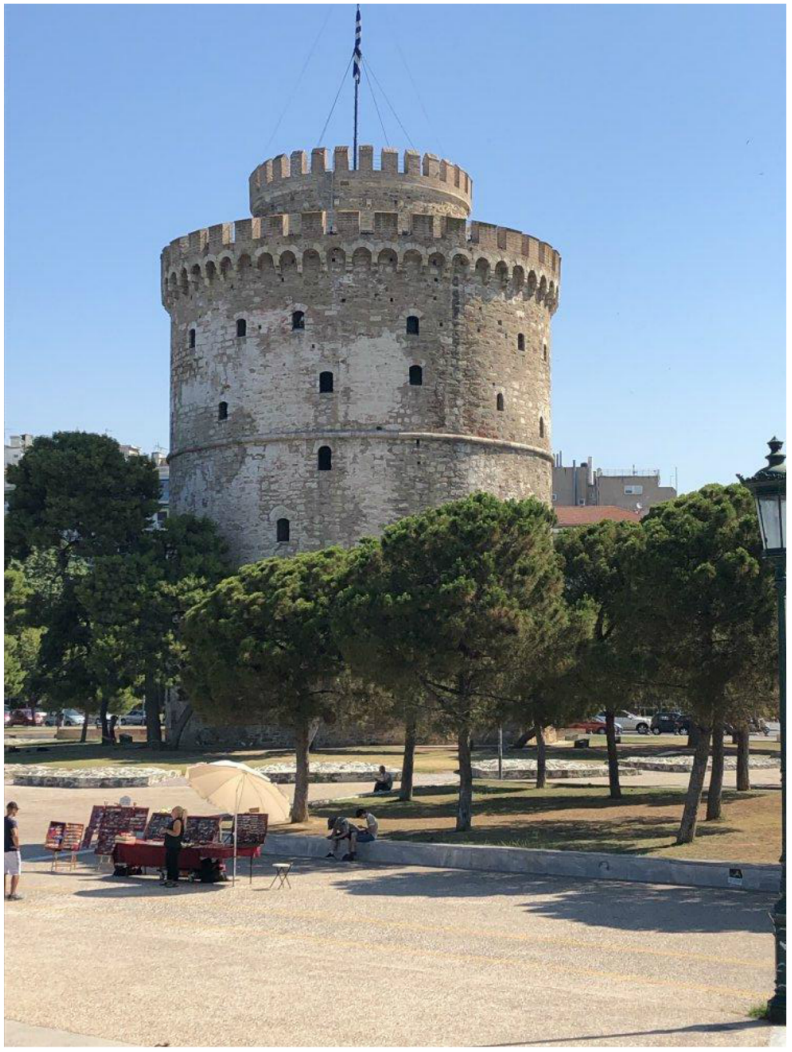
Anticipation because we know how vibrant is the city of Thessaloniki but also because we were hoping our visit and exploration would be as good as last time.

We were not disappointed and prepared for an enjoyable few days with a couple of drinks in the rooftop bar (right) with philosopher Aristotle keeping an eye on things down below.

