Olympian Triad

J G R Harding
Plates 57–60

Part I—Winter

Olympus! The very name evokes imagery, divinity and soaring aspiration—'Altius' of the Olympic motto. Certainly, no other mountain in classical consciousness had a greater wealth of mythological and poetic association. And this was due in part to the religious conceptions of Ancient Greece in whose cosmography the world was created as a disc with Greece its centre and Mount Olympus—touching heaven and synonymous with it—the apex; in part to its poets and particularly Homer, the literary protagonist of the Olympians.

Homer's Olympus was an imaginary paradise 'not shaken by winds, nor wet with rains, nor touched with snow'. The reality is a formidable mountain, snow-bound for six months of the year. But then, the Ancient Greeks had no real sympathy for mountains or mountain scenery. According to the Protagorean ethic, man was the measure of all things and humanism the dominant philosophy. The gods who inhabited Olympus were themselves a reflection of Man. For the Greeks the magic of the mountains was not scenic but rather their association with the spirits of nature and particularly the Oreads—nymphs whose task it was to guide the weary traveller through the dreary upland wastes.

Although Homer's Olympus was more a concept than a reality, the mountain which is indisputably identified as the home of the Gods from which Zeus despatched his thunderbolts is the great massif rising almost 3000m from the shores of the Gulf of Thermae. From time immemorial it has been an obstacle to invaders moving down from Macedonia to the plains of Thessaly and on this high stage were enacted numberless mythological dramas. It was the birthplace of the Titans who piled Pelion upon Ossa in their thwarted attempt to usurp Zeus. From here mankind's first benefactor, Prometheus, stole the sacred fire and paid the price in chains and torment on the Frosty Caucasus. Here it was that Cupid presented Psyche to the Gods and to whose summit Bellerophon, on the winged Pegasus, aspired. He was frustrated by Zeus's gadfly and in antiquity's list of first ascents only Hercules of mortal aspirants made this summit.

Yet if the reputation of the Thessalian Olympus is secure as the most famous mountain of antiquity, it was but one of a score of mountains that once embraced that name. 'Olympus' has no known etymology. Probably it predates Greek itself—a generic name in some long forgotten tongue for any great mountain with divine attributes. There were Olympuses in the Peloponnese, Arcadia, Cilicia and Cyprus, to name but a few. Of these ancient Olympians my personal trio—the fruits of four separate journeys, two in winter and two in summer—are those of Thessaly, Bithynia and Lycia. The latter two are now in Turkey but were once identified by the Hellenic provinces of Asia Minor from

which they spring. The Bithynian or Mycian Olympus (2543m), dominating Bursa, is now the Ulu Dağ or Great Mountain. The Lycian Olympus, lesser known, altogether more remote and inaccessible and rising out of the Gulf of Antalya is now Tahtali Dağ (2375m). All three Olympians are true mountains of the sun within sight of the Mediterranean. So it was right that my approach to each should have been in Odyssean style albeit in vessels more prosaic—liner, Bosphorus ferry and yacht.

Because it is highest, grandest and the choice of Homer, precedence must go to the Thessalian Olympus, the culmination of Greece at 2917m. This huge limestone massif whose triple summit lies only 18km from the Aegean covers an area larger than the Bernese Oberland. In 1961, with the prospect before me of 6 months' leave after 2 years' hard in South Arabia, I knew little of the mountain save for its mythological reputation. But it lay along my route to the mountains of Anatolian Turkey and thus I resolved to climb it. Mountaineering literature on Olympus was hard to come by in Aden, but I established contact with the Hellenic Alpine Club in Athens and duly arrived at Piraeus on 21 November 1961 on the liner 'Bretagne', an ill-fated ship later destroyed by fire.

The plan of campaign was to find out more about Olympus and, more important, a climbing companion. But the best part of three days in Athens were flawed by a tiresome sport invented by the Greek Customs. In exchange for their releasing my brand new Robert Lawrie 'Everest Meade' tent, posted at great expense from London, I would pay them the equivalent of £175. In the match play that ensued my hand was strengthened by Athanos Tzartzanos and Peter Cataforis of the Hellenic Alpine Club who forced the draw which secured my tent's release for free. With it and seven other pieces of baggage I boarded the Athens–Salonika Express on 24 November 1961 bound for Litochoron Limani, the station for Mount Olympus.

Greece has been described as the gift of sun and sea. It is also a country of mountains which make up 80 per cent of its land mass. The rail journey from Athens to Litochoron captures the flavour of harsh and uncompromising ranges—parched in summer, snowbound in winter—which form an inescapable backdrop to the Greek landscape. The section between Athens and Larissa breaching the formidable ranges of Oiti and Othiris, completed between 1902 and 1909 by the French, was once the most notable railway engineering feat in Europe. The railway takes a precarious line along precipitous hillsides, through a succession of tunnels and across the bridge of the Gorgopotamos whose destruction by British SIS agents, severing Northern from Southern Greece, was one of the most signal acts of sabotage of the Second World War. Beyond this tangled upland region the train descended gingerly to the plains and for almost an hour we steamed past the wondrous mass of Parnassus—another Greek mountain that is touched with the magic wand of myth and divinity. Now the landscape had become a variegated patchwork of dun and brown fields still burnished from the summer's sun but set off by mountains streaked with winter's first snow.

There were no lights to identify Litochoron Limani when nine hours after leaving Athens the train made a brief halt. Only one person disembarked, and as the train slipped away into the darkness to Salonika I was left with only the



57 *Mytikas and Stefani (NW faces): the summit peaks of Mt Olympus.*

Photo: J.G.R. Harding

sound of waves lapping a strand just short of the platform. I roused the station master and he in turn raised a taxi which eventually got me to Litochoron Village some 12km inland. More importantly, to its sole hotel, the 'Tourist', clean but foodless and wholly devoid of heating.

