Sifting the Soil of Greece: The Early Years of the British School at Athens (1886–1919)


Reviewed by 116.4

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Histories of academic institutions are tough undertakings. On the one hand, they contribute to understanding the advances in knowledge and changing attitudes that are the stuff of Forschungsgeschichte as well as to more general cultural, social, and even political, history. On the other hand, they must be more than amplified versions of school or college registers (although readers will expect the basic information that is in those publications). In particular, they must nowadays avoid the pitfalls and cover-ups of almost determinist presentations of seamless progress and reveal what went wrong and why, as well as what went right. We have also come to expect to be told, if the evidence exists, about people’s private reactions to being members of the institution and their personal interactions within the institution.

Gill’s history of the origins and formative years of the British School at Athens (BSA), from its foundation in 1886 until the end of World War I, passes most of these tests commendably and will become an essential document for studying the history of Greece (and foreign academic involvement) in the decades before or after 1900, as well as the history of the slow, and still continuing, mutation of classical scholarship from a textual discipline to one based equally, if not more, on the soil of the country and its monuments. These provide the spatial context for the story of classical Greece and frame it temporally through prehistory and Byzantine and later cultural history.

Sifting the Soil of Greece builds on many articles and other publications by Gill over the last 20 years and adds much to the earlier books of self-examination that have come out of the BSA (H. Waterhouse, The British School at Athens: The First Hundred Years [London 1986]; D. Huxley, ed., Cretan Quests: British Explorers, Excavators and Historians [London 2000]; E. Calligas and J. Whitley, eds., On Site: British Archaeologists in Greece [Athens 2005]).

Part 1 covers the origins, intellectually going back to the travelers of the Enlightenment and the sponsorship of the Society of Dilettanti (founded in 1734), and early history of the BSA, with short accounts of the first seven directors (from Francis Penrose to Alan Wace) and of its management from London. R.C. Jebb, the Sophocles scholar, was the key supporter, dismayed that England was lagging behind France (whose school in Athens goes back to 1846) and Germany. Writing to The Times in September 1878, he proposed “a British school of archaeology at Athens and at Rome” (“Archaeology at Athens and Rome,” The Times [18 September 1878] 11); in April 1879, Charles Eliot Norton proposed a similar American institution, again partly to compete—in “honorable rivalry” (14)—with France and Germany. Unsurprisingly to Brits, things moved faster in the United States. The American School of Classical Studies at Athens came into being in 1882 and the BSA in 1886, three years after a meeting to inaugurate the project under royal patronage, being hosted by the Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) and attended by, among others, Prime Minister Gladstone, Lord Salisbury (Leader of the Opposition), and Lord Rosebery. (The BSA still has a Royal Patron, at present the Prince of Wales.)

In London, the BSA was set up with a managing committee and three trustees, a system that continued until 1998, when the committee became the council and its members the trustees. Money was soon a problem: the first government grant of £500 came in 1896–1897, about a quarter of the BSA’s income and the forerunner of today’s grant from the British Academy. Other
Part 2 is about the students of the BSA, whom Gill rightly sees as the kernel of the book. Mostly male (although the first woman student was admitted in 1890)—and educated at “public” (i.e., private boarding) schools, followed by Oxford and Cambridge, and some of them parsons’ children—they represent the often dynamic upper-middle class of late Victorian and Edwardian Britain—but not the upper class/aristocrats, as is sometimes suggested (for this group, swathes of acres are the essential qualification as well as noble/ennobled birth; brains are less important). In those early years, the students undertook a wide range of archaeological fieldwork (detailed in part 3) across Greece and the eastern Mediterranean—and then took their skills elsewhere (e.g., John Marshall went from the BSA to be director-general of the Archaeological Survey of India at the age of 27). Yet more impressive is the breadth of nonarchaeological work (mirrored in the plain title, then and now, of the British School at Athens, although at times “of Archaeology” has been inserted), especially in anthropology; while already in World War I, BSA members were much involved in intelligence, notably John Myres, known as “the Black Beard of the Aegean,” and David Hogarth, heading the Arab Bureau in Cairo.

The book is packed with information, collated in three long appendices, and Gill has been extraordinarily persistent in chasing details, all of which make it an important research tool in the era of growing interest in the historiography of Hellenic studies. I wish, however, we had had more about people from external sources other than “Obituaries, Memoirs and Studies.” Take two Cypriot examples: Dikaios hailed Myres as “the founder of Cypriot Archaeology” (P. Dikaios, “An Iron Age Painted Amphora in the Cyprus Museum,” BSA 37 [1936–1937] 56–72; see also V. Karageorghis, The Archaeology of Cyprus: The Ninety Years After Myres. The Thirteenth J.L. Myres Memorial Lecture [London 1987]), raising the question of what Myres did to merit this; or for evaluating F.B. Welch, one could include the recent publication of his excavation near Larnaca (K. Malmgren, Klavdhia–Tremithos: A Middle and Late Cypriote Bronze Age Site. SIMA-PB 159 [Göteborg 2003]) as well as snippets in Waterhouse’s (1986) history of the BSA.

More would also have been welcome on the life of the school and interactions of the students, as one finds in the biographies of later members such as Humfry Payne (D. Powell, The Traveller’s Journey is Done [London 1943]) and John Pendlebury (I. Grundon, The Rash Adventurer: A Life of John Pendlebury [London 2007]). But reticence has been a hallmark of many British scholars in Greece (cf. R. Barber, “Sense and Sentimentality: British Scholars’ Reactions to Greece, 1885–1986,” The Anglo-Hellenic Review 44 [2011] 3–6); and we may not have the evidence.

Chasing such information would have slowed the publication of this book, which already shows signs of having been completed some time ago. It lacks mention of several relevant papers (plus good photographs of BSA life) in Llewellyn Smith, Kitromilides, and Calligas, eds. (Scholars, Travels, Archives: Greek History and Culture Through the British School at Athens. BSA Studies 17 [London 2009]). Also missing are papers in the second volume from the French School to celebrate its 150 years (R. Étienne, ed., Les politiques de l’archéologie du milieu du XIXe siècle à l’orée du XXIe. Champs helléniques moderns et contemporains 2 [Athens and Paris 2000]).

If there is still some spadework remaining (and more discussion of British reluctance to employ cultural diplomacy would be welcome), Sifting the Soil of Greece is an invaluable contribution that will lead to further research into the histories and scholarly contributions of these pioneering men and women—and their love for Greece.