

Topographical and Archaeological Investigations on the Summit of Helicon

In the last twenty years, considerable progress has been made in the topographical, historical, and archaeological study of the areas surrounding Mount Helicon, whose importance in Greek mythology, history, art, and religion is well known. The almost total lack of excavations in the territory of Mount Helicon (with the exception of two minor excavations at Khostia /Korsiai/ and in the cave of the Leibethrian nymphs /H.Triadha/) has been counterbalanced by long and extensive archaeological surveys and by the publication of topographical and epigraphical studies, most carried out in the last few decades. Without any doubt these publications have shed much light on what is still the unclear topography and history of this area. To today's picture of Western Boeotia could be added several yet unpublished chance finds from the Haliartia, the Koroneiake, Lebadeia, and Thespieae, and in particular from the Tilphossion and from Onchestos. Apart from these and apart from a work dedicated to the region and published by Wallace after his examination of this area some twenty years ago, almost nothing else has been written in recent years about the topography or the archaeology of the monuments of Mount Helicon.

My pilgrimage and investigations of the holy and beautiful mountain were motivated by rumours about imminent economic development and exploitation of Helicon as well as by my particular interest as the Head of the Ephorate of Thebes in future projects concerning the area. It was our hope and aim to preserve Helicon (or at least the part so-called by Hesiod and its ancient traditions) from disastrous human interventions which guided our campaign.

We are also very much encouraged by this small gathering of friends and specialists concerned with Mount Helicon.

We are no less encouraged by the fact that despite the destructive fires and intensive goat pasturing, Mount Helicon still remains one of the most beautiful mountains in Greece. Away from traffic and

cities, this mountain still retains the same pastoral and rustic character it must have had ever since the time of Hesiod and throughout ancient Greek history. Mount Helicon's reputation in Antiquity (and this not only for religious reasons) can best be seen in the detailed descriptions by Pausanias and Strabo. According to the former, Helicon is the most fertile of Greek mountains and abounds in trees; the latter claims that Helicon equalled Parnassus both in height and circumference.

Leake observes rightly that Pausanias meant the Helicon of Hesiod, and not the western extremity of the mountain, which differs in character from the eastern one, which was preferred by the Muses for its gentle slopes, its springs and groves, and for its smiling valleys. In the western part, on the contrary, it is the barren that prevails over the fertile, and the terrifying over the beautiful. Leake continues: «*If industry were protected, all the cultivable parts of the mountain would speedily be embellished by fields and gardens, villages and houses, offering delightful retreats in summer instead of merely furnishing pasture to flocks when they retire in that season from arid plains.*»

I visited Helicon for the first time in 1994 on May 15th together with a group of «friends of Helicon», mostly from Askra and Thespieae. Snow and mud had covered the peaks of the mountain until mid-April. We left the valley behind us and began climbing up from a place called *Poliana*, an old Vlachian hamlet at the foot of a peak named *Diakopi* (or *Motsara* or *Zagaràs*) where a ruined chapel dedicated to the Prophet Ilias is said to have existed. After a walk of more than two hours we reached the glade of *Kryo Pighadi* which scholars identify unanimously with the famous *Hippocrene*. We drank from its cold water, recalling passages dedicated to this place by ancient and modern writers. Frazer's excellent description of the place, although based, as it seems, on information gathered from local shepherds, remains a classic: «*To reach the far-famed Hippocrene from the Sanctuary of the Muses we ascend the steep eastern side of Mount Helicon (Zagara), over moss-grown rocks, through a thick forest of tall firs. After a toilsome ascent of about two hours we emerged from the woods upon a tiny open glade of circular shape, covered with loose stones and overgrown with grass and ferns. All round rises the dark fir-wood. Here is Hippocrene now called Kryopighadi 'cold spring'. It is a well of triangular opening, enclosed by ancient masonry...*»

According to Wallace who made the ascent in May, some twenty years ago, Hippocrene is a delightful place and well worth the effort

it takes to visit it. Situated just below the brow of the mountain in a coppice of fir-trees, the fountain is far from human noise and evokes feelings such as those expressed in AP 9, 290:

Ἄμβαιῶν Ἐλικῶνα μέγαν κάμες, ἀλλ' ἐκορέσθης
 Πηγασίδος κρήνης νεκταρέων λιβάδων,
 οὕτως καὶ σοφίης πόνος ὄφθιος· ἦν δ' ἄρ' ἐπ' ἄκρον
 τέρμα μόλης, ἀρύσθη Πιερίδων χάριτας.