Litochoron has taken root at the foot of Olympus where the Enipeus River debouches from its great gorge on to the coastal plain. To early travellers it was a place of ill repute and even until the 1920s it had associations with banditry. In 1961 its 5000 inhabitants had barely emerged from the shadows cast by the decade of war which devastated Greece from 1940–49 killing 600,000 Greeks—twice Britain's combatant casualties for the whole of the Second World War. In the unrelenting Civil War that followed the German retreat, Litochoron played a role. In 1946 the Greek Communist Leader Zachariadis chose Litochoron's police barracks for an attack on government troops in reprisal for the disembowelling of three left-wing ELAS functionaries. This incident, in which 12 soldiers were killed and the police barracks destroyed, was the spark which lit the third and bloodiest round of the Greek Civil War, itself responsible for 150,000 deaths.

The lowering pall of cloud which hid the upper reaches of Mount Olympus next morning seemed to reflect something of Litochoron's bitter past as I wandered round the village clutching a letter of introduction from the Hellenic Alpine Club in search of some friendly Godot who might speak a common language. Tzartzanos had already advised that my visit did not coincide with the 'ideal climbing period in Greece'. Recollections of the precipices of the upper peaks depicted in photographs seen in Athens made me rue the absence in Munich of the only local guide, Costas Zolotas.

Mythological ascents apart, the climbing history of Olympus long pre-dates the Turkish Sultan Mehmed IV's 1669 attempt and those of 19th century European travellers. Shepherds have grazed the upper pastures for millenniums. The archaeological remnants which grace such peaks as Profitis Ilias (2780m), Agios Antonios (2850m) and Skolio—at 2911m only 6 metres lower than the very summit, Mytikas (2917m)—are evidence of votive occupation of all but the two highest summits for many centuries. On Profitis Ilias suppliants offered their sacrifices to Zeus twice yearly. Here in the 11th century Christians built their chapel to propitiate the prophet Elias. But the traditional myth of inviolability had substance. Notwithstanding any number of 19th century attempts, the highest peak, Mytikas, was only climbed by the Swiss Boissonas and Baud-Bovey with the Greek guide Christos Kakalos on 2 August 1913. This they christened 'Pantheon'. The more elusive Stefani (2909m), 'Throne of the Gods', was only to succumb eight years later, in August 1921, to another Swiss, the great mountaineer, mountain historian and pioneer of the High Level Route on ski, Marcel Kurz.

Why should it have taken 56 years longer for man to reach the summit of Olympus than that of the Matterhorn? The Golden Age of alpinism and the 19th century rediscovery of Greece by European travellers, poets and painters coincided. Shelley might have lamented Hellas's departed glories as Wrecks of a Dissolving Dream but Edward Lear, the landscape painter of Greece *par excellence*, portrayed a glorious vision of the Brighter Hellas with paintings such

as 'Parnassus' (1862)—an inspiration to any mountaineer. In Greece at least, the Victorian mountaineers were laggards behind their artistic contemporaries. An exception was Henry Tozer, the outstanding classical geographer of his day, who made the first serious attempt on Mytikas in 1865—the year Whymper ascended the Matterhorn. Tozer was subsequently elected to the Alpine Club on the strength of his mountain explorations in the Balkans and Asia Minor.

As a climber's mountain, Olympus emerged from obscurity at the time of Mountaineering's Iron Age. In 1934, a year after his conquest of the Cima Grande North Wall, the Italian master Comici delineated the first modern lines up the faces of Stefani and Mytikas. Since then a score of hard routes have been put up to interlace the 500m walls of the 2km Megala Kazania cirque formed by Stefani, Mytikas and Skolio, with the Greek climbers Michaelidis and Zolotas well represented.

My own plans were still embryonic when early on Sunday, 26 November, I emerged from the Tourist Hotel staggering under a sack containing something for everyone and food for a siege. With Zolotas away, it had not been possible to elicit whether the hut had fuel, water or cooking equipment. The village tailor—who better?—had promised to find a substitute guide, but where might he be? After Kafkaesque meanderings through the crooked streets of Litochoron I eventually ran into the only other denizen afoot at that hour. I was sporting cavalry twill breeches and duvet surmounted by expedition-sized sack. He wore sandals, blue jeans and a small ex-German army day sack with a tweed jacket slung casually over his shoulder. This was Jimmy, my guide. Neither new routes nor old looked good for our cordée, but, with the day slipping by, the business of backtracking to the Tourist to jettison abseil ropes, crampons, pegs and other useless impedimenta seemed too much effort. On the way out of Litochoron an ancient, clearly recognising an alien, stopped one in two to assure me in good English that I had chosen my guide well.

One good omen followed another, for the sky had completely cleared to reveal a cluster of snow-covered peaks on the eastern skyline. The Old Route to the Spilios Agapitos Hut picked a line up the northern shoulder of the Enipeus Gorge and involved an 1860m climb that took pack animals seven hours. This hut march should have been a joy, for Olympus has generally been spared the twin scourges of Greece—the goat and the charcoal burning which have denuded so much in the mountains. As a result Olympus retains the complete range of Mediterranean flora from maquis, deciduous woodland, fir and pine to high mountain tundra. But whereas Jimmy proved as fit as a mountain goat, the extent of my recent training had been a race up the Great Pyramid of Cheops. That had involved 135 vertical metres unladen as compared with 1800m to the hut. New boots made bad companions and nine weary hours after leaving Litochoron I eventually came in a very bad second, to be greeted by Jimmy with hot tea and a blazing log fire.

The Spilios Agapitos Hut at 2150m was built in 1931 and named after the first President of the Hellenic Alpine Club. Perched on a rocky promontory overlooking the Enipeus Chasm, it is dwarfed by stands of Black Pine, grandest of Mediterranean conifers, which at this altitude grow to Olympian dimensions and are over 1000 years old. Above the hut Mytikas, 'the Needle', was clearly

visible as the high point on a jagged crest surmounting the curious horizontal striations that are a feature of Olympus's East face. Below lay the great gorge of Enipeus running almost to the sea which spread out hazily blue beyond the shoulders of the gorge's narrow gates framing distant Litochoron.