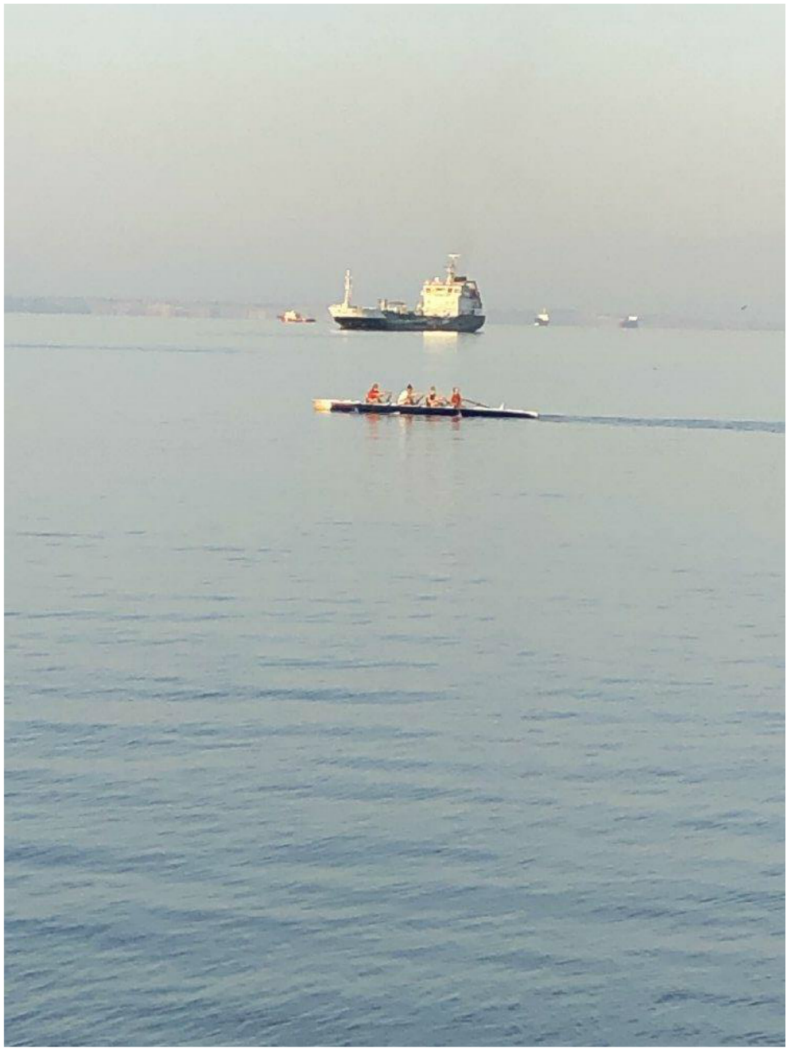




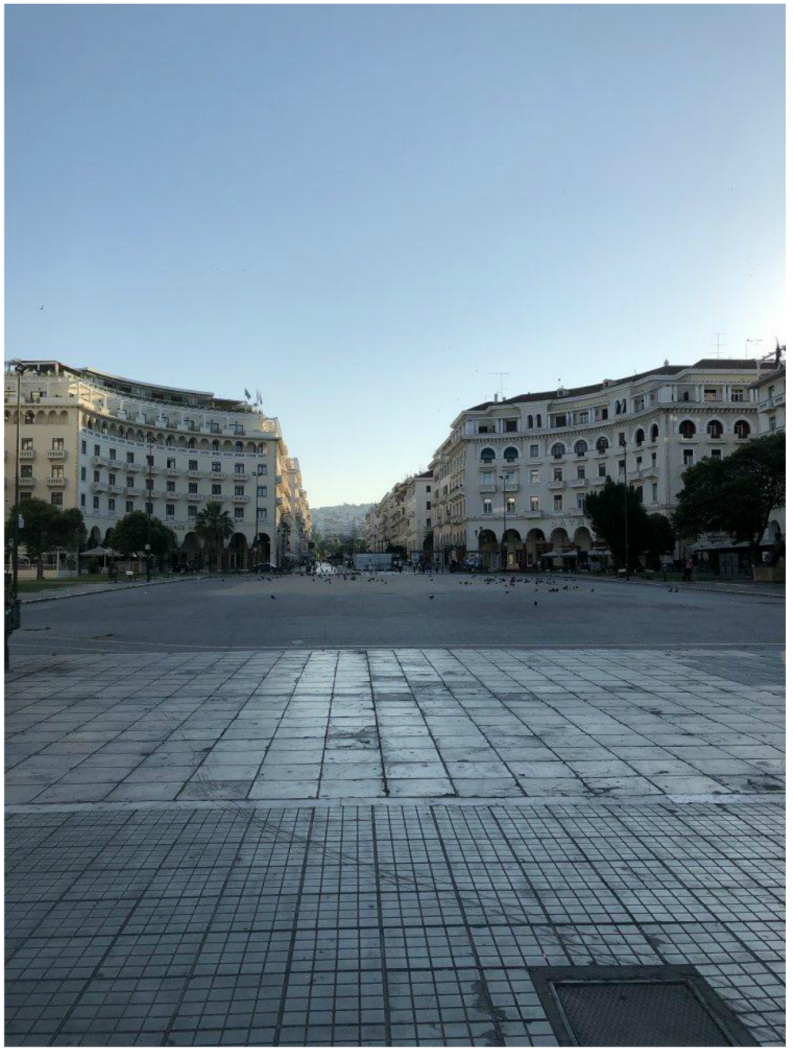
A view from Ano Poli - the old town - at the top of the city with the Rotunda (see later) centre.



The White Tower - once a jail now a museum - an icon of Macedonian Greece.



Early morning exercise across The Thermaic Gulf.



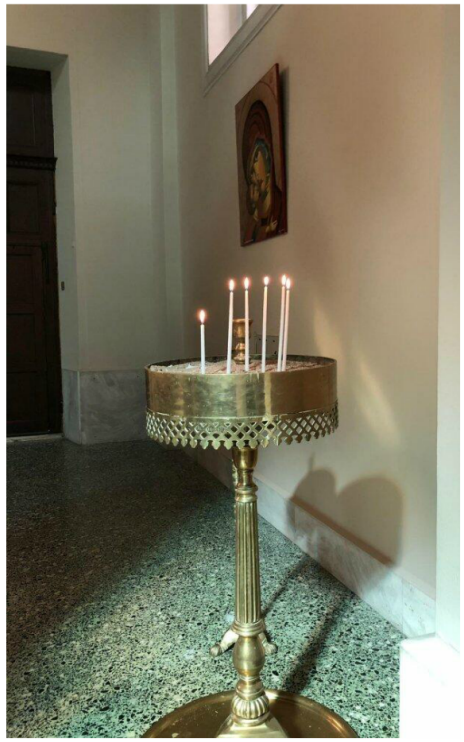
The view from the sea front back down Aristotelous Square with our hotel on the left.

