

May 2011 in Greece: in the planning stages, it seemed like a wonderful idea. I asked for money from the Langara Research Committee (LRC) to go to Athens to look at images of adults and children on Athenian red-figure pottery, and consider the nature of the interaction. I asked for funds for a one week study session, and had a timetable of which museums I would visit and when, in order to make the week as efficient as possible.

Well. May 2011 in Athens was rather more exciting than I had planned for. Even before I left, I wondered how the strikes and delays would affect my plans, and spoke briefly to Cheryl McKeeman about it. She said, with a degree of faith that I found (and find) heartening, that she was sure I would be able to make the trip worthwhile regardless. As it happens, people who study ancient Greece are accustomed to being very adaptable in the face of widely scattered material remains (courtesy of years of the 'grand tour' and souvenir hunters), of overcrowded museums, and of the loss of about 95% or more of what was there in the first place. And strikes and demonstrations are nothing new (though the extensive museum closures were an unwelcome extra). Here, then, is my report.

I had intended to spend three full days in the National Archaeological Museum looking at the pottery there. Because of funding cuts, however, the hours were shortened, and the entire pottery section of the museum was closed. So, adapting as I went along, I looked instead at sculptures where adults and children were displayed together, spending only one and half days there. I thus had time to spend at the new Acropolis Museum, which had a wonderful display of images of women on pottery. These however were displayed clustered tightly together such that only one side was visible, on three ranks of shelves: one too high to see in any detail at all, one so low that to look at anything I needed to crawl, and one at eye level (thank goodness). No photographs of the pottery were permitted, but I did get some photographs of sculptures where there were images of families -- families in any medium were now to be my expanded topic, less likely to be stymied by the economic crisis in Greece. As Cheryl had predicted, I did therefore adapt. I was able to visit the four other museums on my list. At the Piraeus Museum my expanded topic found material in, for example, tombstones showing adult men and their young daughters, and a wonderful, large family tomb for a man and his adult son. At the Benaki Museum, there were images of mothers and sons (the best one in a room where photographs were not allowed). There were other useful, but predictable, images from the Agora and Kerameikos museums. However, the time left over from the planned visits to the National Archaeological Museum also left me time to see other museums, not even on my list; in total, I visited 17 museums in a one week period. These included the Pottery Museum (19th century and somewhat earlier material; useful for pre-industrial potting methods and situations), the Byzantine and Early Christian museum (where, alas, the icons which would show different versions of Mary and the infant Jesus were in the parts of the museum closed for lack of funding), various branches of the Greek Folk Art Museums, one of which had a display and discussion of marriage customs on one of the Greek islands during the medieval period in Greece (and very odd they were too, but alas, no photographs and no brochure), the Jewish Museum (a moving visit, covering the Jewish experience from ancient times to the present in a museum with carefully guarded access), the War Museum (a decidedly disturbing place), the Kanellopoulos Museum (a family collection with random and potentially useful material, which however had been listed as closed, so I ended up there by accident and without my camera on the day after my study time had ended), the Museum of Cycladic Art, and others. In addition to museum study, by chance I found out about a lecture at the Danish Institute in Athens by Dr. Michael Kerschner on Greek settlements in the East Aegean; his discoveries included an ancient kiln, adding considerably to our understanding of the social aspects of pottery making (thus linking to part of my original planned study).

What, ultimately, did I learn from this study? First and most important, I think, is that while generally

speaking in the ancient Greek family women were not highly valued, there were clearly many exceptions to this where adult males (presumably fathers or grandfathers) are shown interacting with young girls; these exceptions are not part of most social overviews, and because the images that show them are not necessarily either common or artistically well done, they don't appear in art history books either. Second, relationships between for example mothers and daughters are hard to assess using sculpture (which is what I was mostly able to see) because sculptures of adult women tend to make them all apparently the same age. Third, images of young children in family groups are hard to define; thus, in the Acropolis Museum two virtually identical images of families each including one small boy identify the child, in one case, as a son, and in the other case, as a slave. There is nothing inherent in the images to prove one or the other.