Next morning, 27 November, I took stock of the situation. Jimmy in his sandals was fit but totally ill-equipped. I was both unfit and over-equipped. My map, a reproduction of the German Occupation 110 series cut out of a monograph on Olympus I had picked up in Athens, was quite unsuitable for navigation in bad weather. Jimmy elected to guard the hut. Having come this far there was no respectable option but to press on upwards, leaden legged. To the south, through shifting clouds beyond the void of Enipeus, the lesser peaks of Antonius, Diakontis, Kavarakos and Pagos emerged as a neat clutch of white cones. Skala (2866m), stepping stone to the highest peaks, was merely a trudge. On this summit, precisely on cue, the cloud lifted dramatically to unveil, for the first time, the route to the seat of the Gods. The ridge separating Skala from Mytikas due N was a mere 300m distant horizontally and 'the Needle' itself barely 50m higher vertically. The ridge at first fell away, then gathered itself to rise to its culmination by a series of steps and gendarmes. To the west it plummeted to the cloud-filled depths of the Megala Kazania. The route appeared to traverse the sloping E face by a series of limestone slabs covered in fresh snow. With this in prospect it became easier to understand why only 20th century mortals had made the summit of Olympus. Pusillanimously, I turned my back on Mytikas and settled for Skolio (2911m), the third summit. That at least gave a magnificent view of the 500m precipices, broken only by the occasional snow ledge, that make up the mountain's spectacular NW cirque, the finest feature of Olympus.

Descending hotfoot and raw-heeled with Jimmy to Litochoron the following day, I allowed my disappointment at not making the summit to give way to the prospect of at least getting in one square meal before leaving Greece. My traveller's guidebook had quoted an American recommendation that the 'only restaurant in Greece' was the Olympus Naoussa in Thessalonika where wild boar and hare might feature on the winter menu. I caught the only bus out of Litochoron that same afternoon with my clutter of baggage. The higher the expectation the greater the disappointment. Against the promised 'pleasant atmosphere, good food and excellent service', the reality was dessicated 'dolmades' and one surly waiter. After 20 minutes' wait I walked out in search of Thessalonian fish and chips. Thus ended my first attempt on Mount Olympus, a mountain to which I did not then contemplate a return visit.

Barely a week after my tilt at the Thessalian Olympus, I boarded a Bosphorus ferry at Istanbul's Golden Horn bound for Yalova, the port of Bursa, the beautiful and historic city that is dominated by the Ulu Dağ (2543m). My hosts were Sidney and Hilary Nowill; our longer term mountaineering designs were on Erciyas Dağ and the Ala Dağ in Anatolia, but as an introduction to the mountains of Turkey Sidney had suggested, as one of his old favourites, the Ulu Dağ. By accident rather than design, this was to be my second Olympian within 10 days.

Winter had already come to Turkey. As the transcendent skyline of Stam-



Photo: J.G.R. Harding

58 *Cliffs of Zirve, Ulu Dağ (the Bithynian Olympus).*

boul slipped away in the boat's wake, a pale December sun picked out the incandescent veneer of snow that capped the dome of the Solmaniya. Three hours later and only two shillings the poorer we reached Yalova. This NW corner of classical Asia Minor was as famous in antiquity as it is today for its rolling hills of pine and cypress and the prolific gardens and vineyards of its valleys. Bursa of the 202 mosques, where the first six Ottoman sultans are buried, is Turkey's most elegant city. Founded by King Prusias some 2200 years ago, at the suggestion of Hannibal in exile, it became the Ottoman capital during that empire's most formative period, from 1326 to the early 15th century.

Breasting a pass, Bursa revealed itself below, spread over a series of low foothills overlooking a plain. Above it rose the huge mass of the Ulu Dağ, snow covering its lower slopes, cloud its upper. The summit of the mountain, Karateppe (2543m), is some 2300m higher than the town but merely one feature of a range 32km long and 10km wide that projects abruptly from the plain as a forest-clad mass culminating in a rolling 20km summit ridge. The most interesting features of the mountain are its N and NE flanks scoured by deep gullies surmounted by glacial cirques.

From the earliest times the Bithynian Olympus was a place of pilgrimage accorded divine attributes. To this mountain Prince Hylas of Mycia was enticed by the lovesick Oread Dryope en route to Colchis with Jason's Argonauts. In Byzantine times the place was frequented by monks—a memory preserved in the old Turkish name 'Keshish Dağ', the Mountain of the Monks. The Ottomans used Olympus's honey-coloured limestone to build Bursa's magnificent mosques. Long after Istanbul became the new capital, snow from the névés of the northern cirques was laboriously transported down the mountainside to Yalova and ferried across the Sea of Marmora to cool the Sultan's sherbet. The modern name 'Ulu Dağ', or Great Mountain (as indeed it is), derives from Ataturk's language reforms.

In 1961 Mehmet Bey's Becheren Refuge was the only mountain hut on Ulu Dağ, predating what has become a thriving ski resort in a national park. Sidney knew both the owner and his hut from 40 sorties upon the mountain. The jeep track to the refuge—its banks piled high with snow from a blizzard three weeks back—climbed up slowly through successive layers of forest from deciduous to pine and spruce.

