The Annual of the British School at Athens

<http://journals.cambridge.org/ATH>

Additional services for *The Annual of the British School at Athens*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)

Meteora

A. H. Cruickshank

The Annual of the British School at Athens / Volume 2 / November 1896, pp 105 - 112

DOI: 10.1017/S0068245400007103, Published online: 18 October 2013

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0068245400007103

How to cite this article:

A. H. Cruickshank (1896). Meteora. The Annual of the British School at Athens, 2, pp 105-112 doi:10.1017/S0068245400007103

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

METEORA.

METEORA. BY THE REV. A. H. CRUICKSHANK.

PLATES II. AND III.

A VISIT to the monasteries of Meteora is easier now than in 1834, when Curzon, escorted by a party of "klephts," reached them from the North. One feels, in reading the account of his rapid passage from Corfu to the valley of the upper Peneus and back again, that it was touch and go in those days. Now the traveller can approach Meteora by the railway, the chief outward and visible sign of improvement in the region assigned to Hellas by the Treaty of Berlin. To any one who has the time to spare I can strongly recommend a week in Thessaly, as it contains several objects of first-rate interest, and is in many respects unlike the rest of Greece. The population is largely Wallachian, and their bronzed shaggy faces suggest the uncomfortable thought, that the veneer of civilisation is even thinner than elsewhere in these parts. It is easy to believe that such a population would like nothing better than frisking into Macedonia in surreptitious bands.

Our programme in Thessaly last May was this : first, to penetrate to Larissa and Tempe, thereby seeing the noble Bay of Volo, Pelion with its four-and-twenty villages, the elegant Pyramid of Ossa, and majestic Olympus : secondly, to visit Meteora. As the Thessalian railway bifurcates at Velestino, the ancient Pheræ, where Apollo tended the herds of Admetus, we had to return from the picturesque semi-Turkish Larissa to this junction ; then gradually ascending a steep incline we passed into the western half of the large bare Thessalian plain. We could have tried the cross-country route from Larissa to Trikkala, but were warned that it took two days, and that the accommodation midway at Zarkos was indifferent.

The Thessalian trains are comfortably arranged, and the traveller, as elsewhere on Greek lines, is allowed to do just as he likes. The population seemed to enjoy travelling much ; not only were the third-class carriages full, but there were plenty of well-to-do people in western dress, in the first (and only other) class. Each station was crowded with people in great variety of costume, though in these parts the "fustanella" is comparatively rare, and the "fez" almost universal. We came before long to Phersala, the ancient Pharsalus, straggling under a fine double-peaked Acropolis : the Enipeus was not at all full of water, though cows stood here and there cooling themselves. An

adequate and cheap meal was obtainable at the station, which is two miles from the town. We tried to reconstruct the manœuvres of Cæsar and Pompey on these fields now waving with corn. The landscape is certainly worthy of the occasion which has made it famous. The range of Pindus was dimly visible, covered here and there with snow, through a haze. Indeed, after the clear air of Athens, the Thessalian fog, exhaled from many rivers, reminded us of northern regions, and during the whole visit we were not really able to see the whole of Olympus clearly at one time.

Sixty miles from Volo is Sophades, where for two or three miles round the plain was covered with vast crowds of shepherds, cattle-dealers, and others, in every variety of costume, while thousands of animals in droves stood patiently about. It was clearly one of the great annual fairs, like Frith's Derby Day without the grand stand. Soon the line, which had hitherto been running due west, turned north-west, and fourteen miles farther on passed Phanari, perched on a romantic height to the left. At length we crossed the Peneus, already a deep and muddy stream, but only one among several such, and soon reached Trikkala, the chief town of these parts, but too far from the station to make out very clearly. If we had had time we might have stayed the night here, gone on to Meteora early the next day, and seen it thoroughly, sleeping in one of the monasteries, and returning for a night to Trikkala the third day. And this is what I should advise any one who visits Meteora to do, who is not pressed for time, unless indeed he should prefer to take his books with him, and stay even longer.