The authors pleased at finding a Cretan restaurant and a rather large carafe of Raki.

A view of the Thessaloniki seafront, taken during a pleasant trip round the bay on the tourist Pirate Ship.

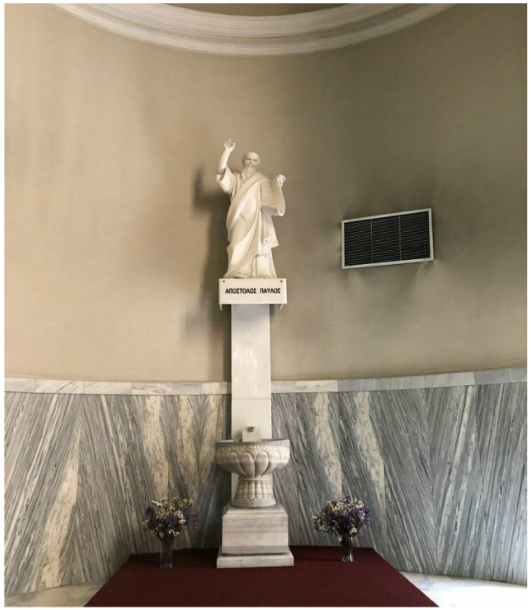
Having explored the famous Church of St Demetrios before, we turned our attention to a couple of the other myriad churches in this cosmopolitan city.

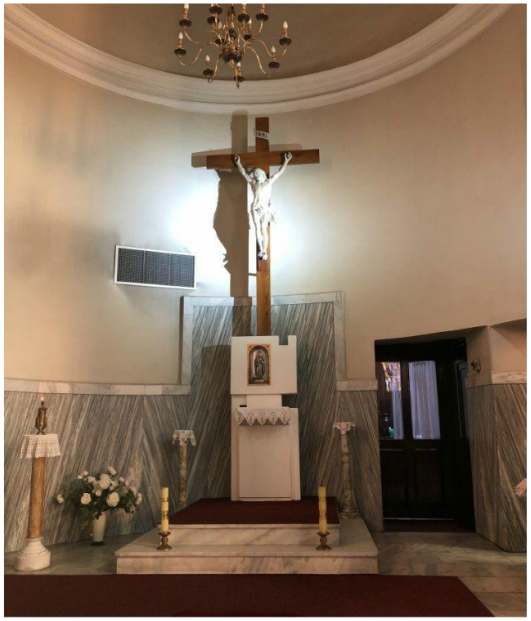
Our first mission in Thessaloniki was to visit the Roman Catholic Church 'Temple of the Immaculate Conception' to light candles for family members no longer with us.

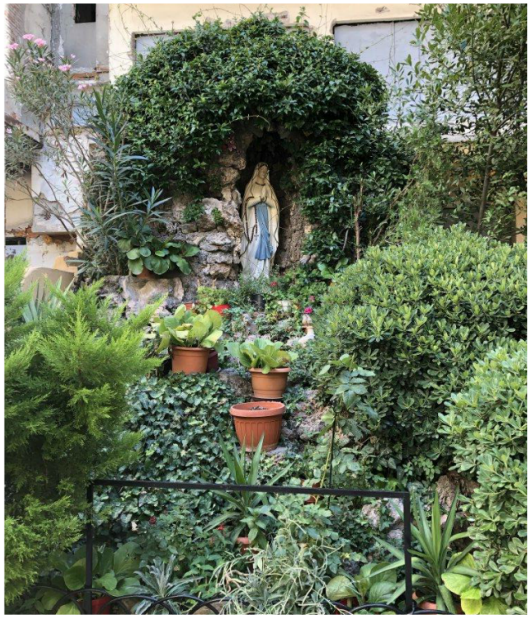


Compared to our normal fare of ancient ruins, this church is a newish building, constructed in 1899 and designed by Vitaliano Poselli, a well known architect responsible for many buildings in Thessaloniki.

