

Retracing the Steps of Socrates

By KAREL HUJER

The Athenian observatory in Greece was founded in 1842, the same year as America's oldest observatory in Cincinnati. Even Mt. Palomar Observatory with all its modern equipment cannot compare with the unique qualities that surround the Greek National Astronomical Observatory, superbly located on top of Nymph Hill. There an overwhelmingly fascinating view from the office of Director Kotsakis, our host, reveals that architectural superlative, the Parthenon, on top of the Acropolis, dominating the scenery of Athens.

A solar eclipse once brought the famous American astronomer, the late Henry Norris Russell of Princeton, to Athens, and at Nymph Hill he felt as if transported into another world.

Not only the Parthenon, but also the barren elevation of Areopagus, and the three hills, Acropolis, Areopagus and Nymph Hill, surround a motley of ruins, all that is left of the ancient agora. This once formed the cultural center of flourishing bygone Athens.

At every step one encounters relics and names deeply imprinted into the traditions of our western civilization of Graeco-Roman background. Numerous spots of historical treasures of ancient Greece appear condensed within a relatively small area and separate the observatory's Nymph Hill from the Parthenon.

Most visitors to Athens head toward the marvelous Parthenon where 100 years ago Ernest Renan wrote his inspiring Prayer to Perfection, but only few may stray toward the seemingly uneventful

rock of Areopagus where the Supreme Council of the proud Hellenic capital once held its sessions.

Agora, a disorderly and apparently senseless array of broken masonry and scraps of ruins, lies low and desolate. What captured my imagination were traces of a circular structure, Tholos, at the foot of Hephaistos temple. Legend persists that it was here that Socrates, at the turn of the 4th Century, B.C., confronted the judgment of Thirty Tyrants. The words of Plato to that effect, addressed to his teacher, Socrates, resound through the centuries: "How is it, that you have abandoned the walks of Lyceion and you are seen at the portico of Vasileios? I do not believe that it is because of a law suit which obliged you to do as I."

Socrates, the nonconformist, was accused of breaking the laws of the noble society. His discourses with a humble cobbler, Simon, in a nearby shop, met dangerous notoriety. Socrates maintained he

faithfully had tried to follow the originally well-intended laws of the orderly society. Had he left Athens, as Critias had urged, he could have saved himself. But this law-abiding philosopher deemed that step treason and instead chose to drink the cup of hemlock.

The names of his judges are long since forgotten but the name of Socrates has impressed itself on the ages. Socrates' plea to the men of Athens who sat in power is the noblest defense of the law ever recorded.

All this occurred within a small area of agora, just below today's observatory. Varied fragments of sculptured stones remain silent witnesses of dramatic scenes followed by centuries of devastating barbarism.

The last moments of Socrates, before the final effect of the hemlock, are most remarkably described by Plato, his famous disciple. Socrates placed highest emphasis on morality and was not for what we today call science. Yet, the late George Sarton, Harvard historian of science and humanitarian, considered this event so universally important that he included this Plato story of Socrates' final discourse with his disciples in his last moments of earthly life in his excellent volume on the History of Science.

The magnificent Phidias Parthenon, or whatever has withstood the incredible onslaught of barbarian pounding, cannot rival the undying, invisible heritage of the spiritual, moral and ethical enlightenment that continues to radiate for all mankind from this incident that took place inside agora. It represents an invisible and therefore invincible cosmic record that looms perpetually high above the ephemeral physical forms of agora which, centuries before our era, witnessed an incomparable defense of the dignity of man.

In face of ephemeral governmental systems, the case of Socrates who did not seek temporal power offers a radiant example in the spirit of the One who four centuries later said: "The meek shall inherit the earth."

Science Briefs

Circus elephants usually are female.

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The Amazon River is the widest river in the world.

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A bolt is 40 yards. It is used for measuring cloth.

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Forty-eight per cent of Canada is covered with forests.

Looking Backward

(From the files of Looking Backward of March, 1943):

Captain Vernon Castle was killed in an airplane accident in Texas 25 years ago, the famed dancer of the Royal Flying Corps. He had braved death for more than a year of the German lines with only a minor wound, to meet death on a peaceful flying field

in Texas in an effort to avert a collision with another aviator.

Castle had a national reputation as a dancer. His real name was Blythe. Mrs. Castle, professionally known as Irene Castle, was his dancing partner and later became a star in motion pictures.

The body was taken to New York for burial.