

From Grexit to Brexit: A view from Athens

John Bennet, Director of the British School at Athens, reflects on two different paths taken



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Sunday 5 July 2015: a referendum is held in Greece on whether to accept the latest bail-out terms offered by the European Commission, the European Central Bank and the International Monetary Fund. Turnout was 62.5 per cent and, in the wee hours of the following morning, the vote to reject announced as 61.3 per cent. Although not explicitly a vote whether to remain within the EU, the implication of a no-vote was that Greece would leave the Eurozone; there would be a Grexit.

Thursday 23 June 2016: a referendum is held in the UK on whether the UK should remain in the EU. The result was much closer than the Greek poll: 51.9 per cent

'Leave' and 48.1 per cent 'Remain', turnout 72 per cent. Both polls delivered essentially the same result, yet, only a week later, the SYRIZA-led government of Greece accepted an even more stringent set of measures and, despite real fears of Grexit, Greece remains part of the EU and of the Eurozone. Politicians in the UK, on the other hand, took the referendum result as a mandate to initiate the process to leave the EU, and Article 50 was formally invoked on 29 March 2017.

Two referendums, each delivering the same result; one *not* leading to Grexit, the other triggering Brexit. One could argue, however, that the Greek vote was a vote of confidence in its government, allowing it to continue

to negotiate, while the UK vote was against government, making any appearance of going against the popular will (however narrow the margin) politically inconceivable. Two years later, after a third bailout, there are a few encouraging signs and Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras has announced that 2017 will be the last full year of austerity for Greece. In relation to Brexit, uncertainty seems to be the word of the moment.

As Director of the British School at Athens (BSA), based in central Athens, I am regularly asked about Brexit. Probably the most consistent reaction is perplexity: why would the UK, absent the severe pressures Greece was experiencing in 2015, actively choose to leave the EU, especially when Greece had made the same choice *in extremis*, but had thought better of it? Beyond that perplexity, however, lies a fear that links fostered and nurtured while both countries were within the EU, will weaken as the UK seeks other partners in the new post-Brexit world sketched by (some) UK politicians. While my own experience lies only in the research and higher education sectors, I would like to hope that those fears are misplaced.

The BSA has existed and operated in Greece since 1886 – over 130 years – and still occupies the same location, then on the margins of the city, now effectively in its centre. The BSA's foundation reflected the strong ties between Greece and the UK, partly forged during Greece's struggle for independence earlier that century, but mainly through a mutual interest in the study of all

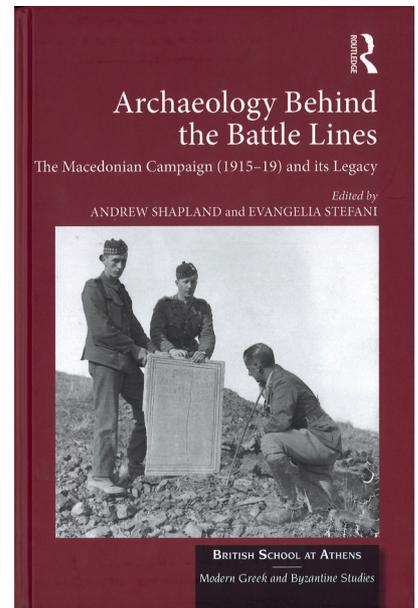
aspects of Hellenism: ancient, medieval and modern. For example, early researchers at the BSA explored the remains of Byzantine buildings with reference to the Arts and Crafts movement, described the lives of mobile herders in (what is now, but was not then) northern Greece, documented the dialects of spoken modern Greek, and examined Christian practices within the Ottoman Empire in its last days. Archaeological research, too, was (and remains) a strong and distinguished component in the BSA's overall portfolio of activities.

These research strands were established long before the UK joined the EU. Membership has undoubtedly brought many benefits, not least in the form of EU funding for research, particularly in archaeological research (as Simon Keay writes elsewhere in this issue). EU funding has supported BSA-sponsored projects too, such as the recently completed AGRICURB project that examined the origins of agriculture across western Asia and Europe, drawing on active fieldwork and legacy data from BSA research. A few days ago, we were joined at the BSA by a Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellow, who will spend two years based in the BSA's Fitch Laboratory, a leading centre for science-based archaeology, partner itself in many projects with EU-based institutions. The potential for UK-based researchers to win such grants in the future is currently uncertain. Loss of this funding entirely would clearly have a negative impact on UK research, since its existence is a strong element in the bilateral research collaborations between UK-based and Greek institutions that the BSA exists to foster.

But what of the next generations of researchers? Greek students have been major consumers of the opportunities offered by UK higher education institutions, and many of them have engaged with the BSA before, during and after their time in the UK. While the financial pressures of the so-called 'crisis' in Greece have understandably dampened those numbers, another crucial element in ensuring that bilateral research continues to grow and develop is to encourage new generations to access these

opportunities. Future fee regimes for EU-based students seeking to come to the UK should be set at appropriate levels that encourage, rather than discourage future applicants. An example from personal experience: I currently work in an institution where the Assistant Director and the Curator of our satellite research centre in Knossos both earned doctorates in the UK, while the Director of our laboratory completed a post-doctoral fellowship there; all three are Greek nationals. My own university department in the UK has placed at least three former doctoral students from Greece in university posts there in the past 10 years, while many more of our postgraduate-taught students from Greece have continued their careers there.

Certainty remains in short supply. Although the UK may separate from the EU as a collective on or (more likely) after 29 March 2019, it is inconceivable that bilateral collaborations and partnerships with colleagues and institutions here in Greece nurtured by the BSA over 130+ years should be jeopardised as a consequence. Indeed institutions like the BSA that continue to operate within member countries of the EU are best placed to continue to foster high-quality research links/partnerships in the humanities and social sciences, whatever form Brexit eventually takes – soft, hard, short-lived or prolonged. ■



The British School at Athens has recently published *Archaeology Behind the Battle Lines: The Macedonian Campaign (1915-19) and its Legacy*, edited by Andrew Shapland and Evangelia Stefani (Routledge, 2017). The cover photograph shows the discovery by Scots Fusiliers of a 2nd-century AD honorary inscription, now on display in the Thessaloniki Museum.

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