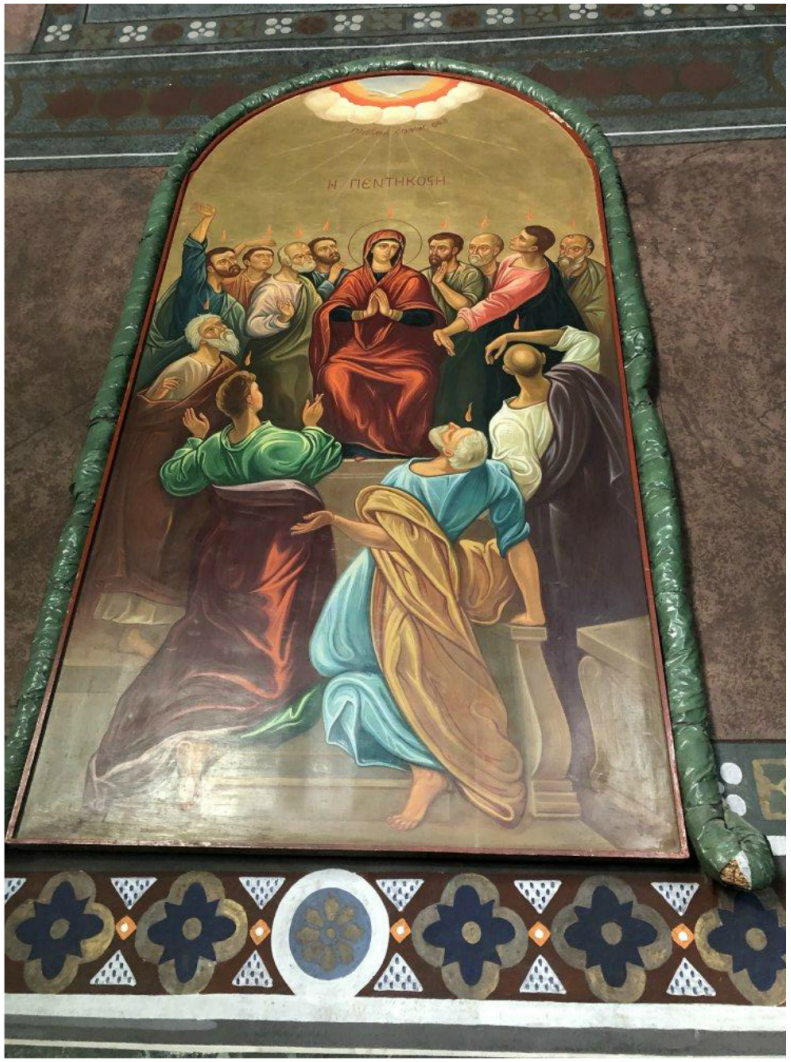
It is a quiet place, hidden off the main street, and completely empty when we were there - unlike some of the big Greek Orthodox churches.



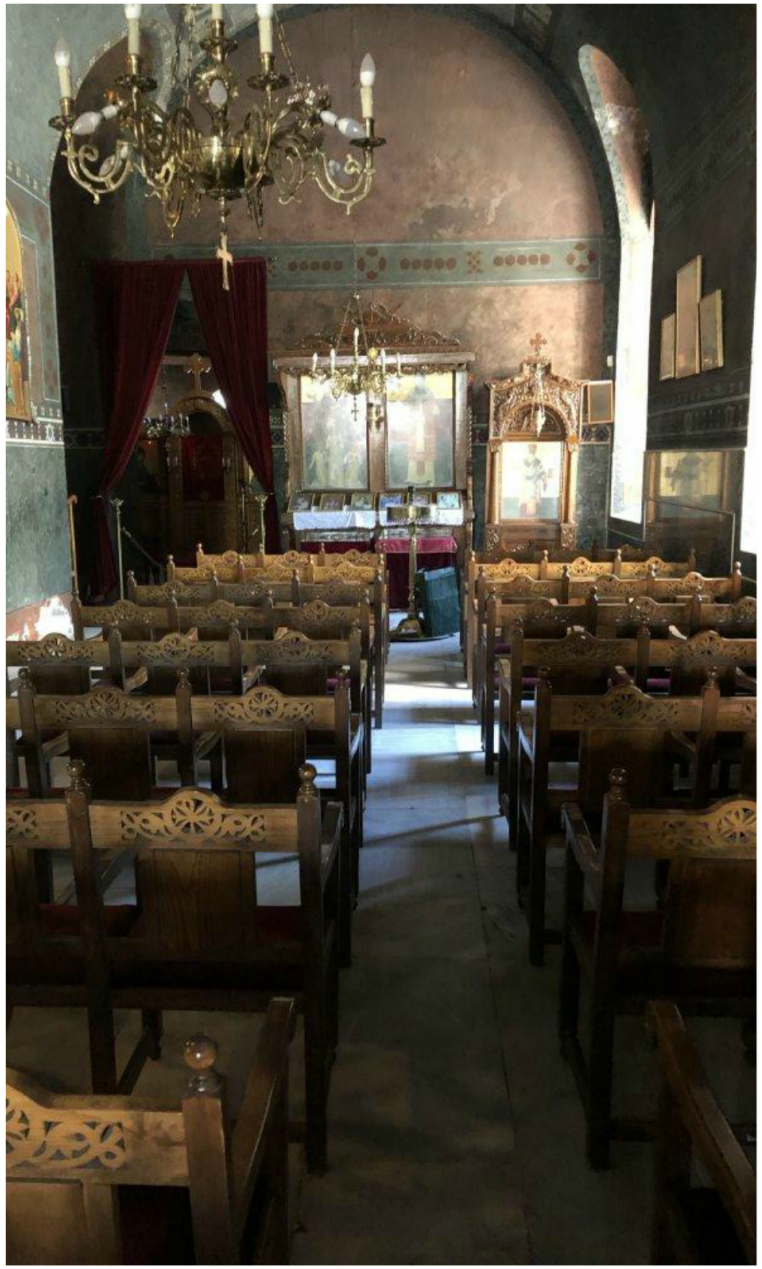




The Holy Church of the Wisdom of God (The Church of Saint Sophia) is also known as The Cathedral of the Metropolis of Thessaloniki.



