

# WORLD TRAVEL



The Strait of Telendos.

## Aegean Odyssey

Fresh from a decade spent researching the latest edition of the *Blue Guide* to the Aegean, **Nigel McGilchrist** takes us island hopping through an archaeological paradise.



**W**e live in a city-centric world. When we think of the scattered islands of the Aegean, we think of them as remote and peripheral, places of retreat where we can ‘get away from things’. To the Ancients it was not so. In the Bronze Age, the Islands and the sea-routes that linked them were the beating heart of their world – vital stepping-stones between two continents, Europe and Asia,

and between two great seas, the Euxine (Black Sea) and the Eastern Mediterranean. At that time and throughout later Antiquity, the sea was of central importance – much richer in possibility than the dangerous and often infertile land-masses that bordered it.

From earliest times tiny, sea-girt Delos, in the middle of the Aegean, was the cosmopolitan heart of the Greek-speaking world, as well as birth-place of two of its greatest divinities:

Apollo and Artemis. In the 6th century BC the island city of Samos was a bigger and more vital trading centre than Athens could then dream of being. Socrates, in his dialogue the *Phaedo*, put it in a nutshell when he implied that the Greek world was a pond scattered with frogs: the pond was the Aegean, the frogs the Greek cities. The frogs could never have existed without their pond – the life-giving expanse of water that united and separated them at one and the same time.

### Cradle of civilisation

The Aegean world, once seen, is never forgotten. It is an extraordinary combination of mountains, winds, turbulent waters, idiosyncratic vegetation, and brilliant light; and it has created a way of thinking, of living, of perceiving the universe, which is quite unlike that of the other great cradles of civilisation – the calm, fertile valleys of the Euphrates, the Tigris, and the Nile. I spent over six years of my life walking the islands of the Aegean – all 70 of them: the inhabited ones, at least. Yes, I certainly felt compelled by that divine and majestic landscape. But it was also because I sensed that our reading of Greek history, and therefore of early Western civilisation, was skewed unnecessarily towards the centres of mainland Greece.

Nobody would sensibly deny the huge importance and achievements of Athens; but should we, by the same token, overlook the contributions to the arts and sciences, and to the evolution and thinking of the Hellenic world, of



A blessed trinity: Paros marble, Milos Obsidian and Naxos emery.

Lesbos, Samos, Naxos and Paros in the 7th to 5th centuries BC, or of Cos and Rhodes in the 5th to 3rd centuries BC? Up until only a few decades ago, the Islands were difficult to visit, and remained unexplored and little understood for that reason. It is time to redress the balance.

My personal marathon of walking, sailing – sometimes climbing, and even swimming – this remarkable island-world began with a commission to write a brand new *Blue Guide to the Aegean Islands*. ‘Four hundred pages’, the publishers said. I began with Kythera; then Chios, Thasos, and Samothrace. Already there were nearly 250 pages of material. By the time I had completed the book there were over 1,500 pages, and my publishers had lost hope. But the full text has now appeared in 20 small volumes covering individual islands or small island groups.

### Black gold

When you are involved in a project like this, the customary reading of history itself begins to alter in front of your eyes. I came to the island of Milos fairly late in my research. In museums all over the Aegean area (and further afield in Malta, Italy, and Egypt) I had seen, again and again, Neolithic tools and blades made from the pure and unmistakable volcanic obsidian of Milos. But to stand on a grassy hill-top above the harbour of Milos, and to see the piles of discarded obsidian pieces lying exactly where they were dumped

Karpathos: the village of Olympos with Mt Prophitis Elias rising behind.

five, six, seven thousand years ago, and to realise that Neolithic traders set off from this one point in sail-less coracles to paddle along sea-currents from island to island, past deserted coastlines to distant shore-side settlements, in search of purchasers for their curious 'black gold' – to witness the origin of all that in one place, is wonderfully moving. It was the beginning of sea-borne commerce in Greece.

It was also the beginning of the tradition of Western sculpture. When that micro-sharp obsidian from Milos came to the island of Naxos, home of a soft and exquisite, crystalline white marble, it was a marriage made in heaven; and the progeny was the wealth of tiny figurines of unmistakable craftsmanship which we call 'Cycladic sculpture' (see CWA 26). That sculpture is not Egyptian in inspiration, or Mesopotamian, or Cretan: it is proudly and independently 'Aegean' for the first time – the origins of a much later and truly 'Greek' art. What is seen so clearly in the Islands, is the way in which the art and history are driven by the geography, by the availability of materials – and by that unpredictable facilitator of communication, the all-surrounding sea.

