

PELION

Since the dawn of ancient history, Pelion has been hiding secrets and playing host to mythical creatures. The dense and rich vegetation that covers it, the abundant fauna, the waters and springs which through the centuries have created countless small valleys of unique beauty have all, for thousands of years now, given life to this blessed mountain; the home of the Centaurs according to Greek mythology. *Here Chiron, wisest of all the Centaurs, taught and raised the greatest hero of the Greeks, Achilles, and before him, Jason; the mythical hero whose achievements during the Argonautic expedition were taught at ancient Greek Laidia as they grew up thereby instilling in them the spark to become seafarers and begin acquiring, what was by then, the whole of the known world.*

The Cheerful Mountain of the Centaurs

The people of this area have kept and enriched the customs, art and aesthetics of these legends and in so doing have added the final brush stroke to this unique portrait of Greek nature. The traditional villages, built from the grey stone of the region, seem as if they have been transported here from another crystal-clear place in time, with their celebrations and religious festivals which the locals hold with devotion.

The special architecture of the village of Pelion; the 'tower-house', Byzantine and post – Byzantine churches and monasteries as well as the stone bridges, fascinates anyone who has come to know it.

The beauty of the nature and people of Pelion, has made the area into an important tourist resort which never loses its liveliness or charms throughout the whole year.

The completely green mountains with their dense woods, along with the small picturesque beaches, fill with people every summer. During the winter, Pelion is dressed in white and the snowy slopes and summits fascinate countless visitors who either stay in the welcoming villages of Pelion or enjoy the pistes of the ski centre in Chania.

In the very human villages, in the extremely beautiful nature which surrounds them and gives them life, and in the monuments that are everywhere and recall the region's history, the visitor will feel the need, even before returning home, to plan their next visit to this wonderful place.

Nature and Morphology

The soil of Pelion consists mainly of crystalline rocks and, according to its morphology, is divided into eastern Pelion (towards the Aegean) and western Pelion (towards the plain of Thessaly). Its highest summits are Xeforti or Pourianos Stavros (1,624m), Kotroni (1,550m), Pliassidi (1,548m), Aidonaki (1,537m), Agriolefkes (1,470m) and Schitzouravli (1,450m).

Torrents rush through the mountain and flow directly to the sea creating little waterfalls in many places. In the southern approach to Mavrovouni there used to be a lake, Lake Boebeis or Karla, which has since been drained so that the area could be cultivated.

The inaccessible eastern side of Pelion, which has only a few capes, ends abruptly at the coast of the Aegean; inhospitable for ships but with small, beautiful, sandy beaches which attract many tourists. After the Strait of Skiathos is the bay of Andriami and in the Strait of Trikeri are the capes of Grivas, Agios Vatos and Kavoulia.

In the Pagasitic Gulf, on the Trikeri Peninsula, are the capes of Kalogiros and Trachili. On the inside of the peninsula are the port of Trikeri and the bay of Valtoudi. The port of Volos, because of its location in a low-level (15m above sea level) alluvial area between the foot of Pelion and the sea, is protected from the winds, a fact that played a part in its

development towards becoming a large maritime transport centre. Within 13 km of Volos, in Malaki, is an impressive cave within which, along with 250m of passages, there is an underground river and a number of lakes. The coastline of the western side of Pelion (towards the Pagasitic Gulf is more approachable. Its only capes are those of Agios Minas on the eastern side of the entrance to the Gulf of Volos, and Angistri on the west. Further east of the Gulf of Volos, are the bays of Almyros, Sourpi and Amalipoli as well as a number of capes.