There has been a church on this land since the 4th Century AD but the existing building was constructed in about 750 AD. It has a turbulent history and for a long while was, like many churches, converted into a mosque.
After almost 400 years in 1913 it was restored to Orthodox Christian worship.



Previously, we were unable to gain entry to The Rotunda so, while it has featured briefly in an earlier book, we feel it is well worth sharing more detail and more photos.

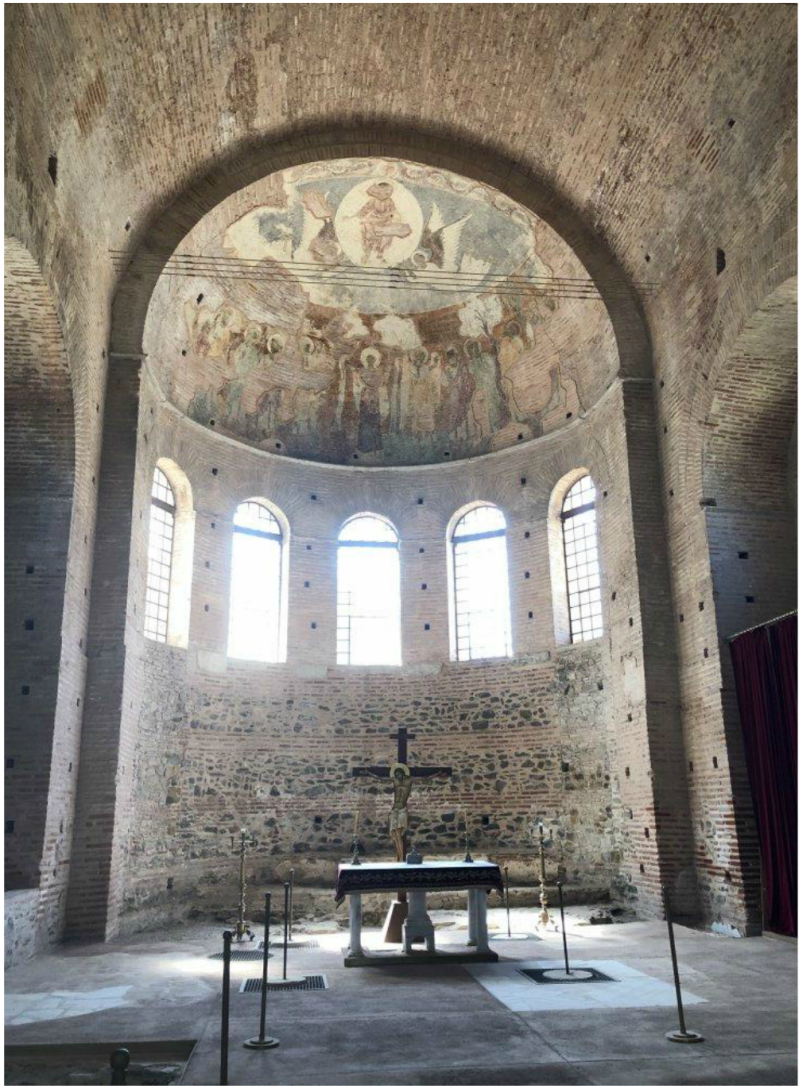
The Rotunda, or Church of St George, is a massive, impressive building, 30m high with 6m thick walls, and is undergoing constant restoration. It is claimed by some to be the oldest Christian church in the world.

It was built in 300 AD by the Emperor Galerius, possibly as a temple dedicated to Zeus. It became a Christian church in about 380 AD dedicated to the Asomatoi or Archangels or, depending on what you read, the Holy Bodiless Powers.