Naxos, like Paros its close neighbour, still produces the finest sculptural marble in the world. But Naxos also produces in one ravine of its eastern sea-board a curious and unprepossessing mineral known as emery. Its hard, granular texture will abrade and smooth the surface of marble to a soft, pellucid skin – without discolouring it. No wonder, then, that the long and distinguished tradition in Ancient Greece of cutting, shaping, and polishing marble as sculpture, has its origins in Naxos where marble, emery, and imported obsidian first came together by topographical coincidence. To this day,

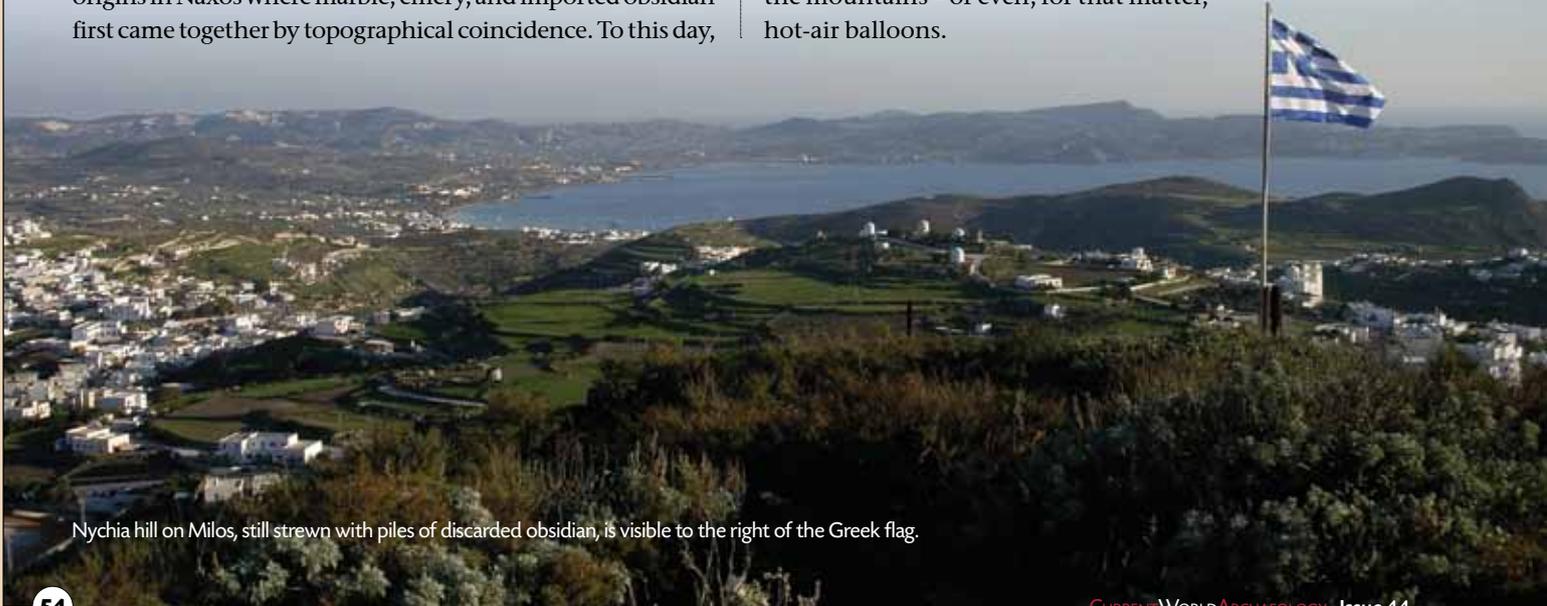


A large Cycladic figure.

one of the most moving sights in the Cyclades are the colossal, 6th century BC unfinished marble sculptures of *kouroi*, or youthful males, on Naxos. Almost 6m long, these were abandoned where they had been cut from the bedrock of the marble mountainsides – witnesses of the boldness and vitality of sculptural workmanship on the island.

