

REPORTS – STUDY TRAVEL – EXHIBITION

Detailed Overview of Present Project on Afro-Byzantina on the Occasion of a Visit to Greece

Raita Steyn

(University of Pretoria)

(raita.steyn@up.ac.za)

This paper will present the outcomes of a study visit to Greece, organised by the Institute of Afro-Hellenic Studies, which took place during the period of 22 September to 23 October 2017. The *IAHS* has had a long history of collaboration, since the 1980's with Institutes and academics from Greece, by means of publications, periodicals, organisation of international conferences, visits, colloquia and seminars.

The aim of the series of colloquia, discussions, seminars and *Round Tables* was twofold, namely, a continuation of the scholarly collaboration and cooperation in the fields of research and publications as well as the creation of new projects and continuation of existing research programmes.



Figure 1: National Archaeological Museum of Athens
Source: Photograph by author, 2017

Together with a group of researchers from the University of Johannesburg and myself, from the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria, travelled to Athens to have our first meeting with the Director of the Institute of Graeco-Oriental and African Studies IGAAS, Professor Vassilios Christides. During this meeting, consensus was reached on the collaboration on common publications and research in the framework of each Institute's projects, i.e. the focus on Afro-Byzantina (mainly Egypt, Nubia and Ethiopia). The following day, we visited the renowned National Archaeological Museum of Athens (Figure 1).

Apart from the antiquities of the museum collections, a temporary exhibition, titled *Odyssey*, immediately caught my attention. Hues of deep blue colour together with the sound effects imitating the sea life, were projected against a wall. This created a sense of 'experiencing' rather than just 'seeing' the depths of the sea. Then, poems by renowned Greek poets such as Cavafy, Seferis, Elytis and Ritsos were also presented against the blue waves. The verses of one of Constantine Cavafy's poems, *Ithaca* (Figure 2) – was a perfect metaphor for the purpose in life – which reminded me of the importance of enjoying the journey rather than reaching your destination:

Το φθάσιμον εκεί είν' ο προορισμός σου,
Αλλά μη βιάζεις το ταξείδι διόλου...

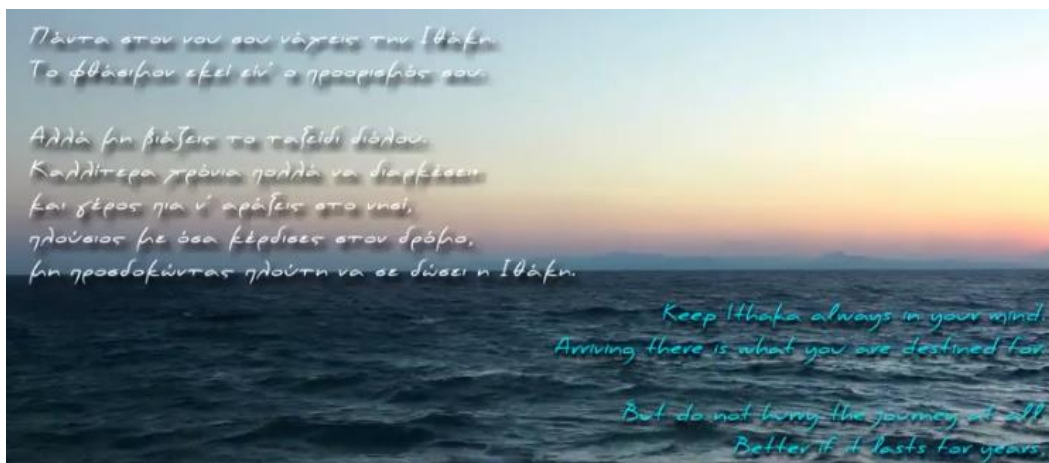


Figure 2: Verse from Constantine Cavafy's poem, *Ithaca* projected against the museum's wall
Source: Photograph by author, 2017

The next morning, we left Athens for the Greek port-city, the second largest and wealthiest city of the Byzantine Empire, Thessaloniki, to continue with our research plans and also not to forget ... to enjoy our journey too! Upon our arrival, further meetings, colloquia and *Round Table* discussions took place, organised by Dr Dimitri Kasapidis.

After an intense meeting, the researchers split into two groups; the one group went for a well-deserved break while our group went with Dr Kasapidis who volunteered to become our tour guide and showed us a large number of Byzantine churches as well as some Ottoman and Roman historical buildings which dated ca 4th century. Ancient Roman ruins, i.e. the Arch of Emperor Galerius and the Rotunda (Figure 3), which was once a church and a mosque, were found in the centre of Thessaloniki. We were guided from church to church and to our surprise saw archaeologists, about 15 meters beneath the metropolis, digging with shovels in hand. “A city under a city” explained our pseudo-guide. Dr Kasapidis told us how “during the construction for a new metro sub-way, some men while digging discovered a part of an ancient villa”. For a few seconds I closed my eyes and wondered, what would become of the sub-way, would the metro project or the excavation continue? Suddenly I was pulled from my daydream by a voice announcing: “here is your bus!” That was Dr Kasapidis announcing our means of transport back to our living quarters, cheap and very efficient...