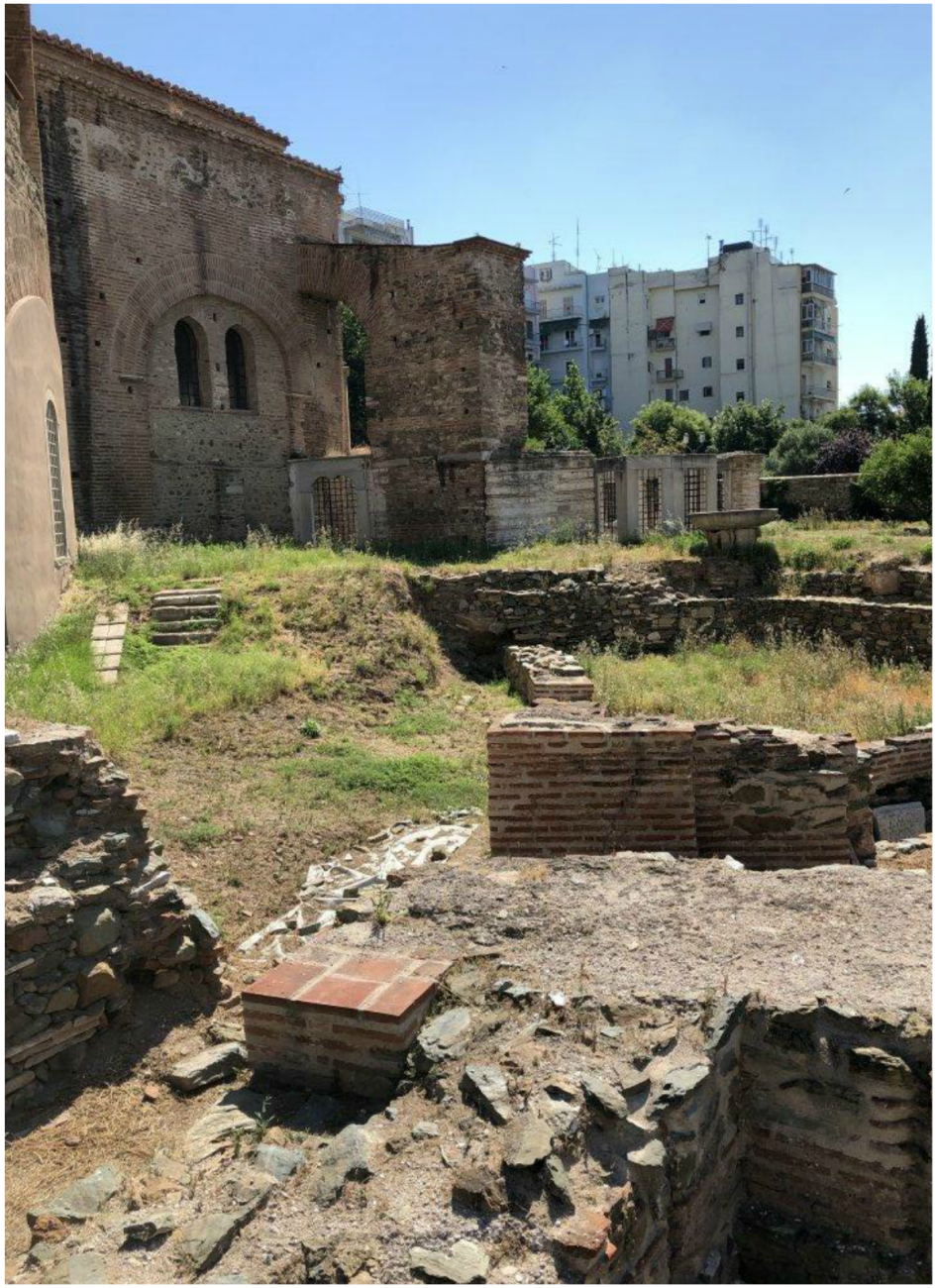
Under Turkish rule it became a mosque in 1590 (one minaret still remains) , returning to Christianity in 1912. But from 1914 The Rotunda became the subject of intensive archaeological excavation. It is regarded now as a museum but church services are held at certain times in the year.