Archaeology is a science of riddles. Those abandoned *kouroi* sculptures, high up in the hills of central Naxos, can tell us much about the way ancient sculptors worked and the tools which they employed. But by what possible means (unless the ancient Naxiots had invented the hot-air balloon and never told us) were these fragile, immensely heavy pieces of colossal sculpture ever to be transported over 12km of rocky and precipitous terrain, from the place where they were cut to a shore where they could be safely loaded onto barges? There is no easy explanation. For years, together with the students I brought to see them, we would wrestle with such problems. But archaeology, in the end, has a way of coming to the rescue of the riddles it sets. Recent excavations in the vicinity of the *kouroi*, have revealed the presence of a large sanctuary, apparently dedi-

cated to chthonic deities – possibly those two rebellious giants, Otus and Ephialtes, twin sons of Poseidon, who perished on Naxos and were honoured as the protectors of quarrymen. Supposing the colossal Flerio *kouroi* were originally destined for this sanctuary rather than, say, Delos or the city of Naxos? Then there would be no need to posit special transportation ramps stretching for miles across the mountains – or even, for that matter, hot-air balloons.



Nychia hill on Milos, still strewn with piles of discarded obsidian, is visible to the right of the Greek flag.

## Tunnel vision

It is in the Archaic period, especially the glorious 7th and 6th centuries BC (to which the Naxos *kouros* belong) – the age of Sappho, Pythagoras, and Polycrates – that the Islands carry most influence in the Greek world. Already by the 5th century, with the Persian wars and the hegemony of Athens, their political and artistic wings were being clipped. Herodotus was profoundly impressed when he went to Samos and witnessed its achievements under Polycrates' rule in the late 6th century BC. The archaeological remains of what he saw there still astonish today.

Engineering technology often tends to thrill only engineers. But the 1km-long tunnel, which the engineer and mathematician Eupalinus excavated through a mountain around 540 BC in order to bring fresh water from a spring into the town of Samos, is of wider fascination. When you enter, you see its masterful construction: the service-tunnel above, connected at intervals to the actual water-channel below (in much the same way as a service-tunnel connects to the two transport galleries in the Channel Tunnel). But that is not the point. Eupalinus, for whatever reason, began excavating the tunnel from both sides of the mountain at the same time, and his two teams of workmen met head-on in the utter darkness, 500m into the interior of the mountain after months of digging, with a total discrepancy in floor-level of only 4cm. How on earth was this achieved?

The combined brains of my talented student-groups, year after year, failed to come up with the explanation. In the end it is not that difficult. The work simply required an ingenious combination of marker posts, plumb bobs, water-levels and shafts dug down from the surface with hanging posts for alignment, together with that quality of clear, theoretical thinking which the Island Greeks possessed in abundance. The problem of water-supply for Samos could have been solved by a



An example of a finished *kouros* from Samos.

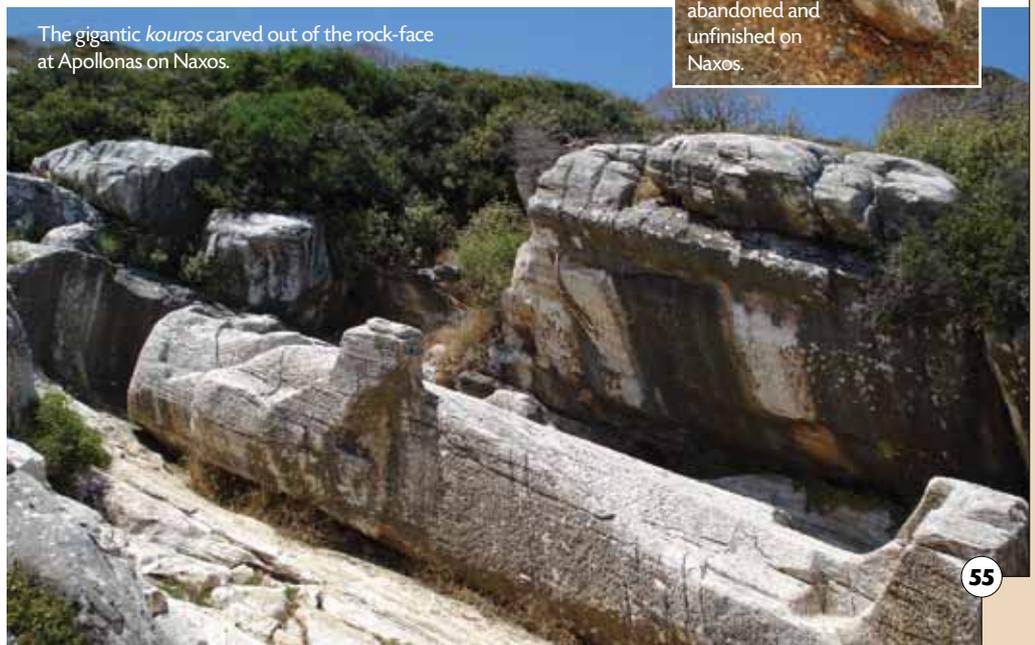
smaller and less ambitious project. But the early Greeks derived a primal joy from setting themselves a seemingly impossible task, and then pulling it off. It was not just about building a tunnel: it was about exalting the prowess of the mind – an exercise in showing-off. The whole scale of construction and sculpture in the Archaic period partakes of this same *chutzpah*, too. On Samos, Herodotus marvelled at two further wonders: the man-made extension to the harbour mole, whose foundations were 18m below the water surface, and the temple to Hera. Designed between 570-560 BC by Rhoecus, the first named architect in Greek history, the temple's colossal size was a good two and a half times that of the later Parthenon in Athens.