Leake locates *Kryopighadi* near the summit of Mount Marandali and *Hippocrene*, at the copious water spring of the Monastery of Makariotissa; the latter is easily accessible from Domvraina and Thisbe. However Leake is mistaken because he takes the Monastery of Saint Nicolaos to be the Sanctuary of the Muses. The identification of *Kryopighadi* with *Hippocrene*, now accepted by all, is ascribed to Ulrichs; the situation of the spring corresponds perfectly to Pausanias' description and measuring of the distance of 20 stadia (ca 3,5-4 km) from the Vale of the Muses. At Hippocrene, Pausanias saw a copy of Hesiod's *Erga* inscribed on lead plates much worn by time. According to Hesiod, this fountain is one of the favourite bathing and dancing places of the Muses. Its mythical origin (it sprang up where Pegasus jumped on to earth) is hinted at in the popular etymology of its name as well as in that of the place named *Aganippe* situated not far from the vale. More difficult to identify is the river *Lamos* which is also mentioned by Pausanias. The name is almost a hapax as a hydronym and reminds us of the capital of the mythical Laestrygonians. According to Leake, this could be a manuscript lapsus for *Olmios* = *Olamos*. I personally am inclined to agree with this suggestion and would accept as a good candidate for the Lamos river the Zagara stream which is one of many streams that have their sources on the mountain. In doing so, I note that the spelling and sound of the words *Olamos* / *Olmios* are similar and that both are said to be «*akrotato Helikoni*». (Permessos, for instance, runs down through the valley.)

I have only a small comment to make here for the sake of philological and topographical information. A word *ra-mo* with derivatives *ra-mo-de* and *ra-mi-jo* is attested in a toponym in the Linear B tablets and the inscribed sealings recently discovered in Thebes. They are undoubtedly related to religious offerings in the context of animal sacrifice. Offerings could have come from a locality called *Lamo* which is attested, as I have observed, in the Thespiae and the Askraia and elsewhere. If we accept the emendation of *Olmios*, we must abandon the speculation which situates the Mycenaean *ra-mo* in this area.

Having left Hippocrene behind us, we continued to ascend the mountain up to its brow where the pillar of the Army Geographical Service now stands at a height of 1530 m. A little further to the North, under the supposed ruined chapel of the Prophet Ilias, we found a sturdy construction with fairly well preserved walls. Traces of illegal excavations were clearly visible; it was obvious that a certain amount of damage had been done by people using metal detectors; in many countries these detectors are well known as the greatest single danger for ancient remains and sites.

We collected some fragments of pottery, among them one piece with graffiti, and the lower part of a Corinthian aryballos of the VIth c. BC. According to traditional belief, the altar of Zeus Helikonios is located on this summit, under the chapel of the Prophet Ilias, is located (*Bomon eristheneos Kronionos*, in Hesiod's words). Wallace briefly refers to this belief and mentions Frazer, Vischer, Ulrichs, Bursian, Hitzig-Blümner and Welcker. I add Burn who considers that the solid foundations identified have nothing to do with a holy building.

On June 24th we resumed the cleaning up of the ruins, aiming on the one hand at preventing new illicit activities and on the other, at facilitating the making of drawings of the ancient remains of Hippocrene and of the buildings on the top of the mountain, as well as at collecting pottery and other important evidence for the chronology.

Our starting point this time was on the southern slope from Dombraina, Makariotissa, Pente Pigadhia, from a glade at the foot of the main mountain. We were told that the trip was shorter from there: «*One and a half hour's walk.*» In reality it took us a bit longer.