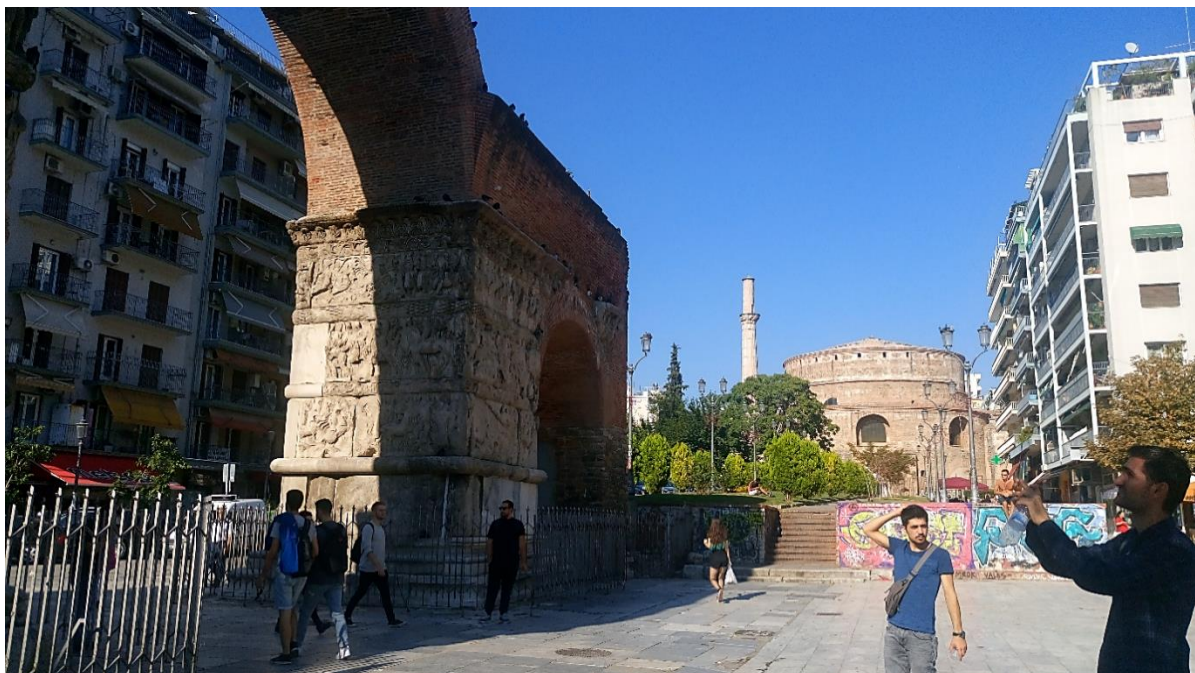


Figure 3: Arch of Emperor Galerius (left) and the Rotunda (back), Thessaloniki
Source: Photograph by author, 2017

Over the next few days I collected material for my Afro-Byzantina research. This included photos, notes, books and other fine examples of art and architecture of the Byzantine period. More visits to libraries and to a number of Byzantine churches (Hagia Sophia, catacomb of St

John the Baptist, Churches of the *Acheiropoietos*²⁸⁶ and the *Panagia* of the Chalcedon (Figure 4); visits to Islamic architecture (Hamza Bey Mosque, Muslim Baths, and Ottoman Bank) and visits to Byzantine excavations. During the end of my second week in Thessaloniki, Dr Kasapidis introduced me to George Tsigaras, an Associate Professor of Byzantine and Post-Byzantine Art History of the University of Thrace. The themes which were discussed were about the collaboration between the representatives' universities, the publishing of articles in the institutions' periodicals and also talks that related to our personal and current common projects on Byzantina and Afro-Byzantina. Furthermore, thoughts around student exchange and exchange of exhibition materials were also on the table. All these items are currently being followed up and tangible results are expected during 2018-2020.



Figure 4: Church of Panagia Chalcedon, Thessaloniki
Source: Photograph by author, 2017

²⁸⁶ *Acheiropoietos* literary meaning 'made without the use of hands'.

We had more visits with members of the *Greek Society of Historical Studies* (Prof. A. Zafraka) and the *Greek National Academy of Civilizations*, Dr A. Maras and Prof Karathanasis. Dr Maras would open up its programmes for the IAHS and its members. I was also invited to contribute an article in the latter's periodical on the portrayal of Alexander the Great in the Ethiopian Arts, as one of Prof Karathanasis' research programs concerns Alexander the Great, including his meaning for Africa. Our last visit for the week took place at the Museum of Byzantine Culture with Dr Anastasia Tourta, Director Emerita of the mentioned museum.