Sidney's selection for the morrow, 9 December, included the West ridge of 'Kuskakli', 'the Ring'. This well describes an extrusion of granite which makes a feature of Ulu Dağ's SW facet. Clearly marked in the snow outside the hut were 8cm pug marks bigger than those of a wolf. These belonged to the Anatolian Karabash, the Turkish shepherd dog which guards its flocks from the grey wolf. The breed dates back three millenniums; it sports spiked iron collars and weighs up to 50 kilos. Visibility was so poor that day that we saw nothing of or much from the summit of Kuskakli (2300m). Coming down, a favourite 30m pitch of Sidney's, 'The Organ Pipes', preceded a plunging descent by rock ribs and snow-gullies to the austere pine forest of the valley bottom. The grey day was drawing to a close. Return to the hut involved recrossing the main ridge, but on reaching its crest the sun, so long quiescent,

now broke through. In the fading evening light, mist and cloud suddenly began a hurried retreat leaving at our feet, beyond the stark silhouettes of lone pines, a turbulent cloudscape from which emerged distant ridges like whalebacks in a petrified surf. Away to the west, beyond the bands of light and shadow, Hebridean in their effect, lay the Aegean Sea.

For our last day Sidney chose Zirve, the third summit of the range with a northern cirque of Scottish proportions and character. Our route by the amphitheatre's edge took in a series of rock ribs and traverses before debouching us on to the upper snow-fields by a steep snow couloir. Once on the ridge, the wind made it bitterly cold even in the bright sunshine. A sharp cornice line leading away to the east was delineated by a series of graceful curves that culminated in the Ulu Dağ's summit, the Karateppe or 'Black Top'. That was a hill too far for that day if we were to make our rendezvous that same evening in Bursa. So we took our leave of the Bithynian Olympus, a mountain of infinite moods. Descent through its gloomy forests, darkened by a creeping evening mist, left a flavour altogether different from that of the Thessalian Olympus. Visits to Turkish mountains are not lightly undertaken in winter, for here gods of a different temper dwell.

Part II—Summer

I first heard word of a mystery mountain little known and virtually unexplored from the Turkish Grand Vizier Sidney Nowill. This was Tahtali Dağ (2375m), the dominant peak of the Lycian Alps, a 90km chain of mountains that gird the western shores of the Gulf of Antalya in Turkey. Ancient Lycia, the Land of the Tombs, was always reckoned hard country. In winter its hills are snow-bound; in summer the oppressive heat of the littoral drives men inland to seek the cool of the uplands. Here dwelt the mythical Chimaera—the firebreathing monster with triple heads of lion, goat and dragon. This is more than folklore's recollection of another age. Leopard may still be found in Turkey and snakes are rife in its marshes. Despite Bellerophon's traditional slaughter of the beast on his winged steed Pegasus, the Chimaera lives on just south of Tahtali itself—a natural combustion of methane issuing from a rock vent that is sometimes visible from the sea.

The glory of Lycia is its coastline, unrivalled in the Mediterranean. The grandest stretch runs parallel with and is an adjunct of the Lycian Alps along Antalya's Gulf. Here, a succession of limestone cliffs rises sheer from the sea, relenting occasionally to form natural harbours cut deep into the rock that give safe anchorage where pine forests reach down to the water's edge. Names like Genoese Harbour echo the past. This was a pirate coast in Roman times. Their activities threatened even the Pax Romana before Pompey swept them from the Mediterranean in just 40 days in 67BC. Some 1600 years later this same coast was a base for Barbarossa's Corsairs. Today it has become a modern paradise for yachtsmen.

Outstanding in this realm of natural wonders is Tahtali Dağ whose unmistakable summit pyramid of bleached limestone, snow-capped in winter, has been a landmark for sailors rounding the Chelidonian Peninsula since these waters were first navigated. There are many Tahtalis or 'Thrones of Ali' in the lands of Islam, for Ali was the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet and to Shiites he is Mohammed's rightful successor. But in the older classical world it was known otherwise as the Lycian Olympus. Freya Stark identified Tahtali with Alexander's Mt Solema, so-named after the Solymni, a people of ancient Lycia. But Professor Bean preferred Ak Dağ as Solema—at 3070m the highest point of the Bey Dağ range, and he confirms Tahtali to be the Lycian Olympus. The ruins of the Lycian city of Olympus, once a prosperous member of the Delian League, bestrewn at the southern feet of the mountain affirm its namesake. The Turkish government, zealous and imaginative in reconstructing the sites of antiquity, has designated the entire area as the national park of 'Olympus Beydagli'.

Before the coast road lifted another veil of inaccessibility, the only practical approach to Tahtali Dağ was by sea, with landfall at the ancient port of Phaselis. Such broadly was our own plan. John Blacker and Janet Macrae would sail the 580km from Kusadasi to Antalya within a week. Lolly Osmond and I would fly in from London. We would all forgather in Antalya Harbour on board John's modern Argo 'Foresight' on 25 September 1983.

Antalya, founded over 2200 years ago and visited in its time by Alexander, Pompey, St Paul, Hadrian, crusaders, Seljuks and Ottomans, has the most magnificent setting of any Turkish city along the Mediterranean coast. The range of the Taurus—burnished in summer, snow white in winter—dominates its horizons north and east. At the city's feet is the Mediterranean. Due west, directly across the immense gulf that bears Antalya's name, is one of the great sights of Turkey. Rising direct from the sea is a mountain wall crowned by a panoply of peaks and adorned with every feature of mountain scenery—ridges, faces, aiguilles, towers and slabs. The effect of seeing these mountains in the early morning on first waking was unreal: it was as if they had been constructed for a film set. These are the Turkish Dolomites whose climbing history has yet to be written.