Careful observation and drawings have shown that the ruins on the summit of Helicon belong to the foundations of a two-room rectangular building orientated approximately N-S. The foundations are laid on the natural rock whose level varies considerably. A rough levelling of the rock might have preceded the laying of the foundations but, as in many other cases, the foundations follow the configuration of the natural calcareous stone. The lower part of the foundations is better preserved and reveals a Lesbian polygonal construction. The entrance area, which is fairly well preserved, is built in the same style of masonry. The entrance itself is situated near the SW corner and gives an excellent view over the plains and coastal lines of the SW coast of Boeotia and the Corinthian Gulf from Livadostro to Prodomos. The second room is reached from the first, through a

door cut into a separating wall. The external walls of this northern Room 2 are badly preserved, their foundations once laid on the rock at a higher level having been removed. But we can easily reconstruct the plan of the long rectangular building. With its sound construction it can be tentatively considered as a very interesting piece of military installation, probably a watch— or a signal-tower controlling mainly the SW coast. Preliminary examination of the pottery shows that: 1) the building was built sometime in the Archaic period; 2) the majority of this pottery has graffiti on it, and 3) the polygonal Lesbian masonry, although quarry-faced and sometimes careless confirms the date of the structure. Further study of the building and the excavation of its interior Room I, together with the study of the graffiti, will give answers to some questions that are still unclear. The investigation of the scattered debris of the northern room yielded tiles, of the Archaic and Classical periods, which belong to the roof of the building. A cavity resembling a chasm situated in the western half of the same room and which was heavily damaged by robbers, yielded sherds inscribed with graffiti. A study of them will show if they are of secular or religious character.

Wallace remarks that although the summit of the mountain seems to be an appropriate place for the altar of Zeus, it is possible that the ancient construction there actually served as a watchtower controlling the Gulf of Corinth. Hesiod's *bomos* was perhaps only an ash altar. Wallace is correct in his remarks even though he did not study of the construction fully. He did not make any attempt to establish its chronology and he was quite pessimistic as to whether it could ever be possible to identify Keressos, Donakon, and Leontarne, the altar of Zeus and the sanctuary of Mnemosyne. I do not agree with him at all because, as is well known, even the smallest piece of good evidence can tilt the balance. Scholars dealing with Boeotian archaeology and history are well aware of the surprises that these silent sites keep for those engaged in their study. The recent discoveries at Thebes have changed our views on some very important aspects of the Aegean civilization; and the Athenian press has recently reported the discovery by our colleagues of a fragment of a Megarian heroic bowl with scenes and inscriptions dealing with the mythical foundation of Thebes by Kadmos.

Let me try now, in this preliminary and incomplete paper about the recent examination of the summits of Helicon, to define the historical characteristics, the chronology, and functions of the

ancient remains there. Although from the Corinthian Gulf Helicon looks like Boeotia's western defense wall against invaders, in reality it does not seem to have had this function at all. As Burn remarks: «*From the time of Epameinondas and his predecessors to this day (Burn wrote his article at about the end of the Resistance and the Civil War) it has always been not a comfort but a headache to any person in charge of the defense of that part of Boeotia. This mountain as many others is not monolithic but a system of ridges penetrated by excellent routes. This fact rendered extremely nervous the fourth century Boeotian hegemony about its south coast during the war with Spartan naval allies.*» This statement is confirmed by the series of fortifications along the coast as well as by the watchtowers and other fortifications which are to be found further inland. Fortifications on the summits of mountains like the ones at Vigla/Petra and Palaiothivai and, as we believe, our watch-post on the summit of Diakopi (or Mot-sara or Zagara), were all of them conceived so as to prevent people from travelling across Helicon, especially when the usual routes along the coast of the lake or across the valleys were blocked.