The Centaurs

Wherever you stand, wherever you walk in Pelion, you are aware of the heart-felt presence born in the hazy years of the legends of prehistory. The Centaurs, unique mythological creatures were neither gods nor mortals nor animals. Half of their body was human whilst the other half was that of a horse; half of their existence was immortal and the other half mortal. According to the myth, the father of gods, Zeus, took pity on Ixion and offered him hospitality on Olympus as well as making immortal. Ixion was the king of Lapiths of Thessaly but had murdered his fiancée's father and for this crime he was hated by both gods and men. The ungrateful Ixion however, got drunk on nectar and made brazen advances to Hera, the wife of Zeus. In order to punish him for his ingratitude, Zeus allowed him to pair off with Nephele, a cloud in the form of Hera, and from this union a monstrous being was born, Centaurus. From the relationships of Centaurus with the mares of Magnesia, the Centaurs were born. Their lithe figures sauntered nonchalantly on the sandy beaches and the plains, or trotted along the quite slopes and gorges, or simply rested in the caves of Pelion, Othrys and Oeta. As creatures guided by their instincts and feelings, the Centaurs, with their wild and uncontrolled nature, often became involved in hostilities with the inhabitants of the region, the Lapiths. The largest of their fights, which the humans won, became a symbol of victory for the Greeks against other nations (especially the Persians), symbolizing the victory of the morality and logic of the Greek civilization over barbarism. *The ancient writer Nonnus, in his work the 'Dionysiaca', distinguished three types of Centaurs. To the first category belonged the immortal Chiron, son of Cronus and the Oceanid Philyra. Also in this category was Pholus, son of Silenus and a Nymph. To the second category belonged the 'horned' Centaurs, sons of the Hyades Nymphs, who took their appearance as a punishment from Hera because the Nymphs had nursed Dionysus. To the third category belonged the Centaurs born in Cyprus from Zeus and Gaia who accepted his sperm after he failed to rape Aphrodite.*

The most famous representative of all the Centaurs was the wise Chiron, who healed animals with the countless herbs of Pelion. Both gods and heroes learned hunting, music and fighting techniques in Chiron's cave. The place where he lived (Chironio) was considered sacred by mortals. Asclepius, god of medicine, youngest of the Argonauts and the son of Apollo and the Nymph Coronis, grew up with him, as did Achilles great-grandson of Chiron, Jason, the Dioscuri Castor and Pollux, and others. The scrupulously fair Pholus, descendent of a less eminent origin, acted as an arbiter at the quarrel of Hephaestus and Dionysus for the possession of Naxos. When he finally decided for the latter, Dionysus gave him a barrel of wine as a present, which he was not to open until Heracles came to visit him. When Heracles came to Pholus and the wine was opened, the other Centaurs smelled it and wanted to take part in the feast as well which, as a result, ended in a terrible fight at the end of which Heracles scared them off. During this battle, Heracles hit Chiron with a poisoned arrow by mistake. Being unable to heal, the Centaur preferred to die and asked Zeus to give his immortality to Prometheus.

In another myth it is mentioned that during the wedding ceremony of the king of the Lapiths, Pirithous, and Hippodamia in Pelion, the Centaur Eurytion tried to kidnap the bride. A wild fight followed between the Centaurs, who ran to help Eurytion and carried off the women,

and the Lapiths who finally, with the help of Theseus, defeated them. The 'Centauromachy' was one of the most favourite mythological compositions. On the oldest monuments there are Centaurs shown with wild faces, beards, messy hair and the ears of Satyrs. They had the entire body of a human with a horse's rear end stuck on the back. Later, the legs all became those of a horse and the face lost its wild expression.

Peleus and Thetis

Peleus, the son of Aeacus and king of Iolcos; with the immortal Thetis (daughter of the sea god, Nereus) who had already rejected the advances of Zeus and Poseidon and as a punishment was forced to marry a mortal. Chiron advised Peleus to catch her while she was washing her hair in a spring with the Nymphs and not to let her go whatever terrible form she would take. Peleus was not scared of the shapes the goddess assumed to scare him off and thereby forced her to give him her love. All of the gods came to their wedding. Thetis gave birth, by Peleus, to their son Achilles and tried, in every possible way, to make him immortal including burning him and then dousing him in the water of the Styx. Peleus found out what she was doing and became enraged. Then he returned to the Nereids where he saw the Achilles grew up with Chiron. From an ash tree of Pelio, the spear of the hero was fashioned which gave him many victories during the Trojan war.

