

Back To The Future



Aerial view of the excavation site with Navarino Bay on the horizon.



A fragment of an ancient tablet, the earliest known written record in Europe, and construction of a luxury resort at the edge of a historical site and wetlands are challenging beliefs about ancient society and modern. Archaeology meets mythology and sustainability meets development in Homer's 'sandy Pylos'. **By Amanda Summer**

Ever since Homer spoke of 'sandy Pylos,' in his epic poem *The Odyssey*, visitors have been arriving on the shores of Greece's southwestern coast of the Peloponnese. This region, known as Messenia, is world-renowned for its rich archaeological heritage, including the famed Palace of Nestor, and wraps around an expansive bay that is best known in modern times for the battle of Navarino, fought in 1827, resulting in Greece's independence from Turkey. Yet while historic battles and Nestor's Palace have made Messenia famous, an archaeological site with exciting new discoveries, along with a groundbreaking resort development, are placing the region back in the headlines.

Tucked away in a corner of this expansive bay is the town of Pylos, a horseshoe shaped collection of whitewashed buildings on a gently rising slope, designed around an Italianate plateia. The sites of this charming village—a spectacular Turkish castle looming above town, a nearby protected bird sanctuary, and, of course, the famous beaches would be reason enough to visit here. Yet two very exciting projects, both with deep roots in the region, are bringing a whole new level of visibility to these sandy shores. On a citadel just outside town, the echoes of pickaxes and trowels ring out as archaeologists are unearthing some of the most exciting finds in recent history. A few kilometers away, a Messenian native's dream of Greece's largest—and environmentally-conscious—resort complex is manifesting into reality.

IT'S DAWN AND THE SUN is just coming up over the horizon. Professor Michael Cosmopoulos is standing over a trench, coffee cup in hand, taking a look at the previous day's work. Tanned and energetic, he resembles a modern-day Indiana Jones in his khaki pants and work shirt as he goes over last minute instructions with his field staff, directing a group of workmen to begin digging further to the north. We are standing on a ridge overlooking the Ionian Sea at an archaeological site where Cosmopoulos and his team have been working since 1998. Students and volunteers—the latest of over 700 Cosmopoulos has trained since the project began—arrive for a day of work as the Greek summer sun starts pouring through the gated entryway to the site. Selecting

tools that have been soaking overnight in buckets, they head off in separate directions; first bodies, then heads completely disappearing from view into the deep trenches. The view from the ridge is breathtaking; a single engine plane hums in the soft blue of the early morning sky and olive orchards stretch out for miles over khaki-colored earth towards the Ionian Sea, glimmering in the distance.

To understand how Cosmopoulos came to dig at this site, we need to travel back to 1954, when the famed Greek archaeologist Spyridon Marinatos went on a hike in the hills above Pylos on a reconnaissance mission. Near the small town of Iklaina he came upon the remains of a structure with massive walls surrounded by large deposits of pottery. The site was overgrown with olive groves and the terrain was difficult to cover, but a brief trial excavation suggested the existence of a palace. Marinatos went on to Thira to excavate Akrotiri, the settlement covered in volcanic ash after the great eruption of the fifteenth century B.C., leaving the mysterious site located in the hills above the Palace of Nestor buried for several more decades until the arrival of Cosmopoulos in 1998.

The then thirty-five-year-old Greek native had directed excavations in Greece at Oropos and Eleusis, but when he learned from a colleague, Professor George Korres, about the promising site in the hills above Pylos he was eager to pick up where Marinatos had left off. He organized a team and established a seasonal headquarters at Pylos's charming Hotel Karalis, overlooking the Bay of Navarino, providing housing for his students and staff and space for classroom lectures. After an eight-year field survey, Cosmopoulos received a permit from the Greek government and the Athens Archaeological Society to begin digging.

The excavation began with a flourish in 2006, after an elaborate ceremony involving all the townspeople of Iklaina as well as a special blessing from the local priest. "There were flags flying in the air and lots of chanting and praying by Father Jeremias," Cosmopoulos recalls. Once the priest had finished, "he suggested very strongly that we start digging right where he had placed the table with all the things necessary for the blessing. That's where we put the first shovels in and within ten centimeters of the surface we started finding walls and pots. We



Excavation finds



View of the excavation

joked about his blessing helping us find things—divine intervention,” he says with a knowing wink.