The finest view of this prodigious spectacle is from the old square that overlooks the Yivli Minari—Sultan Aladdin's 13th century Fluted Minaret. In early morning, the mosque's mellow red brick reflects the sun's warmth and its blue green Seljuk tiles mirror both sky and sea. Such was our vision on 25 September. Having breakfasted de luxe at the Hotel Talya, we slipped unobtrusively from the foyer shouldering our sacks, and thence through the town to find a way down to the Old Harbour to search for 'Foresight' amongst the garishly painted local fishing boats jostling the sleek gin palaces of Europe. We searched in vain. A sudden storm had blown up the previous night, and for the best part of the day, ensconced on a pebble beach, we scanned the horizon apprehensively with binoculars for the comfort of a small white sail. Return to the lowly Sehir Hotel late in the day unravelled a Turkish farce. It transpired that, to avoid yesterday's storm, John and Janet had already holed up at Kemer some 40km down the coast. John had then driven in to Antalya leaving

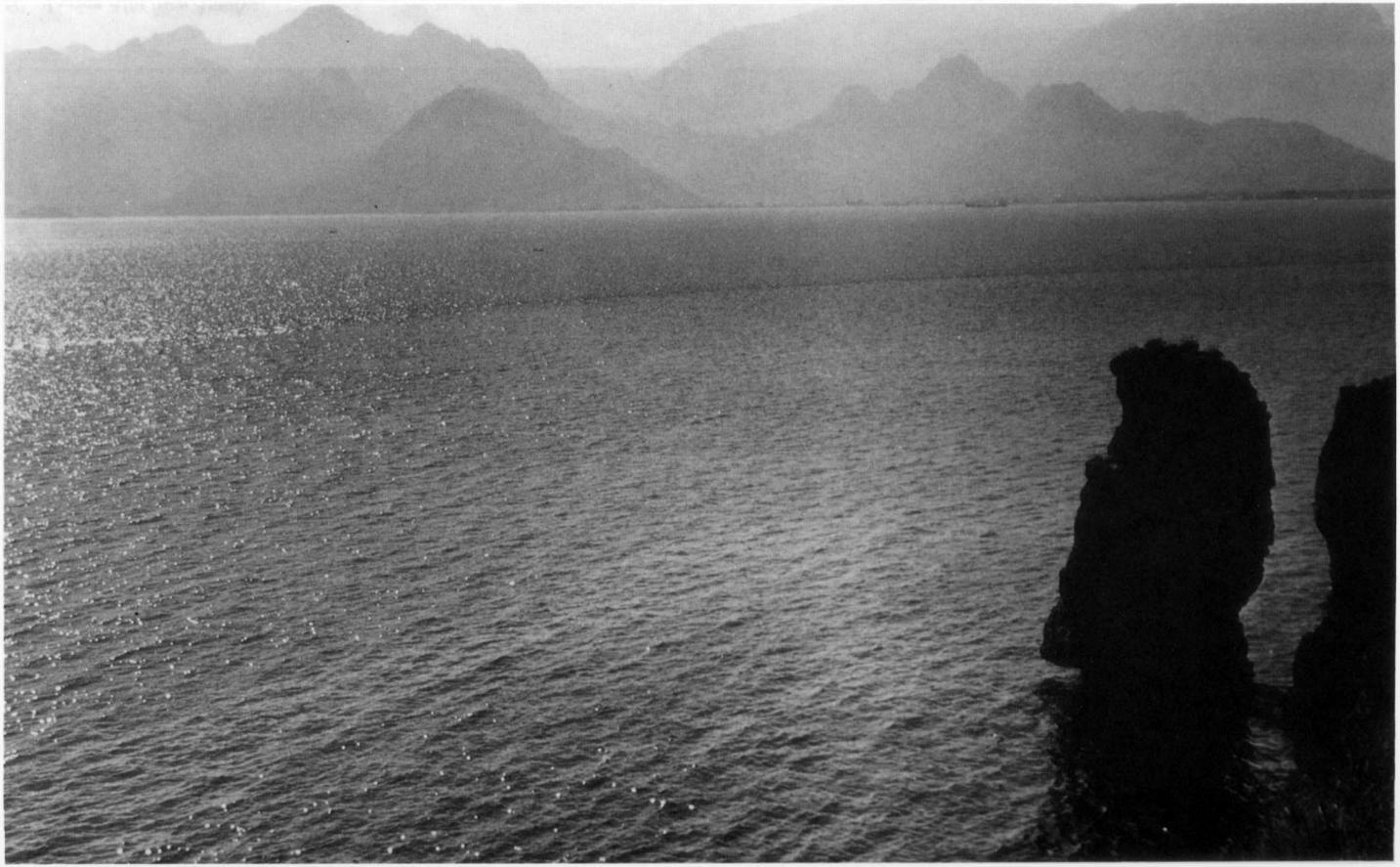


Photo: J.G.R. Harding

59 *Lycian Alps.*

messages for us at the Talya, but neither his message to us nor ours to him had reached the intended recipient. John had made a second visit, somehow gathered together the threads and left word at the Sehir that we should taxi to Kemer, pronto. A day had been lost, but forgathered that evening for deferred sundowners in Foresight's cockpit, the air balmy and phosphorescent waters lapping the boat's hull, our cups seemed full enough.

Next morning, clean cut but uncompromising in the September sun, the Lycian Olympus filled the western horizon. Its summit rose 2375m above sea level and lay perhaps 18km away almost due west. But between the sea and the mountain was a complex of heavily forested ridges and escarpments, the nature of which we could only guess at, for we had no maps. The general picture was clear enough. From a forested base a series of ridges led up to the limits of the tree line and then converged on a massive cap of gleaming white limestone devoid of vegetation.

After attending to the usual bureaucratic formalities with the harbour authorities, John and I picked up two days' food from the village and slipped the comforts of Foresight and its crew. It was already 10.30 but an itinerant bus conveniently dropped us at our road near the ruins of Phaselis. When Alexander paused here awhile in 333BC, having crossed the Chelidonian Peninsula from Finike, Phaselis was a distinguished city. From here he dispatched the bulk of his force inland up the Climax Gorge into the mountainous heart of Lycia. The gorge, with its three horizontal bands recessed into the hills, is visible from Kemer: according to Freya Stark, 'the steps the Thracians cut still visible to the eye of faith'. Alexander took what was then a harder direct route to Antalya along the sea shore when, according to his chronicler, the sea bowed low to do him homage.

