

CTPA Visit to Field Museum

“The Greeks — Agamemnon to Alexander the Great”

December 15, 2015

Twenty-three (23) CTPA members attended this self guided visit to a new special exhibit at The Field, open **November 26, 2015 until April 10, 2016.**

“Witness the birth of Western Civilization through the perspective of individuals, both famous and anonymous, and surround yourself with more than 500 priceless archaeological treasures from more than 20 Greek museums. Myth and history will come alive before your eyes.”

Four museums worked with Greek cultural officials to create this exhibit, including **Chicago’s own National Hellenic Museum** in Greektown. First seen in Montreal where a blockbuster 280,000 people visited, now in Chicago until April, the show will travel finally to the National Geographic Museum in Washington, DC through October. We can thank the burial practices and mythology of the ancient Greeks, and those archeologists who unearthed them, for the spectacular artifacts on view. It’s a fantastical gilded tour of stone, bronze and gilt statues, coins and costumery from the 7th to the 2nd Millennia BCE (before the Common/Christian era, an abbreviation used now, instead of BC). This exhibit presents milestones of over 5,000 years of Greek history and culture from neolithic beginnings to the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE.

A great odd-shaped crown or diadem displayed was found in Tomb II in the cemetery at Mochlos, one of the oldest-known “crowns” from ancient Greece, but it is not known who might have worn it despite the clear signs of wear. The exhibit passes through the Minoan period, considered the first “European” civilization, discovered in the ruins of a most important and spectacular palace at Knossos. Wonderfully articulated timelines illustrated with images of the related artifacts, and spectacular huge maps of the Greek Islands move visitors through the ancient world. A large bowl is identified as “the first kiln-fired pottery” made in Greece.



Rulers and warriors of the Mycenaean World from the 16th to 12th Centuries BCE tell of the later Bronze Age when in the southern parts of mainland Greece large towns emerged, centered around palaces. An opulent gold necklace is on display, with the notation that a warrior was buried wearing it, decorated with a double-faced eagle. This era was enshrined in the writings of the Greek poet Homer whose *Iliad* tells the story of the Trojan War (12th C BCE), and the *Odyssey* which describes the adventures of the Greek hero Odysseus whose example of courage and determination inspired Greek warriors. A portrait of Homer – a Roman copy of a Greek original—is displayed, as one of many carved between the 5th and the 2nd centuries BCE.

Among the many stunning artifacts are a series of helmets and funerary masks in bronze with gold decoration, some with relief depicting eyes and other facial features. These death masks were excavated at the Archotiko cemetery. The deceased were high-ranking Bottiaean nobles. The helmets have no signs of wear and were not meant for fighting, but to indicate the deceased’s rank in the Underworld. Another helmet was made from boar tusks.



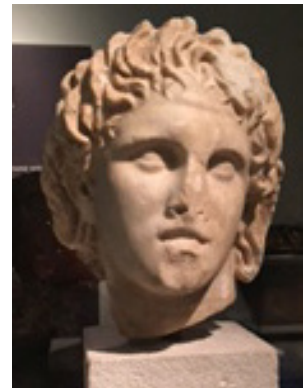
We learn of the birth of the Olympic Games which began in the Classical Period. Every four years, city-states sent their best athletes to compete, which helped establish political ties in a common celebration. In addition to the Olympic games three other Pan-Hellenic games were held every two or four years and included competition in the arts as well as in physical sports. Citizens of Athens had the right to vote and were expected to perform civic duties in return. Certain devices ensured that jury selection was random. On display is a Kleroterion or an “allotment machine,” with columns of slots representing Athenian tribes. We’re told that a “pinakion” or juror’s ticket, bearing the name of a

potential official was placed in each slot. Black and white balls were released to determine the final selection. This “Pentelic marble” from 162-161 BCE came from Hadrian’s Gymnasium.



Moving on to the Kings of Ancient Macedon, we learn that the 4th C. BCE witnessed a major turning point in history. A king from Macedon named Philip II unified Greece through a series of military victories, diplomatic alliances and marriages. Alexander the Great was Phillip’s son who would go on to conquer much of the ancient world, seen as a God and memorialized forever. One of the most beautiful artifacts in the exhibit is a myrtle wreath, a gold crown featuring two lifelike branches of myrtle, an aromatic plant associated with Aphrodite and a symbol of immortality. In Macedon such objects were found in the graves of wealthy men and women. Wreaths were worn during public or secret rituals, and at symposia, games and other events. Another magnificent myrtle wreath rendered in gold, described as a true masterpiece, was worn by Queen Meda, the sixth of the seven wives of Philip II. Meda was the only wife allowed the privilege of burial with her royal husband She threw herself on his funeral pyre to follow him to the kingdom of the dead. We learn (and have to wonder how this is known) that most of the remaining wives committed suicide or were murdered!

Philip II left two potential heirs to the throne, but his eldest son had an intellectual disability that may have resulted from an attempt on his life. His half-brother Alexander was thus groomed to become king, receiving instruction in combat, the arts, science and philosophy. Alexander was 20 years old when his father was assassinated, but he was ready to be king, and under his service the ancient world was transformed from a series of leading city-states into a single empire. We see marble statues representing Alexander, and in one he is depicted as the God Pan, an idealized model of male beauty. Since portraits were produced during his lifetime, along with rare physical descriptions in ancient writing, scientists say it’s possible to recognize him in sculpture by a slight tilt of his head, the arrangement of his hair, his lack of a beard (unlike other rulers of the time), and an upward glance.



The exhibit ends with a beautiful small coin said to be commissioned by the King of Thrace a century after the death of Alexander the Great, representing Alexander “not as a mere king, or even an emperor, but as the combined personification of the supreme deities of both Greece and Egypt: Zeus and Amun.” The provenance is unknown, the date is 297-281 BCE, and it resides in the Numismatic Museum of Athens. Reproductions can be purchased in the Field Museum gift shop into which visitors are led at the end of the exhibit.

At the end there was a sign indicating there is another Greek history exhibit at the National Hellenic Museum: Journey through millions of years of upheaval and beauty in “**Aegean: Creation of an Archipelago,**” open through August 2016. An introduction of the story can be viewed online at:

http://aegeon.org.gr/index_en.htm and

<https://www.nationalhellenicmuseum.org/exhibits-collections/upcoming-exhibitions/aegean-creation-of-an-archipelago/>

Respectfully submitted

Judith Randall, Co-Secretary

Photos by Judith Randall & Donna Primas

MORE INFO on line at:

<https://www.fieldmuseum.org/about/press/greeks-agamemnon-alexander-great-press-kit>