Initially Cosmopoulos had anticipated the mound might be hiding a tholos tomb, as segments of ancient walls were still visible on the surface, a portion of which seemed to extend into the rising slope. What he found instead was a giant “Cyclopean” wall with offsets typical of Mycenaean architecture; massive blocks of stone roughly cut but rectangular in shape, placed in horizontal rows, similar to architectural features found at Tiryns, the palace of Nestor, Mycenae, and Gla. This wall formed a terrace, on which once stood an impressive building complex.

“It was a huge thrill,” Cosmopoulos exclaims, recalling the day, adding, “we never expected to find anything like this.” For now he stops short of calling it a palace—preferring to refer to it as a ‘seat of power’—but the structure is the largest ancient building in the region outside the Palace of Nestor, and the site has been determined to be a district capital in Nestor’s domain. In addition to its monumental size, unusual for this period, it contained multiple storage rooms for foodstuffs, plaster offering tables, a rich pottery assemblage and was decorated with elaborate figural frescoes painted in blue and red, which are stylistically reminiscent of Minoan frescoes found on the islands of Thira and Keos.

ACCORDING TO COSMOPOULOS, Iklaina is mentioned in the clay tablets excavated at the Palace of Nestor. Written in the ancient Greek script known as Linear B, an early form of ancient Greek writing used by the palaces during the Mycenaean era of Greece, ca. 1600–1100 B.C., it was recorded that the state was divided into two provinces: the Hither and the Further, of which Iklaina is a member. Each region was further divided into districts, Hither into nine and Further into seven. The tablets refer to nine major capitals, and in *The Odyssey*, Homer also refers to the Nine Cities of Nestor: one of them—*Aipy*—may have sounded similar to the name of the Iklaina site in the Linear B record (*Aphy* or *As-*



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phy) where it is written as *a-pu2*. Cosmopoulos is understandably enthusiastic about the possible connection. “It would be extraordinary if it turned out that our excavation has brought to light a site recorded in both Greek myths and ancient texts,” he says.

In addition to the imposing Cyclopean building complex, Cosmopoulos has identified a large town sprawling to the north, consisting of multiple small dwellings. Between 1400 and 1350 B.C. the site was destroyed and the new rulers built their settlement directly on top of the old town with a different orientation, in a display of superiority in the establishment of a new authority. Cosmopoulos believes this is evidence the site was annexed at that time by the Palace of Nestor, now a major power in the area. The new construction included a megaron—a great hall of a Mycenaean house containing a central hearth surrounded by four pillars. It is unclear if the megaron was used for administrative purposes, or was simply a wealthy house, but Cosmopoulos hopes further excavation in the area will establish its function.

The ancient inhabitants were advanced enough to have running water, evidenced by an extensive drainage system and clay pipes, originating from a series of rooms that were used as industrial installations. Large deposits of flaxseed were uncovered in those rooms, so it’s probable that flax production was a major industry at the site. Ancient Iklaina may have also supported metalworking, as the Linear B tablets from Pylos mention *a-pu2* as a metallurgical center. At least nine smiths and up to 225 workmen may have worked at the site, some of whom received bronze from the palace, and numerous metal objects such as bronze nails, saws and rings have been found, as well as a unique head of a bronze male figurine.

A significant building, aligned along one side with an upright rectangular stone known as a “stele”, was uncovered in the final weeks of the 2011 season. At some Bronze Age sites such markers indicate a sacred space, but in this case, Cosmopoulos believes the building may have been unfinished and the post was a construction marker. “We’ve never seen anything like it,” Cosmopoulos says. The team has uncovered no artifacts in the interior of the structure, but

Cosmopoulos believes its size and formal construction may indicate it was used for a special function. The 2011 season also marked the discovery of what may be the first known Mycenaean open-air shrine. This pit, containing evidence of fire along with plaster offering tables, fragments of frescoes, a folded lead sheet, numerous burned



Michael Cosmopoulos with students (left) and Amanda Summer on the dig.



bones from very young animals and scores of drinking vessels, opens up new avenues for the study of Mycenaean religion. In 2009 workers excavated the skeleton of a young female, about twelve, who had been buried alongside a wall near the Cyclopean terrace. Why she was buried alone is uncertain, but Cosmopoulos believes there are more burials to be found nearby.