The construction must have been used for military purposes on at least two occasions: 1) during the Spartan campaign against Thebes which finished badly at Leuctra; and 2) in the battle of Keressus, the «*earliest great deliverance of Greece*», according to Plutarch, somewhere in the Helicon area, at about 520 BC.

It is difficult to reconstruct the situation at the moment when the newly founded Boeotian League of Thebes with Coronea, Haliartos and Thespieae, rose against the Thessalians who had moved through Helicon and were already occupying the territory from Phokis «*ἄχρι Θεσπειάς*» as Plutarch says. Having invaded Phokis about 520 BC, the enemy decided to conquer Boeotia too counting on the help of Spartan forces. We can note that three out of the four towns in the League are situated near Helicon; we can therefore suppose that they became members of the League probably because they already suspected Thessalian intentions for expansion.

But the Thessalians were neither the first nor the last invaders to cross the mountain. The hypothesis put forward by Burn about the movement, during the Iron Age, through Helicon of Northerners bringing along their deities, cults, myths, and toponyms, constitutes *mutatis mutandis* a good reason for the existence of place-names and mountain cults common of the areas of Helicon and Pieria. The cult of the Muses, for example, was not confined to the Valley grove only;

it was practised on the mountain too, as well as in the glade of Hippocrene. Burn visited the spring and the ruined chapel on the ridge of Diakopi just above the spring. This mountain chapel seems to have been built on the site of an ancient Greek holy place; sherds of ancient glazed pottery are still to be found under the tumbled stones of the walls which now obstruct the floor.

Our preliminary investigation of the area of Hippocrene was confined to the thorough survey of the glade and to the digging of some trial pits; the latter was unfortunately without any substantial result because no datable pottery was found in this place.

The stone blocks that today form the mouth of the well are ancient and the *tracing* of the wall is of elaborate masonry of polygonal or Lesbian style. In my opinion, this construction is to be dated in the Archaic period, that is the date of the first mentioning of the spring in relation to the Muses and their cult. The style of the masonry shows considerable similarities with that of the building on the summit. The shape of the mouth is like an *isoskeles trapezium*; the dimensions of the mouth, on June 24th, up to 2 m under the water level, were as follows: 2m on the N-S longer sides, and 1 to 1m30 on the shorter E and W sides.

I find the arrangement of this spring extremely sophisticated and monumental; this fact can hardly be justified by the use of the water solely by soldiers and shepherds. Its importance lay in the cult functions unanimously attributed to it by ancient tradition.

The spring is at its full point about April and keeps its water throughout the whole summer.

Dimitris Anadiotis, a shepherd from this region, showed me another deep well situated on the same line as Hippocrene at a distance of about 100 m below the Hippocrene glade. The shepherd knew the second spring as «*i Trypa tou Gerou*» and according to him an old man used to live there «once upon a time». After having visited this well, I was able to ascertain that the well is too deep and narrow to have accommodated an animal let alone a man; the well is almost 10 m deep and it is possible that its opening follows the direction of the mountain slope. This fact deserves special investigation by speleologists. The well in question is particularly important since it is situated in an area which is sacred to the Muses and not only to them.

Still another interesting element was noticed during our investigation on Helicon: there exist on the brow of the mountain several

«*craters*», as they are called by local inhabitants. Some of them are covered with dense fir-trees but there are at least two which are uncovered and are quite surprising in size and appearance. We estimated their diameter to be about 60 m, and their depth about 15 m. I have consulted geologists on the matter and they are of the opinion that craters of this kind are not created by volcanic or meteoric activity but rather by the sinking and settling movements of the ground at those parts of the summit. These geological phenomena seem easy to interpret today, but to ancient people they must surely have appeared to be of divine origin.

Let me conclude by saying that the contribution of my present paper to the solution of the topographical, historical, and archaeological problems of Hesiod's Helicon and its surroundings is just a modest one. The detailed study of the new material and the new excavations due for next spring will perhaps bring the answers to at least some of the questions. I do hope however that my brief and modest paper brings out our firm decision to preserve as long as possible Helicon's natural, ecological, and archaeological heritage.

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