The substantial amount of new archaeological work underway in the Aegean constantly reinforces that the islands were busy, well-populated, and intimately connected with one another from the Early Bronze Age right through into late Antiquity. As if to underscore the diametric contrast to the way we perceive things now, it is often the smallest islands that had greatest importance: the diaspora of tiny islands (including Keros) in the lee of Naxos and Amorgos, for instance, or those to the north and east of Alonnisos in the Sporades, where prehistoric communities and commerce flourished. ➡



A 6m-long *kouros*, lying abandoned and unfinished on Naxos.

The gigantic *kouros* carved out of the rock-face at Apollonas on Naxos.



## Island sanctuary

If you had to choose one spot in the Cyclades to follow over the coming years, the tiny, deserted island of Despotikó, off the southern tip of Antiparos (in front of Paros), would be a good candidate. An extensive sanctuary, dating back to the Early Archaic period and seemingly dedicated to Apollo, is coming to light here. Amongst the fascinating complex of sophisticated buildings is an unusual bathroom for ritual ablutions. The votive objects found here come from far and wide, suggesting a considerable importance for the sanctuary, even though the temple itself has yet to be located. And what a delightful and unhurried visit it makes: the ten-minute crossing to Despotikó needs negotiating with the taverna-owner on the shore opposite, who possesses a small skiff. He will take you and collect you again. While on the island your only companions are the larks.

Despotikó may seem remote; but the presence of a Byzantine church (largely constructed from antique *spolia*) on the tiny rock-stack of Strongyli, a mile out to sea from Despotikó's southwestern extremity, reminds one that – when it comes to choosing a site – the builders of the Christian era pushed the limits even further than their pagan predecessors.

The sheer, exhilarating beauty and boldness of the natural sites which the Island Greeks, throughout their whole history, chose for their settlements and for their sanctuaries



Eupalinus' tunnel

is one of the abiding joys of the Aegean world. Santorini is a fine example. When Dorians from the lush, inland valley of Sparta set off in the 8th century BC to form a colony in the Aegean, they encountered a very different geographical reality. They settled on a dramatic, rocky plateau on Thera (Santorini), with the limestone peak of the ruined island behind, and dizzying drops to the sea on all other sides. Each year, on this sublime promontory, they performed their celebrations (the *Gymnopaïdai*) for their patron god – Apollo Karneios – naked, beneath the searing heat of the August sun, before an un-blemished horizon.

The last decade – the period in which I have been working on these books – has seen a ferment of archaeological and historical activity in the Islands. New, thoughtfully designed museums for individual islands, especially in the Dodecanese are being created. Major new excavations are under way – from the fortified Bronze Age town at Palamari on Skyros, to Early Christian remains at Eresos on Lesbos. Wide-ranging conservation-work has helped preserve a patrimony of Byzantine painting in the churches of Naxos, Kythera, and Euboea – which has no equals anywhere for



Ancient Samos showing, in the background, the awkwardly located hill obstructing access to the spring.



**LEFT** Remains of an Early Archaic sanctuary on Despotikó.

the diversity of its styles and periods. And some notable political obstacles have been overcome too: the Ottoman monuments still remaining in Greek territory, as well as the extraordinary legacy of Italian colonial architecture of the 1920s and 1930s in Leros, Kos and Rhodes, are now starting to receive the attention they deserve.

Perhaps the old imbalance in our perception of the Greek world is slowly being redressed after all.