But by far the most important find Cosmopoulos's team has uncovered is also the smallest. In the summer of 2010 Cosmopoulos was supervising his students at the site when he received a phone call from the excavation lab, where Cynthia Shelmerdine, the team's chief pottery specialist and one of the world's leading authorities in Linear B worked.

"I thought someone had been hurt," Cosmopoulos recalls, hearing Cynthia's agitated voice, but when Shelmerdine was finally able to speak, he was astounded by what she reported.

"Michael, we have a tablet!"

Found in a 3,400-year-old refuse pit and encrusted in soil, the object of Shelmerdine's excitement originally looked like a potsherd when it was bagged and sent to the lab. Brought to her attention by a student who had just finished washing it, she instantly recognized the markings of a distinctive ancient script, and was the first to read the fragment, which is written in Linear B. The fragment appears to be part of a bookkeeper's ledger; one side is a possible personnel list of male names followed by numbers, and the other preserves the heading for what might have been a list of manufactured products.

Why is this two by three inch clay slab so important? The existence of a tablet means that Iklaina had scribes, a product of bureaucracy, suggesting a high level of political organization and the need to keep track of commodities. "According to what we had known until now, this tablet should not have been found here, because all known stratified tablets come from the Mycenaean palaces," Cosmopoulos explains. On top of that, most tablets are dated to ca. 1200 B.C. or the period of the Trojan War, but the Iklaina tablet is dated to 1450 to 1350 B.C. Because tablets were used exclusively for recording transactions and property of the Mycenaean governments, this tablet is the earliest known bureaucratic record on the Greek mainland. The location and date of the tablet suggest that the origins of literacy and political states in Greece were earlier and more widespread than what was thought until now. Clearly, such exciting and groundbreaking finds add to Greece's cultural heritage and Cosmopoulos only sees more such discoveries on the horizon.



Currently in the process of raising funds to purchase land adjacent to the site in the hope of uncovering equally stunning finds, he plans to continue work on this exciting project for the rest of his life. By continuing to run a field school that will train thousands of students in the field of archaeology, and eventually creating an archaeological park where visitors can see the remains of a great civilization, he hopes to leave a legacy for generations to come.

JUST OUTSIDE PYLOS, another Greek native is leaving a legacy of his own in this legendary soil. Ever since the thirteenth century B.C., when King Nestor welcomed Telemachus to his court in search of his father Odysseus, Pylos has been a center of art, culture, and luxury, welcoming guests from all over the world. Yet it appears the ancients were not the only ones to find this landscape beckoning them to construct palace-like structures. Near the coastline, construction continues on one of the largest resort complexes to be built in Greek history. The luxury hotels, restaurants, spa, and two championship golf courses of the Costa Navarino resort complex are being developed a short distance from the archaeological site, situated to command the same view of Homer's wine-dark sea.

The resort was the life's dream of the late shipping magnate Vasilis Konstantakopoulos, who grew up in the region. Starting out as a seaman, Konstantakopoulos worked his way up to become one of Greece's most successful businessmen and the resort, particularly the golf courses, designed by the renowned Robert Trent Jones, were his passion. As a stalwart supporter of his native land, Captain Vasilis, as he was known, had always been focused on preserving, promoting and giving back to the land of his birth. His vision for Costa Navarino involved the development of high-end sustainable accommodations and facilities that would allow guests from all over the world to explore the natural beauty, history and traditions of his native Messenia while at the same time providing jobs for locals to stay or even return to their homeland. Unfortunately, he only lived long enough to see the first phase of his project come to life. His son, Achilles, has taken over the resort empire and continues to oversee his father's ambitious project.