Initially, our own route captured something of the place's historic genius. Tahtali was enveloped in cloud but, charting a course in its general direction, we entered an enchanted pine forest bright green with new growth. Further inland the coastal forest with its soft carpet of pine needles gave way to maquis underlaid with white limestone, weathered jagged and radiating heat. To avoid the time-consuming business of climbing up and down the scarps of a series of shallow but steep-sided ravines that winter floods had cut into the limestone, we abandoned the direct route and followed the grain of the land by dried up water courses along the ravine bottoms. Precious time was wasted in avoiding a posse of Turkish foresters upon whose cantonment we had unwittingly chanced. Travellers in Turkey sporting altimeters and compasses should acquire a degree of cunning, for unpremeditated involvement with Authority can have unexpected consequences.

4½ hours after starting the trek we had seen a great deal of forest and all manner of its trees including pine, fir, oriental beech, medlar and juniper, but had barely made 200m of altitude and we had not even reached the mountain's skirts. By chance, what had started as a forest track developed into a mountain path. Now at last we were climbing. From a clearing atop a ridge overlooking a gorge backed by a sunlit wall of virgin rock, the Lycian Olympus emerged from above the trees for the first time since the morning—dark, remote and seemingly unattainable.

Our problem was water. These Lycian hills have an abundance of rain and snow in winter, but the climate is true mediterranean with not a drop of summer rain. By September all surface water had long disappeared into the limestone without trace. Water bottles had long been emptied and, with the heat unabated, dehydration was crippling our workrate. By 5pm we had climbed a mere 750m and had only two hours of daylight left. At this nadir providence took the form of a water trough bearing the strange device 'Kerziban Kose 1959'. This at least was a shepherds' route and, with thirsts slaked and water bottles refilled, the step quickened. Past a Yaila marked by a grove of giant planes, at a fork between high valleys, we climbed steeply up the northern flanks of a huge ridge. As the undergrowth thinned the trees got bigger, and for the first time huge Lebanon cedars became prominent. At last the temperature was dropping. At 7pm, 1360m high on the crest of the ridge that led on irresistibly to the upper bastions of the mountain, we bivouacked under an enormous pine tree whose needles made our mattress and whose canopy was a roof through which the stars winked and twinkled.

So passed the night. In the miraculous dawn of the new day, Kemer's marina was just discernible as a faint smudge abutting the sea. Southwards, the spine of the Chelidonian Peninsula ran out into a blue haze through descending cadences of green. Above, the sun had already lit the stark rock of Tahtali like some incandescent beacon. We eventually got started at 8.15: too late for a waterless climb of over 1000m with the sun biding its time and waiting for us until we were forced to quit the forest for the bare rock. The same ridge on which we had bivouacked now merged into the pink mountain by a dramatic rock bridge that plummetted 1200m to the south into a dizzy chasm whose bottom appeared to be at much the same level as the coastal plain. This was the Bridge of Ali, a key passage on the Pilgrim's Way. We put off the moment of full exposure to the sun for as long as possible by traversing to the highest of the forested ridges which led into a broken couloir steepening to a point at 1810m, where the last trees gave out and with them the shade. It was only 10.45 and the rock now radiated the sun like copper. John had succumbed to a serious attack of mountaineer's foot brought on by dehydration.

Up and beyond a rock band easier ground took me across a strange no man's land of virgin scree scattered with cushion growths of exotic xerophytic plants and helichrysum leading to the summit rocks. Coming into view to the north for the first time were the peaks and passes of High Lycia, unknown and unsung. At 11.45 I was only 185m below the top of Tahtali. But the rocks now steepened to form a final barrier on the mountain's crown. Nothing really difficult, but in that silent shimmering heat the whole place assumed a quality of the dreamtime, and neither age nor the provisions of my insurance policy encouraged solo heroics. Descent to Kemer took another seven hours in the unrelenting sun. For the second time in 24 hours another providential water trough saved us from the trials of serious dehydration. We found no other water that day.

Back on board 'Foresight' John and I had to admit that although we might have been discomforted over the past two days, our route had posed no technical problems and, but for lack of water, we should have seen the top of

Tahtali Dağ. This little known range with its dolomitic rock will give challenge enough to those seeking it. But the special flavour of the Lycian Olympus is that of a remote mountain set in a region of exceptional natural beauty, with the unique qualities imparted by associations with antiquity.

When Odysseus finally broke Calypso's seven year spell and quit her enchanted island of Ogygia, a vengeful Poseidon watched him sail for Ithaca from the Mountains of the Solymi. For a shorter time, these same mountains had been our own and, as we sailed westwards along that matchless coast in sight of Tahtali's white beacon for full two days, I knew that its spell would not be broken.

On 12 May 1985 John Blacker, Liz MacDonnell, my wife and I were breakfasting in the square of Litochoron relaxed in the spring sunshine. As a bemused spectator to a bustle of buses ferrying departing delegates and dignitaries from a political conference hosted by the town, I could not believe that this new tourist resort and conference centre was the same village around whose crooked streets I had wandered some 25 years ago in search of one man and a mountain. Winter had become spring. The new Litochoron sported a host of tavernas and four international hotels. The old village atmosphere, darkened by wartime memories, no longer existed and of the old 'Tourist' hotel there was no trace.

Our party had forgathered in Litochoron the night before. John, arriving by sea from Turkey, had berthed 'Foresight' at Volos from whence sailed the Argonauts. The rest of us had repeated the traditional approach by train. The rain and scudding cloud that pursued us from Athens had been more reminiscent of Northern Europe than of Greece, but lances of sunlight, illuminating patterns of new green growth and yellow broom on the hillside, confirmed the arrival of the Grecian Spring whose scent permeated our compartment whenever the train stopped.