Fourteen miles from Trikkala, and a hundred-and-one from Volo, is Kalabaka, a white town, nestling at the foot of the limestone rocks, on which the monasteries of Meteora stand. These rocks have already been visible from the train for a long time, looking like pillars, and as you draw nearer you see them first on this side and then on that, though no monasteries are visible as yet to the inexperienced eye, and indeed Hagios Stefanos is the only one that can be seen from this side. The country round Kalabaka, and on the lower slopes of the hills, is very fertile and well cultivated. Here, as at Velestino, the eye is refreshed with abundance of trees. Kalabaka, the ancient Aeginium, stands where the Peneus (now called the Salamvriás) enters the Thessalian plain, where Cæsar in his campaign against Pompey crossed the range

METEORA.

of Pindus. The shallow river here covers a great extent of ground with dry channels and rocks, showing how much it expands in flood-time.

Kalabaka seems large and prosperous, more so, indeed, than in Curzon's time, who thought it looked singularly black, the reason being that it had recently been burned and sacked by the "klephts," while the remnant of the inhabitants had taken refuge in the deserted monasteries of Hagios Nicola, and Hagia Mone. It need scarcely be said, that, though acting on good advice, we had taken an escort in visiting Tempe, we were under no apprehension of brigands at Meteora. The question was whether to see the monasteries hastily, and sleep at Kalabaka, as the train next morning left at seven, or to stay in one of the monasteries and risk catching the train; eventually we decided to do the latter, leaving our heavy luggage at the station, and I have no doubt that the choice was a wise one. If we had been travelling with our own servant it would not have mattered so much, but the Xenodochion of Kalabaka would certainly not have fed us so well as the hospitable monks of Hagios Stefanos.

On emerging from the station we were confronted by the usual assembly of screaming men and boys with mules. After effecting a bargain we mounted, the stirrups here being of rope, an uncomfortable device too common in Greece. My guide was an elderly person of unprepossessing appearance, with no hair on his head, parchment skin and an evil eye. Baedeker announces that the most interesting of the monasteries is Hagios Barlaam,* and thither I was bent on going, but our muleteers took advantage of our slight acquaintance with the language and ignorance of the geography to take us in an entirely opposite direction. Perhaps it was as well, for we were late as it was, not arriving at Kalabaka till four p.m. Our path led us in one hour to Hagios Stefanos, where Baedeker advises you to pass the night, the nearest monastery to the outside world. It wound round and under the precipitous crags, leaving Kalabaka on the left, up richly wooded slopes. It seemed easy enough to find, but we discovered to our cost the next morning that it was not. On the contrary we soon lost our way on the return, plunged into a steep ravine too much to the left, from which we scrambled with some difficulty, and very nearly missed the train.

* The b is of course pronounced as an English v.

Before going any further I wish to protest against the current notion that the modern Greek speaks entirely by accent. On getting home I was reproved for talking of Meteōra, when we know of course that in ancient Greek the accent was on the e. The modern Greek, it is true, shortens the penultimate of Aegina and Phaleron, but all I can say is, monk and peasant alike talked of Meteōra, and the inhabitants of the place have surely the right to accent as they please.

As to describing the situation after it has been so well done by Curzon, I feel quite unequal to the task. The best plan will be to quote a few of his words. "The end of a range of rocky hills seems to have been broken off by some earthquake, or washed away by the deluge, leaving only a series of twenty or thirty tall, thin, smooth, needle-like rocks, many hundred feet in height; some like gigantic tusks, some shaped like sugar-loaves, and some like vast stalagmites. These rocks surround a beautiful grassy plain. . . . Some of the rocks shoot up quite clean and perpendicularly from the smooth green grass, some are in clusters, some stand alone like obelisks." The only thing like these rocks which I had ever seen before is the Needles off the Isle of Wight, but they are on a very much larger scale than the Needles, and the colouring is different, being reddish in parts. The name "Meteora" or "in the air" is thus strikingly appropriate for these haunts of mediæval devotion. Though there are now only four or five instead of four-and-twenty monasteries in use, and no hermits that we could see, and though the protection of the situation is unnecessary under the rule of King George, I think those wrong who sneer at the institution as absurd, for after all the buildings have historical associations, and being there may as well be used.