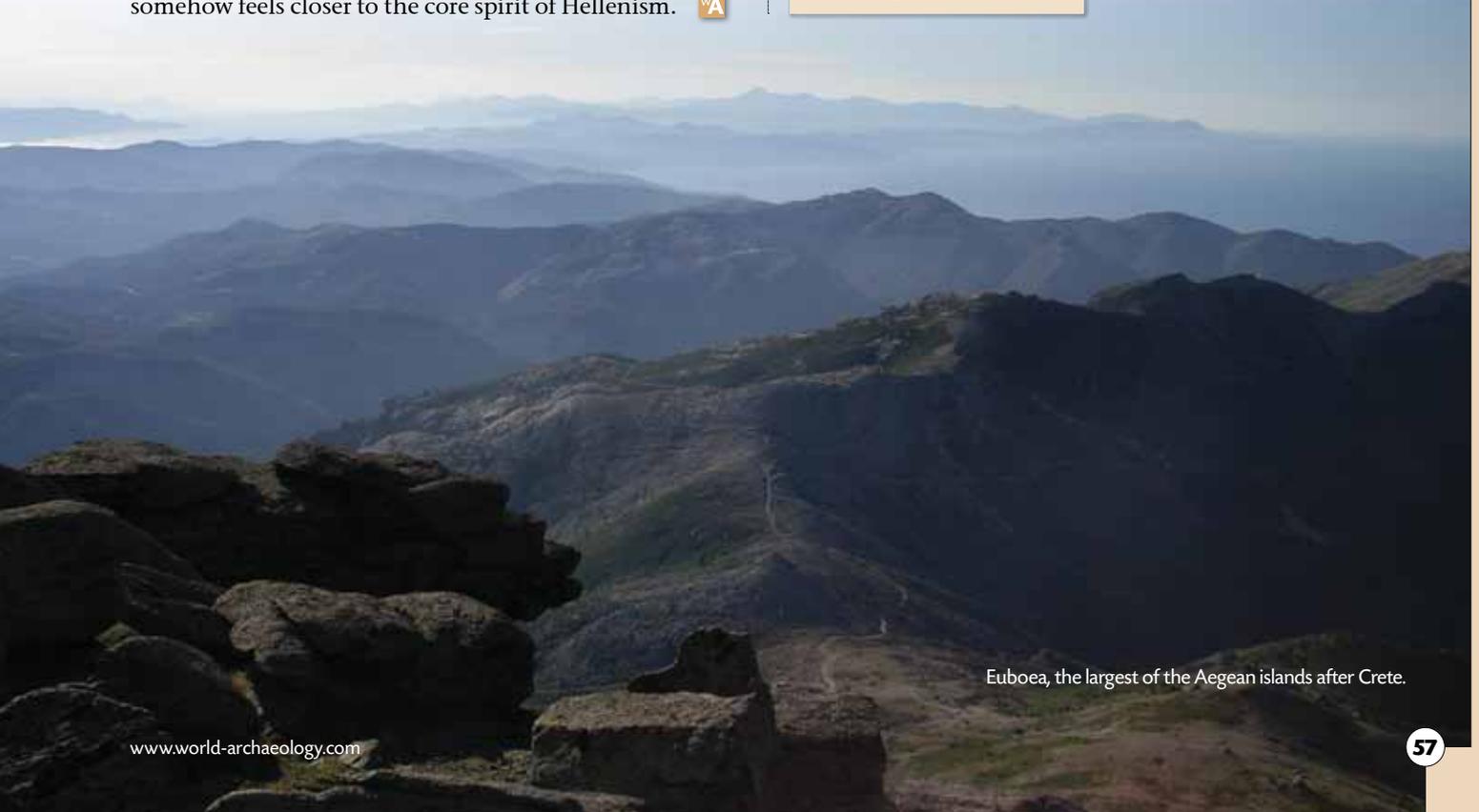
Though always bound by a common language and culture throughout their history, the Islands (as those Spartan settlers discovered) are necessarily a very different world from the Greek mainland. Less well documented, undoubtedly; but with an exhilarating diversity and energy that somehow feels closer to the core spirit of Hellenism. 



**ABOVE** The Terrace of the Ephebes, at Ancient Thera on Santorini.

**SOURCE**

**Nigel McGilchrist.** The abridged version of his work is available as the *Blue guide Greece: The Aegean Islands*. The magnificent full text, in 20 volumes, is reviewed on p.64.



Euboea, the largest of the Aegean islands after Crete.