The Apple of Discord

The ancient Greek story-tellers placed the first 'beauty contest' of the world in the region of Magnesia. At the wedding of Thetis and Peleus, all gods and goddesses, except Eris, had gathered. Eris, the goddess of quarrels, was not invited by anyone because they were all afraid she would create an unpleasant scene. Angry, the goddess made herself invisible and set in front of Zeus a golden apple with the inscription "for the most beautiful". Immediately the three goddesses -Hera, Athena and Aphrodite- began to fight for it but none gave in whereupon Zeus put Paris, the son of Priam, king of Troy, as a judge. After listening to the offers of the 'contestants', he chose Aphrodite who had promised to give him the most beautiful mortal as his wife. Indeed, with the help of Aphrodite, Paris took Helen from Menelaus and brought her to Troy. Helen's beauty, however, had forced the suitors who fought for her to swear that they would protect her marriage from anyone trying to take her by force and the winner should not be afraid of being killed by the rest. Thus, when Paris kidnapped her, all of the suitors went to Troy, as Homer describes in the 'Iliad'.

Jason and the Argonautic Expedition

The myths place in Volos the site of the construction of the ship the 'Argo' -symbol of the Greeks' love of travel- and the beginning of the Argonautic expedition. The dominant version of the myth is, briefly, as follows: Poseidon, god of the sea, fell in love with the very beautiful mortal Theophane, whom he took to an unknown island and made love to her in the form of a ram while he transformed her into a ewe. From this union a ram with 'golden fleece' was born. This ram was sacrificed by Phrixus in the temple of Zeus Phyxius in Colchis and its magical fleece was hung on an oak tree in a wood devoted to Ares, with a terrible dragon that never slept placed as a guard.

Homer (in the 'Odyssey', 11' 254) narrates the myth of Poseidon and Tyro. From their union the twins Pelias and Neleus were born. Tyro, in order that her relationship with Poseidon should not be revealed, abandoned her children in a tub close to the river where a shepherd found and raised them. Cretheus, the founder of Iolcos, later married Tyro, who was his niece, and from this marriage Aeson was born. The three brothers, Aeson, Pelias and Neleus, came together only to separate again over the succession to the throne when, after the death

of Cretheus, Pelias overthrew his brother Aeson and became king of Iolcos. Aeson married the grand-daughter of Hermes, Polymede, and hid his son, Diomedes, in the mountains to protect him from Pelias the usurper of the throne. The young Diomedes grew up with Chiron and was so good at botany, and in particular with herbs, that he was renamed Iasonas or Jason (from *iasis* meaning 'cure'). Years later he returned to his birthplace but, when he was crossing the river Anaurus, he lost one of his sandals and appeared in front of his uncle Pelias with only one sandal! Pelias, who had received a prophecy from the oracle at Delphi to beware of the one-sandaled man, gave Jason an assignment to bring the corpse of Phrixus and the golden fleece back to Iolcos. The builder of the mythical ship used on the journey was Argos, son of Phrixus and Chalciopé and cousin to Jason.

In Colchis, king Aëetes allowed Jason to take the fleece, provided he managed to complete a task that the king would set. With the help of the king's daughter, Medea, who fell in love with Jason, the hero managed the task and took the fleece from the dragon after it fell asleep under her charms. Medea left with Jason and after they had escaped the king's persecution and many other difficulties, they reached the island of the Phæacians (Corfu), where king Alcinoüs helped them to get married. The young couple returned to Iolcos, gave the fleece to Pelias and dedicated the Argo to Poseidon at his temple in Corinth.

