Lucy D'Urso (MML) – Greece, Summer 2018

In my final year of the MML tripos, I am interested in taking GR6, a paper focusing on the manifestation and re-interpretation on classical Greek myths in Modern Greek literature and society. Thanks to a generous grant from the college, this July I was able to travel to Athens, Santorini and Crete to explore these ideas for myself.

Athens was a great place to start, being a modern city littered with allusions to its ancient past. My favourite part of Athens was definitely the Acropolis museum, as here the relationship between ancient and modern Greece was most obvious. At the museum there was a section on the way in which subsequent societies attempted to repurpose and deconstruct the Acropolis for their own religious and municipal purposes. This was particularly interesting, as the museum itself was clearly involved in such processes, repurposing the Acropolis as a site of international tourism and education.

In Santorini, the popularity of Greece as a modern tourist destination was striking. Teetering on the crater of an extinct volcano, Santorini’s landscape is remarkably barren. Learning about the devastating eruption of this volcano (Thera) in c. 1600 BCE was fascinating. The eruption is rumoured to be both the source of the eventual decline of the Minoan empire, as well as being a potential site for the myth of the lost city of Atlantis. I found it really interesting to see how such a potentially bleak geographical location has become an iconic tourist destination.

Probably the most famous character from Greek mythology is the Minotaur, who is said to have been banished to the infamous labyrinth by King Minos of Crete. This labyrinth is widely agreed to have been based on the Minoan Palace at Knossos, Crete. Curiously, however, the actual site and museum at Knossos focused primarily on the archaeological digs that resulted in the eventual discovery of the site. Again, the role of the museum was really interesting here, because I learned how the museum had to persuade locals to donate artefacts that they had stolen from or discovered at the site. This highlights how there was a desire to tell a specific ‘story’ of what happened at the site of Knossos, and that the museum felt that they were the correct institution to tell it.

Overall, I really enjoyed my time in Greece, and I loved learning about how Modern Greek institutions use the country’s past to create historical dialogues and perpetuate the appeal of the myth. I’d like to thank the college for giving me the opportunity to take this trip, it was a brilliant experience.