Our third and last week was, personally for me, the most exciting. The reason for this is that firstly, I am an artist myself and secondly, I teach *Visual Arts Education* at the University of Pretoria. The exciting event took place in the small Café Anatolikon, in one of the back streets in Thessaloniki, retelling the times of when the Impressionist met and discussed artworks in Parisian cafés. We were invited to the opening of an art exhibition, entitled, *Ndlé*, by Alexia Vouvoura (Figures 5 & 6). The title *Ndlé* for blue, was mispronounced by a little boy and inspired the artist Vouvoura's choice of title of her exhibition. Traces and reflections of idealised forms of the Greek blue (*Ndlé*) sea were found in every art piece created by this contemporary artist.



Figure 5: The *Ndlé* Exhibition on the walls inside Café Anatolikon, Thessaloniki
Source: Photograph by author, 2017



Figure 6: From left to right: Dr Raita Steyn, Dr Dimitri Kasapidis, Artist Ms Alexia Vousvoura and Dr Chryssa Mantaka, surrounded by the artist's artworks

The next day, the Ms Vousvoura, who was also a post-graduate at the School of Drama of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Aristotle University, invited us to view the students' art and design exhibition on Fayum portraits (Figure 7) and the paintings of the mosaic floors. When we walked inside the School of Drama, we were so amazed to find that the Fayum portraits were gigantic paintings on canvas compared to the Fayum or Egyptian small mummy portraits which were painted on natural wooden boards and attached to the deceased head in ancient times. Alexia Vousvoura explained that the students started off with small paintings and slowly increased in size. This way they build the student's confidence in producing giant artworks which are used as stage props in theatre performances. The beautiful rendered paintings of the mosaic floors were a realistic replica of those found in the Roman villas (Figure 8).



Figure 7: Fayum portraits by students of the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

Source: Photograph by author, 2017

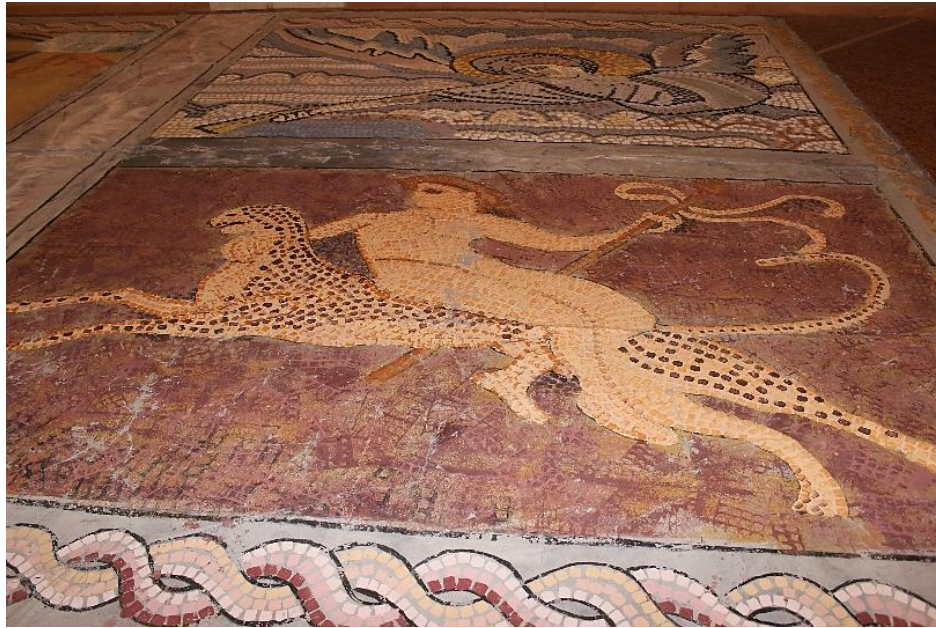


Figure 8: Gigantic mosaic scene painted on canvas
Source: Photograph by author, 2017

After viewing these enormous, stunning mosaics and Fayum portraits, Prof Proios, Head of the School of Stage Design, invited us to interact with the students while working in the studios under different disciplines, offered by the university. This visit posed to be very valuable as we realised that we had common interest in our subject matter, i.e. art and design education. Further discussions around the possibility to exchange and exhibit artworks created by students of the School of Drama, Faculty of Fine Arts of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki and art works created by my own Art Education students of the Faculty of Education, University of Pretoria (Figures 9 & 10) also took place. The student art work exchange would possible uplift both institutions and also create a learning environment that promotes different cultural activities that offer the students an opportunity and a platform to showcase their art works in Greece and South Africa respectively.



Figure 9: Students from the discipline Stage Design at the School of Drama are designing bird heads for a performance
Source: Photograph by author, 2017



Figure 10: Prof Stergios Proios, Dr Raita Steyn, Dr Lila Karakosta, Ms Alexia Vousvoura

Our visits to Greece was to find common ground for scientific collaboration in the fields of Byzantine, Afro-Byzantine and Art Education studies with our own research programmes at the University of Johannesburg and University of Pretoria. Arriving there is what we were destined for and we didn't hurry the journey at all!