Kos: A First Stop in the Refugee Crisis

BY JEROLYN E. MORRISON, PH.D.

Each day our humanitarian efforts on Kos begin after our work in the museum ends. It starts with an eight-pound bag of lentils. While sharing our archaeological discoveries, we pick through the legumes to remove small rocks, seeds, and chunks of dirt.

Overnight they soak in water so they can be cooked quickly, packaged, and carried the next day to Kos Solidarity, a local humanitarian club. Here we coordinate with volunteers from Europe and North America to distribute dinner to refugees from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Syria.

I am a member of the Serraglio, Eleona, and Langada Archaeological Project in Kos sponsored by the Italian Archaeological School at Athens that is investigating cultural connections in the Aegean during the Final Neolithic to the Late Protogeometric period, ca. 3500–900 BCE. We are scholars and artists who examine ceramic, stone, and metal artifacts to better understand ancient life.

Our quest for humanity this study season has been significantly shaped by the current geopolitical situation. Kos is a Greek island with a population of approximately 33,000. It is part of the Dodecanese island chain in the southeastern Aegean Sea, about two miles off the Anatolian (Turkish) coast. For millennia Kos has served as a link between the Anatolia peninsula, Mesopotamia, and Europe. Today it continues in this role as individuals and families leave their homeland to seek asylum. Countless wooden fishing boats and rubber rafts—over-packed with women, men, and children sporting defective lifejackets—depart nightly from Bodrum in Turkey to race across the sea to Europe. This mass migration has sparked an explosion of chaos on the Greek islands and Turkish coast. There is limited shelter, clothing, food, and medical care to offer those who survive.

Walking in the refugee camps along the castle’s seawall and in the ancient agora, one notices differences among the refugees: between those who live in tents or on the streets.
and solo travelers or those traveling in groups. The men traveling alone cluster together to talk and play cards, while women traveling with their families watch the children as their husbands collect goods to ease their journey. Regular activities for everyone include washing clothes, bathing in the sea, and collecting as many sandwiches, pieces of fruit, boiled eggs, bottles of water, energy bars, and hot meals as possible.

Each dinner shift we face different challenges. Some evenings there is enough food to distribute and other times there is not. Populations and attitudes change daily. A four-day Greek ferry strike left both locals and refugees marooned. During the strike unseasonably warm days with a calm sea allowed for multiple illegal crossings from Turkey to Kos. The number of individuals quadrupled, leaving refugees and volunteers feeling desperate. The number of refugees dwindled to a few thousand once the strike ended and some people could move on.

We talk with English-speaking refugees to learn their stories and help with specific needs. A mysterious force that drives individuals to adapt, survive, and form bonds with each other is evident. I look at the marvelous faces and feel their heroic attitudes and wonder: Would it be possible to document this type of spirited movement in antiquity? Undeniably the personal and cultural impact is great for all involved. Together we are creating the future.

Jerolyn E. Morrison, Ph.D. is an archaeologist working in the Aegean. She is the founder of Minoan Tastes, located in Crete, which brings together ancient flavors of the land, sea, and sky of Crete with Minoan cooking demonstrations.

**THE KOS TEAM** included men and women from the Italian Archaeological School at Athens; the University of Patras, Department of Geology, Greece; and the Institute for Aegean Prehistory. With anonymous financial support, we were able to provide a modest, hot meal for 25-28 families each day for one month, and supplement meals with boiled eggs and sandwiches for an additional month. Minoan Tastes (Ceramic Cooking Pot, LLC) continues to help Kos Solidarity. For more information, please email minoantastes@gmail.com, or contact Kos Solidarity via Facebook.