Almost exactly as planned we had run each other to earth outside the hotel Myrto close to the appointed hour, had awakened to a new day of clearing skies with vines framing our window, and were now braced for the march to the Agapitos Hut. So far so good save for one small, dark, man-made cloud. Blacker had lost his climbing boots and thereby hung a cautionary tale. Arriving the day before, he had found no room at any inn owing to the conference, so he booked in at the Youth Hostel. Later on, discovering an apartment to let, he peremptorily deserted the hostel and, in doing so, incurred the everlasting enmity of its warden. John's fatal omission had been to leave behind his climbing boots at the hostel. On returning to claim them they were nowhere to be found. The warden denied all knowledge of ever seeing them. Georgina and Liz were delegated to make the peace but he would not be mollified. It was Sunday. No shops were open but, even if they had been, none stocked climbing boots.

But the show must go on; John would simply have to make do with my trainers. Picking one of several taxis lining the other side of the square, we took the short cut to Prionia by the new road that has rent Olympus's thinly veiled inaccessibility. By cutting out the initial stages of the traditional 15km 1860m hut march that in 1961 had taken me nine hours, the new road has demeaned

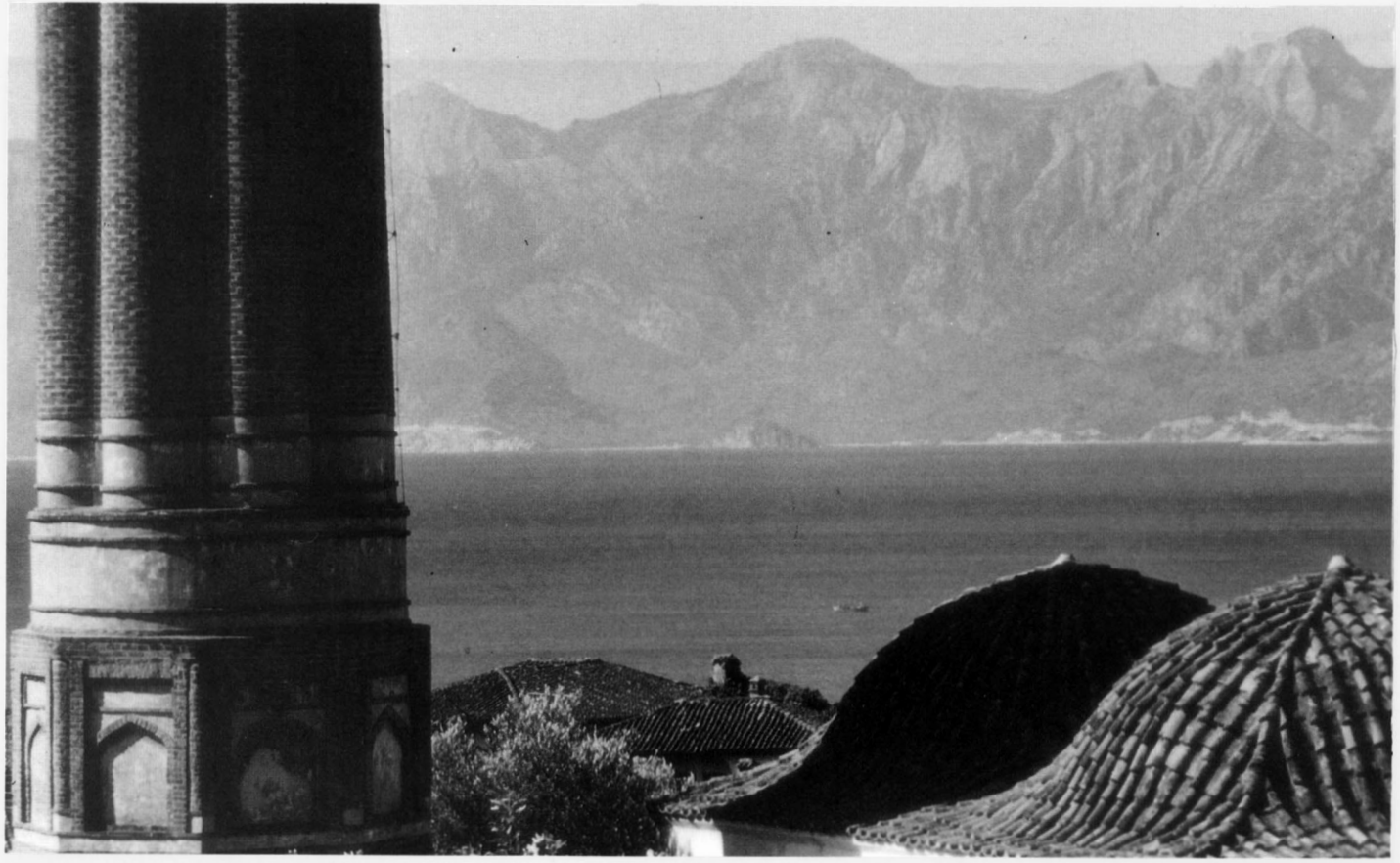


Photo: J.G.R. Harding

60 *Lycian Alps from Antalya.*

the mountain. This time, with a 28kg pack up, the march to the hut from Prionia was completed in under 2½ hours.

At the hut we were met by Costas Zolotas. Even in Athens, our generous hosts George and Erica Akrivou—no mountaineer's themselves—knew of Zolotas. At Litochoron his name was on everybody's lips. This was the same man with whom I might have climbed in 1961. John had already sought his advice; now it was our turn to meet the Mountain Zorba. Zolotas! Climber with a string of Olympian firsts; visionary, idealist, conservationist, guardian of its huts, Guardian of Olympus itself—a larger than life figure with every trait most endearing in the Greek character. At 51 and now a grandfather, Zolotas acknowledged that he had joined 'the Old Boys' but still looked boisterously fit. The success of our venture would turn on Zolotas. He held the keys to the hut and knew the mountain and all its moods. The Great Man was inspecting last winter's damage and taking stock for his forthcoming season and the business of catering for literally thousands of visitors. In 1984 7000 had stayed on the mountain; in 1985 he expected this to rise to 10,000. The new hut (one of four on Olympus), a multi-storied complex complete with all mod cons, was unrecognisable after the old, and looked capable of meeting the challenge. Fortuitously, our arrival had anticipated the start of the season. The Agapitos Hut was not yet officially open, but for Zolotas nothing was too much trouble. A snug, self-contained winter hut was offered us and, as a parting gesture, the cellar was broached and a case of beer produced ex bond. For that night at least, Olympus would be our exclusive idyll.