The chief impressions which we formed as we went up were, first, that this was the end of the world. It seemed as if there could be nothing beyond that limestone barrier. And secondly, we were struck by the deep stillness which reigns all around. Baedeker had said the same before us, but he was more fortunate in hearing the silence interrupted from time to time by convent bells. We heard nothing of the kind the whole time. Presently we began to arrive, and having reached a level spot, descended over bare slippery terraces of rock to Hagios Stefanos, which is very much as it was in Curzon's time. It stands on a detached rock, facing the outer world on three sides, approached by a drawbridge

British School at Athens, Annual II.

HAGIA TRIAS.

PLATE II.

METEORA.

on the fourth over a deep chasm, at this point not more than twelve feet wide. The sides of the rock are covered with ivy, and far below us to the right lay the town of Kalabaka, nestling upon the slopes of the main central block of this group of hills. The Peneus flowed beyond, and Pindus towered above to the west; to the east were lower smiling hills of a deep green. The view down the valley towards Trikkala was equally fine, and I have seldom seen anything more charming than the panorama from Hagios Stefanos in the early morning.

The monks of Hagios Stefanos seemed to expect visitors, and in broken Greek we expressed a desire to spend the night there. All thought of Hagios Barlaam had to be given up, as it was a long way off. We had still an hour or more before darkness fell and the convent gate closed, which we spent in visiting Hagia Trias. (See Plate II.) But first we rambled round Hagios Stefanos and penetrated to a terrace, without any parapet, on the edge of a sheer precipice, looking straight down on Kalabaka. The buildings are irregularly grouped, some of wood, some of stone, round a courtyard. The only feature of any architectural merit is the chapel, with the usual central dome and *κόγχη* at the East end, recently restored. Indeed there were signs of neatness and prosperity about the place. The stone carvings on the porch, which is on the north, not the west front, opening into quite a small cloister, were quaint and rich, and the woodwork of the screen before the altar very delicate and graceful. Unfortunately, as in so many Greek churches, the interior was too dark for us to see very clearly about us, but it did not seem, though comparatively spacious, to have any special feature.

The path to Hagia Trias lay round some uncomfortable corners, and down one very steep bit. Straight above us, about 200 feet, was the monastery; through a cleft to the left, the lower valley and Kalabaka were again visible. No means of access could be seen except a long rope ending in a stout hook, which dangled from a wooden balcony above. Presently, one or two figures appeared on the balcony, and directed us to what looked like palings on the rock, but which turned out to be ladders fastened on the wall, running up a cleft to the top. The approach to this ran along a ledge, protected from danger by a crazy fence, nor was the ladder at any point exposed on the face of the cliff to the air of heaven, as one sees in Curzon's picture

of H. Barlaam. It was now plain that the rope was not for human beings, but for hoisting provisions. Once launched on the ladder, we found that as each rung pulled out from the wall when touched, there was a disagreeable feeling of insecurity. At last, however, we emerged into a shed through an iron trap-door, and were conducted to a comfortable room, with a divan and windows running round three sides, and one or two pictures on the walls, including the inevitable ones of the King, the Queen and the *διάδοχος*. As no one seemed inclined to talk, there was an awkward silence until coffee and "ouzo"* appeared. We had already partaken of these at H. Stefanos, but it seemed ungracious to refuse.