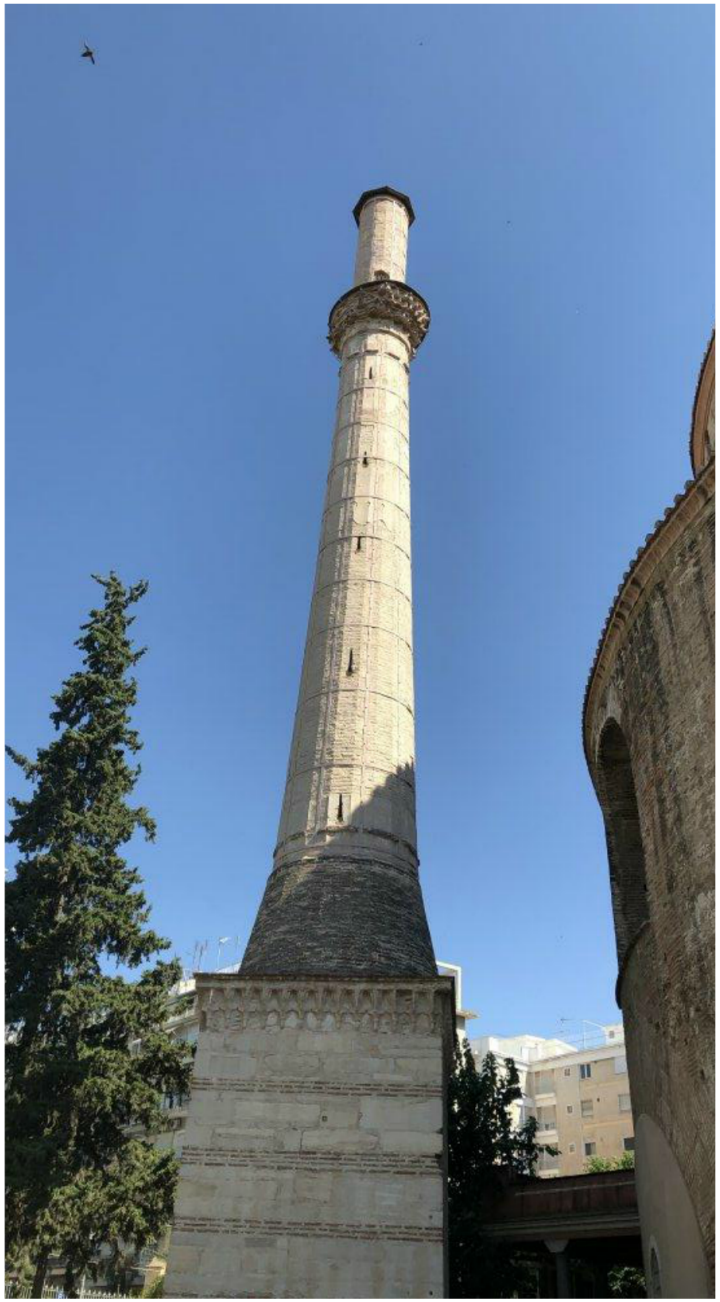
On the right is the building approached via a side street.

The real thing and a model that sits outside the building.



Inside The Rotunda and, opposite, the
remaining minaret and continuing excavations



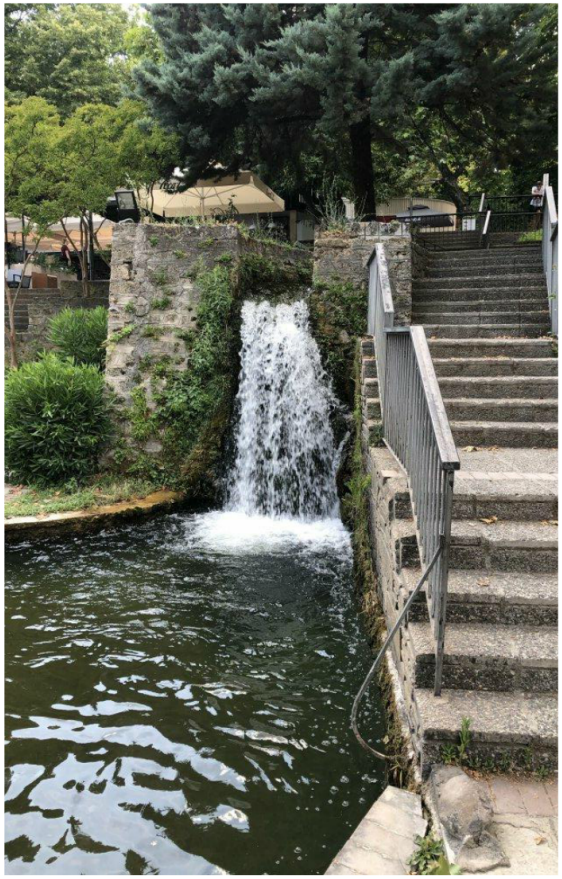


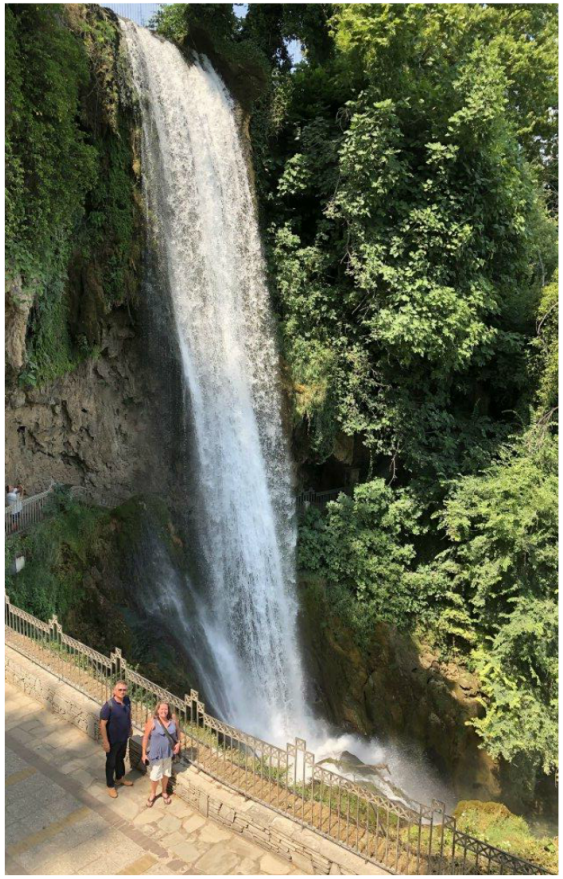
A final day flurry of delving into the treasures of Ancient Greece revealed much gold and silver and, of course, revelations of the dead in the Macedonian Tombs of Judgement, which featured in the early pages of this book. We took the opportunity to revisit three nearby places covered in our first book 'Seven Days in Ancient Greece' - Vergina, Edessa and Naoussa.