Next morning, 13 May, John, Liz and I made a leisurely bid for Mytikas, 'the Needle' and summit of Olympus at 2917m. The memory of the underlying uncertainty of my 1961 winter solo attempt faded in company. It was spring and the hills rejoiced. The passage to Mytikas, 45 minutes' worth that followed a line just below the ridge with route finding assisted by neat flashes of red paint, proved no more than a scramble. But the ambience is impressive and Mytikas, the Pantheon, should not be underestimated. To the left, the NW face plummets 500m to the cloud-filled depths of the Megala Kazania—'the Cauldron'. To the right, a roof of slabs tilts downwards to the Zonaria or 'Girdles' face with its grotesque limestone towers buffeted by silent waves of billowing mist. Easy scrambling on a dry day even in trainers, but a different proposition in winter and dangerous with rain on the shaly limestone that offered little protection. The summit had only one other occupant—a solitary lark. But already that year the summit book recorded forty predecessors. 27 March appeared to mark the opening of the season, and the end of November the close. In the interim, no winter ascents of Olympus had been recorded. Languid in the sun, Liz savoured her first rock conquest.

The scope for our party's further excursions was limited. But one option was Pagos, at 2701m the dominant peak of the Kalogeros, clearly visible from our balcony across the upper Enipeus Gorge. The rolling peaks of this group hold their snow long and would still have offered ski touring. The scenic interest of our high walk to Pagos was more in cloudscapes than landscapes. These alternated between shifting mists that gave the mountains an ethereal quality and dramatic explosions of cumulus that boiled up from the heated Thessalian

plains. Most memorable was the carpet of Crocus Sieberi that grew so thick amidst the tussock grass of the upper pastures that it was impossible to avoid treading its flowers underfoot.

According to Greek tradition, when God created the world he forgot about Greece. This omission he made good by scattering over the country's face every flower left over. Certainly, no other European country, Spain apart, has Greece's diversity of flora. We left the hut next morning for Litochoron. Within the space of four days the mountain had become transformed by the miracle of the Greek spring. At every bend in the path a new floral spectacular presented itself, with the flowers reflecting every variation in altitude. Alyssum, rose, cowslip, scilla, violet changing to viola, crocus, hyacinth, snowdrop, lily of the valley, fritillary and then the spectrum of trees, shrub and maquis—a garden of nature run wild.

Prionia was fast filling up with large German ladies. We left smartly and dropped down to the ruined monastery of St Dionysius. There were four monasteries on Olympus but this is by far the grandest. It lies at the bottom of the Enipeus Gorge in dense forest and looks upwards for its inspiration to Olympus.

The death of St Dionysius of Alexandria in the third century pre-dated the monastery that bears his name by many centuries. The modern monastery, occupying the ruins of more ancient shrines, was built in the 16th century. Its walls, at least two metres thick in parts, made it a refuge for patriots in the Greek War of Independence and partisans in the Second World War. Consequentially, it was blown up by the Turks in 1828 and again by the Wehrmacht in 1943. During the 19th century exploration of Olympus, the same monks who, on the feast day of the Prophet Elias, 20 July, made their pilgrimage to his peak steadfast in their belief that this was the highest summit, offered hospitality to German geographers, French archaeologists and British historians, all intent on climbing the true summit. 20th century climbers also used the monastery as their base, but a plan to convert it into a hotel has lapsed.

Much has been destroyed but both the chapel and sacristy—decorated with icons depicting the agony of Christ and stern representations of St Dionysius—have survived. The only visible inhabitant, other than hippies who had taken possession of the dome-shaped cells set into the vaulted colonnades that surround the central courtyard, was a 190cm Salonikan dressed in pyjamas who informed me that Dionysius was 'a very strong man' and that we were in 'a place of magic'.

We quit the ruined monastery with its evocative atmosphere and crossed the river to the south side of the gorge. This truly was a place of magic. The river ran swift through a maze of polished limestone boulders to drop, by a series of waterfalls, into deep pools of translucent water reflecting the new green foliage of both pine and beech, intertwined with wild vine, that lined the banks. The genii of this place were naiads and dryads and the presiding deity the pagan Dionysius—Bacchus, scion of Zeus, Lord of the Mountain. After two hours lazing, swimming and gazing up to the snows of Olympus, we followed an ancient path that ran past St Dionysius's first chapel built into the living rock over a spring.

From this point on, the gorge narrows. Tier above tier of cliff rises through layer upon layer of virgin forest to containing ridges that run to the sky. The path we followed had an aura of antiquity, yet had been freshly graded and stepped. Newly built bridges crossed and re-crossed the river, enabling the path to continue with its pattern of dizzying descents and ascents up and down alternate sides of the gorge. This was no mere walk but rather some fantastic switchback that seemed to have no end. John thought the gorge as fine as that of Samaria in Crete. Only at 6.45pm, 8¾ hours after leaving the Agapitos, did we reach the noisy, garish taverna that lies at the threshold of Litochoron.

Back at the hotel Myrto, travellers from an antique land with tales of wonder to recount, we were greeted by Zolotas dressed immaculately in khaki uniform. The master, awaiting the safe return of his protégés, now revealed that the new path, a re-creation of the old, had been his own idea to link the past with the present. We left Litochoron next day, but, by the time we reached the coastal highway to catch the bus to Volos and a last grandstand view of Olympus, it had vanished from sight in the heat haze.