Prehistory

During the prehistoric period, the plain of Thessaly was a lake surrounded by mountains. The first inhabitants of the region were the Leleges, the Aëmonians, the Pelasgians, the Ionians and the Minyai. Thessaly was also settled by the Danaï and the Lapiths, and the Thessalians and Magnetes came to the area in the 2nd millennium BC. Very little is known about the civilizations of the people in this region during the early part of this period. The many stone farming tools found, however, confirm that the inhabitants were farmers. In Magnesia, the oldest Neolithic settlements in Greece can be found at Sesklo and Dimini, which are dated to 5000 BC. Excavations here have brought to light an advanced fortification and architectural technique, tools and objects of everyday use along with fine artistic pottery and sculpture. In 2500 to 1200 BC there was a settlement where today, in the cove of the Pagasetic Gulf, lies the town of Palæa. This settlement has been identified with the most important town in this area, Iolcos which, by 1300 BC, had developed into an important port. Southwest of Iolcos was another maritime town, Alos, which was built close to the present-day town of Almyros. Alos was built by Athamas, brother of Cretheus and king of Orchomenus. Pelion was mentioned often by the ancient writers either for its mythology or for its exceptional vegetation; beech, wild cherry and fir trees are all noted among its ancient flora. In antiquity Pelion was also known as the 'curative mountain'.

The Historical Period

From the historical period, the capital of Iolcos starts to decline and Pagasæ becomes dominant. During the classical years this was the sea port of Phærae which became an important merchant port and transport centre exporting Thessalian wheat and slaves. Pagasæ declined a thousand years later, when it was besieged and occupied in 353 to 352 BC by the king of Macedonia, Philip II, who annexed it to Magnesia.

The port of Alos, important during the Persian wars, also declined in the 4th century BC. The Thessalians then used the Thebes of Phthiotis as a port until, during the Social War, they

were besieged by Philip V of Macedonia. After this, they started to bank-up the port of pyrasus and, because it became the centre of commerce, the majority of the inhabitants of Thebes moved there.

In 293 BC, king Demetrius Poliorcetes founded a new town a short distance away which became known as Demetriada in honour of him. This town flourished during the post-Classical years and was densely inhabited by locals as well as people from other areas (Orientals, Egyptians etc.). Like the majority of Greek towns, Demetriada was just an unimportant provincial town of the Roman Empire when, in 194 BC, the Romans took it from the Macedonians. pyrasus remained the sea port of Thebes and kept its independence until its accession to Thessaly in 181 BC.

The Byzantine Period

It appears that during the Byzantine period, for which there are not many records, the area of Pelion was sparsely populated. No large town developed nor are there any important political or cultural events recorded. The whole of Thessaly experienced, during this time, the constant invasions of foreign nations from the north which came down from Macedonia or Epirus. In AO 396, there was an invasion by the Goths and, in AO 539 -540, the Huns attacked Oemetriada as a result of which the Emperor of Byzantium, Justinian, decided to fortify the towns of Thessaly. At the same time, on top of the ruins of ancient lolcos, the Byzantine kastro of Golos was built. The last time the name lolcos is mentioned is in the 12th century by the Byzantine chronicler Tzetis. One and a half centuries later, the Byzantine historian Ioannis Kantakouzinus mentions, for the first time, the name of Golos.

The Frankish Occupation

After the occupation of Constantinople by the crusaders in 1204, the victors gave Thessaly to their leader Boniface of Montferrat who died in 1207 whereupon, in 1222, the despot of Epirus, Theodorus, took this kingdom from the Latins. Due to the flourishing commerce, especially in Almyros, important tradesmen in Pisa had signed a special treaty with the Byzantine Empire in 1119 allowing them to be able to carry out, freely and with privileges, their international trade in the region of Pelion. Other tradesmen from Venice and Genoa also made the Pagasetic Gulf the centre for their businesses. In 1349, Emperor Stefan Dusan of Serbia, occupied the whole of Thessaly but the delegate of the Empire, Ioannis Kantakouzinus, managed to push back the Serbian troops to the west and north. In 1393, Thessaly came under Turkish occupation for the first time. The Byzantine Emperor Manuel, took her back a few years later.

Thessaly again suffered under Turkish occupation from 1423 and the conquerors settled down in the ruined Byzantine kastro of Golos.