Difficult to believe that underneath this “teletubby” looking tumulus or mound is a museum of breathtaking beauty.

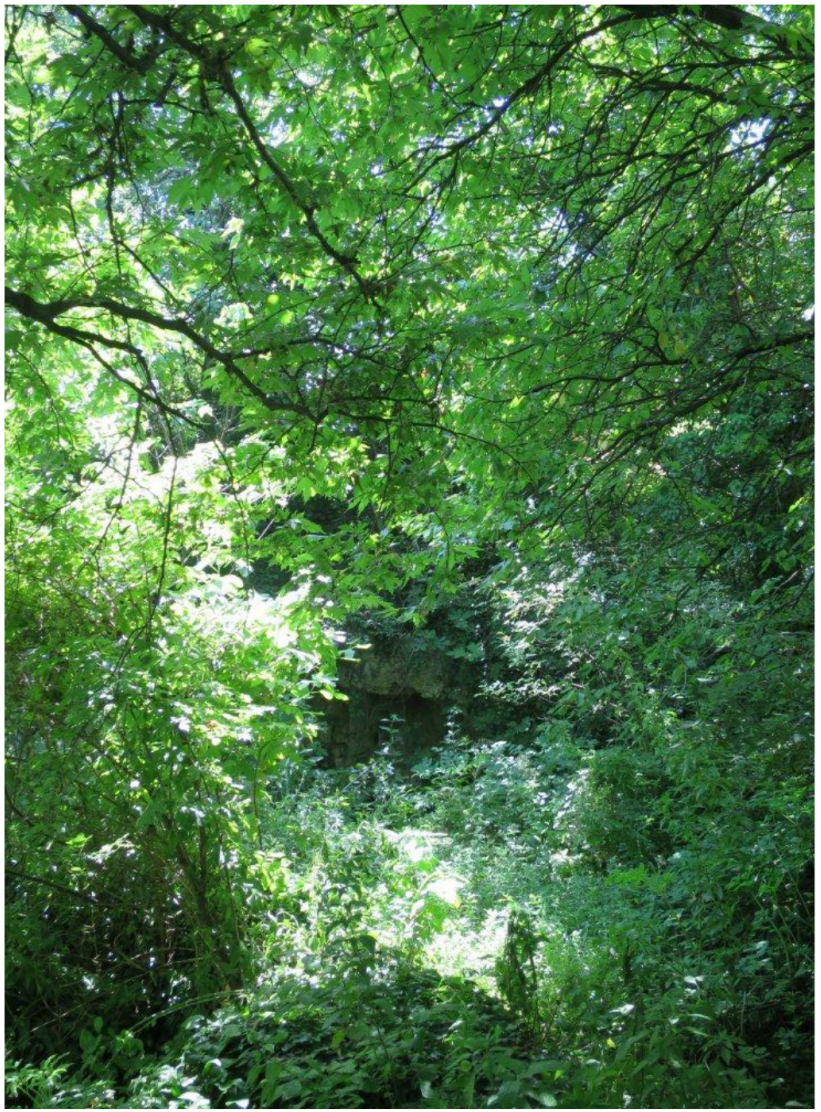
This is where Phillip 2nd, father of Alexander the Great, was assassinated in 336 BC and buried.

The amazing dark and atmospheric museum contains his tomb and that of others plus astonishing gold relics including this remarkable larnax - small coffin for ashes - containing the remains of Phillip (photography not allowed in museum so image on left from postcard).





Edessa - a town high in the hills and full of water ! A cool place to end a hot few weeks. With Nicki, looking up at the camera, is our driver and companion, Stratos.



The green and peaceful School of Aristotle at Naoussa (above and opposite) where the great philosopher taught the future Alexander the Great for several years.

It was not all dusty old ruins and glittering antiquities - here are some faces - ours and some others we met along the way.

And finally.....we return once again to philosopher Aristotle in the Thessaloniki square bearing his name. One of his many sayings is: "There is no great genius without a mixture of madness."

Aristotle awakens after 2,341 years in the afterlife and sees these electric scooters next to him in his square and says: "I was right."