The Costa Navarino complex currently consists of two resorts, offering both a family and high-end holiday experience. The resort extends over three thousand acres of gently sloping land overlooking one kilometer of sandy beaches along the Ionian Sea. The use of local limestone and green building methods have resulted in a se-



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Skeleton (top) and replanted olive trees at Costa Navarino

ries of buildings that blend into the landscape, not taking away from but adding to it. Many rooms have their own private swimming pool and the complex includes shops and world-class restaurants. Plans for the next phase of the resort include Navarino Bay, billed as the first earth-sheltered resort in Europe and a complex of high-end residences.

What kind of an impact can be expected from building such an enormous resort in close proximity to both archaeological treasures and a delicate natural environment? According to Marina Papatsoni, spokesperson for developers TEMES, Costa Navarino’s parent company, the resort has taken the best interests of the region to heart. “As Messenia is one of the regions with the highest biodiversity in Europe, its preservation and the protection of ecologically important habitats surrounding Costa Navarino is a key element of the development,” she says.

The resort’s architectural design is based on principles of bioclimatic architecture safeguarding the integrity of the landscape and horizon. Roofs are planted and buildings are earth-sheltered to enhance biodiversity and habitat protection. The building footprint will end up being less than half the percentage permitted and more than ninety per cent of the total land area will be dedicated to natural and planted landscape. The two championship golf courses have been planted with grass that requires much less water than average varieties, and are irrigated with highly treated wastewater and only organic fertilizers. In addition, golfers will likely be unaware that beneath their feet has been installed the biggest geothermal system of its kind in Europe.

“An extensive recycling program for paper, plastics, glass, used oil, batteries and organic waste has been set in motion, resulting in a significant reduction of the amount of waste ending up in landfills,” Papatsoni says. Part of the waste management system is the operation of a large-scale wastewater treatment facility within the premises of Costa Navarino. In addition, TEMES has started a project—the biggest ever attempted in Europe—to uproot on-site olive and other fruit bearing trees and replant them on site. Of an estimated total of 24,000 olive and citrus trees, over 8,000 trees have been replanted so far with an almost one hundred percent success rate. Last but not least, the resort has taken precautions with any archaeological

finds that were unearthed. “The design was adapted to protect the findings during construction. The excavations which lasted more than three years were funded by TEMES and now form an integral part of the character and sense of history of the place,” says Papatsoni.

Messenia, apart from being one of the most archaeologically rich regions of Greece, also contains a large area of natural wetlands, which is home to a number of bird species, some of them endangered. TEMES and the Hellenic Ornithological Service work in concert to upgrade the wetlands by removing non-native plant species that burden the river’s ecosystem. The Gialova lagoon is Greece’s southernmost major wetland supporting hundreds of bird species in Greece as well as the African chameleon. TEMES has sponsored programs to protect these habitats as well as a project that will map the nests of the loggerhead sea turtle (*Caretta caretta*) in cooperation with Archelon, the Sea Turtle Protection Society of Greece. Resort lighting close to beaches is installed with special covers and uses low-intensity bulbs to avoid disturbing turtle nests during hatching season.

It’s rare when two divergent projects share the same space, but in this corner of Greece, they work together and share similar goals. The captain was a major supporter of the Iklaina project, contributing funds towards the initial land purchase for the excavation to begin its work. Cosmopoulos’s goal is to preserve the artifacts and ensure there will be further treasures for future generations to uncover. Konstantakopoulos’s vision was to allow others to enjoy the beauty of the region while at the same time dedicating efforts to preserve the region’s natural beauty, resources, and treasures. To quote the resort’s website: “Our goal is to preserve this priceless heritage, pass it down to future generations, and invite our guests to become part of it.”

Those who have yet to visit Messenia are in for a delightful surprise. In a landscape where ancient treasures are still being discovered and modern landmarks are being erected, be prepared to travel in time over a span of 5,000 years. With so many sites to choose from: archaeological treasures, exotic natural habitats, and one of the world’s most luxurious resorts along this legendary coastline, ‘sandy Pylos’ is as historically rich and opulently welcoming as it was in Nestor’s time.