Then we went to see the chapel, smaller than that at H. Stefanos, though there seemed to be here as many monks. It was richly painted and the air laden with incense. As one gaunt figure was standing at his devotion, we did not like to peer about too much. Thence to the garden and the well, last of all to a little rock-hewn chapel, covered with frescoes, near the trap-door where we entered. I must not forget also the admirable view which we obtained from the little plateau on which H. Triàs stands, of the distant monasteries of H. Barlaam, and Meteoron, the highest of all. (See Plate III.) There was something in the Hagia Trias which was very pleasing; it is more in the heart of things than H. Stefanos; the views are beautiful, and the sitting-room quite attractive. A young Greek from Trikkala who knew some French, was spending the night there, and I have no doubt that the monks would have been glad to entertain us. As it was, we had to content ourselves with putting something in the chapel-box and returning on foot to our quarters, where we parted with the evil-eyed one with some difficulty. He was anxious to stay the night, and carry down our things in the morning. We assured him we could do this ourselves, and he at length departed.

Before dinner was ready we had a long conversation with the chief monk. The sitting-room was devoid of furniture except the divan; on the walls were several pictures, among them a large oil-painting of a Hegoumenos some forty years back, with grey beard and Russian orders, a very formidable likeness doubtless. The monk told us that there were only five monks there now, and that the Hegoumenos

* Ouzo is the Thessalian name for Masticha.

British School at Athens, Annual II.

METEORA AND HAGIOS BARLAAM.

PLATE III.

METEORA.

was away for the night at Trikkala. He asked us what the Hagia Trias was like very much as if he had never been there, and said five foreign ladies had stayed in the monastery the night before. Another black-bearded monk soon joined us, whose conversation was more intellectual. He told us that there was hardly any library,* and that the monks assumed a new name when they entered the monastery. But conversation was rather hard to keep up, as the monks did not round off their words like the Greeks of Athens, but spoke rapidly and rather in the throat. At length dinner was announced outside in the dark passage: the Manciple and Pericles waited on us. There was nothing Olympian about this Pericles: unlike his namesake he was young and merry, a boy of ten or eleven, always making faces and trying to join in the conversation. The first monk presided over the banquet, which consisted of several courses, with some good sweet Thessalian "Krasi." The first dish inspired me with apprehension, as it seemed to be chiefly bone, but our host was enjoying the meal so much himself, that I am sure he was not offended at our hesitation. The subsequent courses, in which, among other things, we had a curious mixture of greens and raisins, and some sour Kaimaki, made amends, and we ended with coffee, and cigarettes provided by the guests. I found here, as elsewhere, that a sure way of pleasing the rural Greek was to present him with some unused English stamps. Our host pronounced the head of Queen Victoria on a penny stamp to be *πάνν ὥραία*.

The bedroom on the same floor was arranged for five persons. Washing accommodation, as we had before found at Voulkanos, there was none, but there was glass in the windows. We slept very well, and in the morning, after a hasty cup of coffee, brought by the smiling Pericles, sallied forth to cast a last glance at the chapel. Then we bade adieu to the two monks, thanked them for their courtesy, and put our contribution as directed in the box. Then, after giving the Manciple a few drachmas, and not forgetting the statesman who followed us to the drawbridge, we started off at six to catch the train.

And so ended a visit I would willingly have prolonged, for Baedeker had excited my desire to see the frescoes of H. Barlaam. Here too we might have been hauled up in a net by a windlass, a process which, however disagreeable it may be in reality, as described

* Curzon pronounced the libraries at H. Stefanos and Trias to be worthless.

by Curzon, is the chief fact about Meteora known to the outside world. And perhaps if we had been to Meteoron itself, we might have found there the two beautiful MSS. which Curzon coveted, and so nearly secured at the cost of a domestic revolution. But I hope that at some future date, when the Eastern question is settled, one may once again penetrate to Meteora, and after seeing it more in detail, leave by the beautiful route which Curzon followed, through Mezzo to Janina, and thence down to the stern Albanian coast. In any case I commend the expedition which we made as easy and interesting, for the monks of H. Stefanos have good will and good cheer, the views are beautiful, and the situation and surroundings are unique.