The situation remained like this for the next two centuries until, in 1655, the Venetian admiral Francesco Morosini, plundered and occupied the kastro. In 1668, the villages in this area received virtual autonomy from Sultan Mehmed IV and from then on the socio-economic system of the closed society, based mainly on handicraft, ceased to exist. The cultivation of the land, the production of raw silk, the cottage industries and the land trade were all developed. The people from Pelion living in Egypt and Russia, helped in the development of the sea trade. From the 18th century, an important economic and cultural industry emerged, which caused an unprecedented construction frenzy. As far as Volos is concerned, from 1741 building was started outside the gates of the kastro on the first shanties and a trade fair was held there. The need to build a port, due to the prosperity of the inhabitants of Pelion and the needs that the rapid development of trade (silk from Zagora etc.) had brought, was

very intense and the Greek seamen began to organize their own fleet, especially after the treaty of Kioutsouk Kainartzi in 1774.

The Revolution of 1821

Anthimos Gazis the Peliot clergyman and scholar from Milies, was the father of the national uprising in Pelion during the years of the Greek Revolution. On the 7th of May 1821 they declared their participation in the revolution under captain Kyriakos Basdekis. The revolution of Pelion, however, did not progress very far. Most of the koca-basis, or Turkish village headmen, of the region, who gained considerable personal advantages from the Turkish occupation, reacted negatively. Meanwhile, on the coast near Kato Lechonia, ships from Hydra were anchoring and the revolutionaries soon reached the kastro of Volos whereupon Mahmud Dramalis, pasha of Larissa, sent in troops which drowned the revolution in blood. After the end of the revolution, the port of Volos became the main port of communication between free and Turkish occupied Greece. From 1830 (for others from 1890), the people of Pelion started to move closer to the coast and build ware- houses and shops. Later came houses and in the end magnificent mansions that are now the centre of the town which, in the beginning, was called Nea Demetriada or Magazia. From 1852, European consulates (Greece, Austria, England, France and Italy) were installed. In March of 1854, during the Crimean War (1853 -1855), an attempt at liberation was made which once again met the negative reaction of the kocabasis. Any hope independent Greece had of helping the movement of Pelion, was quite definitely lost when the British and French occupied Piraeus.

The Liberation of Pelion

One year after the declaration of the Russian- Turkish war of 1877, a new rebellious movement broke out in Thessaly. This time the movement had been organized by independent Greece with the support of communities from abroad. The rebels were better organized this time and achieved much in three battles which had an effect throughout the whole world. Finally, with the intervention of the British, the revolutionaries put down their guns on the 19th of April 1878 and waited for the congress at Berlin to accept their application for independence. On the 2nd of November 1881, Thessaly and a part of Epirus joined the rest of Greece. During the Second

World War, the German forces brought about major catastrophes in Zagora (January 1943) in Portaria and Milies (October 1943) and in Drakia (September 1943). Many inhabitants were forced to move to other Greek towns and abroad and only in the last few decades, when tourism discovered this outstanding place, has the development of this area and the return of the people really begun.

Culture & Tradition

Manner & Customs – People & Professions –Art & Letters- Architecture

In order for one to feel the heartbeat of Pelion, one must watch the life and habits of its inhabitants; their everyday life and pursuits. The language with its richness, the famous Peliot architecture, the beautifully decorated objects of everyday use, the unique motifs of the decorations, the folk -dances and folk -songs, the religious celebrations and local costumes all reveal the character and soul of the people of Pelion. Living on this rich and beautiful mountain, the inhabitants live, move and express themselves (personally or collectively) , in all of the happy and sad moments of their lives, in direct relation to their home;the mountain of the Centaurs.

It is a fact that the way of life and customs of this area have changed considerably, especially during the last few decades, characterized by the catalytic invention of the 'technological civilization' and the foreign habits brought in by the massive rise in tourism. However, the visitor to Pelion can still find, in between the elements of the modern folk- culture, the roots and trends of the people of Pelion and their way of life.

The deep religiousness which characterizes the Peliois is entirely combined with their love of entertainment and celebrations. In particular we mention here the Byzantine hagiographs of the monastery of Panagia Rassoia where, among the works of purely religious content which decorate the katholikon, the artist has included a folk- feast! Many of the festival religious festivals and feasts gather locals from every region as well as foreigners, tourists and pilgrims in the beautiful churches of Pelion. Here an ancient and eternal way of life still survives; that of Greek optimism and creativity.