

Athens: On being alive in antiquity

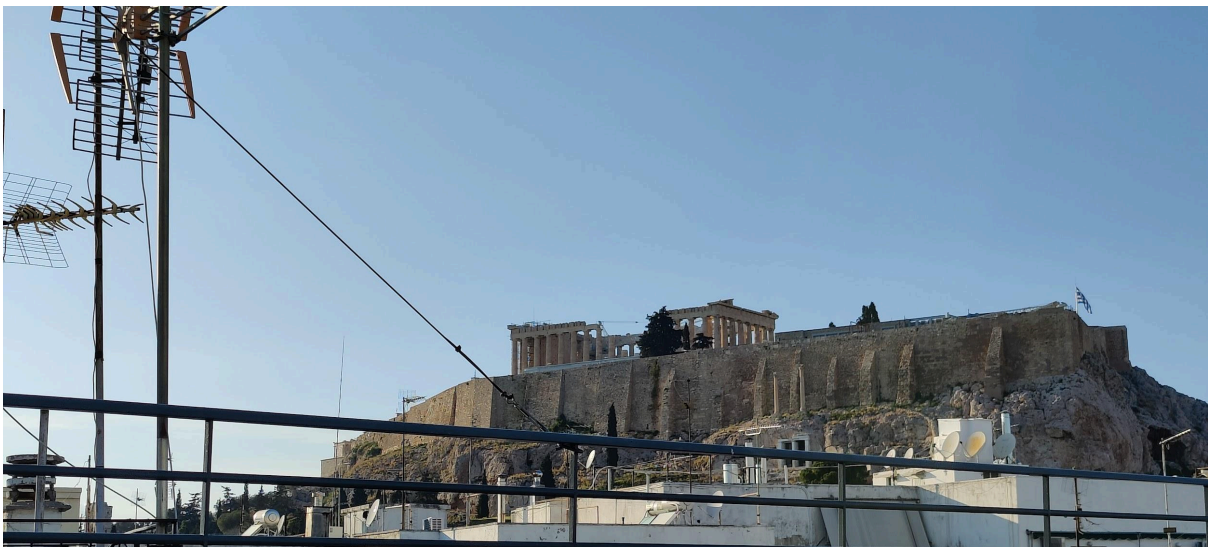
Lord Byron and Leonard Cohen, though removed from each other by a few centuries, have a couple of things in common, besides a long list of works on lady loves: impressive poetic stamina and a love for Greece. In Canto II of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Byron disdains those who cannot appreciate its natural beauty:

Cold is the heart, fair Greece, that looks on thee,
Nor feels as lovers o'er the dust they loved

Cohen has similar views, expressed in *Days of Kindness*:

Greece is a good place
to look at the moon, isn't it?
You can read by moonlight
You can read on the terrace
You can see a face
As you saw it when you were young

When I touched down in Athens on the 24th of March, tired after a sleepless night-long stay in Stansted Airport, I was immediately buoyed by – not the dust, or the moon – but the bright, welcoming sun. Byron's version of Greece is a dusty thing being ravaged by colonisers in the name of knowledge; as I stepped onto the Athenian Metro, with no recognition of the language being spoken and no map in my pocket to lead me to my hostel, I wondered if my museum-filled, 'Classical Ruin' obsessed itinerary was adding to the tradition, treating Athens like a curio to be inspected and hoarded but not experienced. Since I've landed in Cambridge, I've used the word 'tourist' derisively at least once a week, and only half of those times have I followed that up with an admission that a degree doesn't absolve me of tourist status myself. For one, I still don't know how the Corpus Clock works.



Fortunately, the Metro was easier than the Clock, and I found myself walking to my hostel from Syntagma station. I reached by late afternoon, and asked the receptionist for terrace access an hour before it officially opened so I could look at the Parthenon in the setting sun. After a gyro and some walking around, my body caught up to me, and I slept till the next day.

25 March

History is never too far away from reality, no matter how much the Acropolis features into your week. My plans for the day, which involved the Acropolis and the Acropolis Museum, were changed slightly by the Greek Independence Day parade, which I followed down the street from in front of the Temple of Olympian Zeus. Tanks and firefighters waited to march in orderly formation; I ducked into a bakery for a tiropita.



I was struck by the sheer number of children running right up to the parade before it could officially begin, clicking pictures with the ceremonial guard and running their hands over jeeps. The marching-band walking past staidly introduced the intercontinental-missile present. I walked with the crowd for half an hour, but I'm not much of one for parades and

congestion – I decided to strategically move to the Acropolis Museum, which was free in honour of the day and hence had a line around the block.



The Acropolis Museum is a large glass and concrete building which dominates the vision until you notice the Acropolis behind it. Jutting out from behind the on-ground entrance of the Acropoli metro station, the museum boasts three floors of findings from the Acropolis and an interestingly sloped floor which I later found out mimicked the original slant of where the artefacts were found. I was most struck by the erosion of time – I collected pictures of headless Aphrodite statues with the folds of their robes still preserved. The pediments stand at eye-level: a viewer in 2024 can see details which the height of the Parthenon would have obscured from them. Poking around the first floor, I found a cache of ancient gold coins, set out one by one in slots made specifically for them.



The Acropolis Museum caters to showing off the details involved in a Greek devotee's daily life. Walking out onto the balcony, I saw a squadron of fighter jets in the sky. The aesthetic openness of Bernard Tschumi's museum allows for the current world to bleed into the past until they are inseparable from each other.

Feeling hemmed in, I made my way to the National Gardens, stopping at a stall to pick up a gyro for lunch. The National Gardens are a shockingly green oasis in the middle of the city's most crowded tourist centre. At the end of March, Athens was quite dry, but the Gardens were cool, sunlight shining through deep green leaves. I sat on a bench and wrote haikus. For dinner, I had the Greek Independence Day dish, Bakaliaros Skordalia (salted fried cod with garlic mashed potatoes), which I am still thinking about.



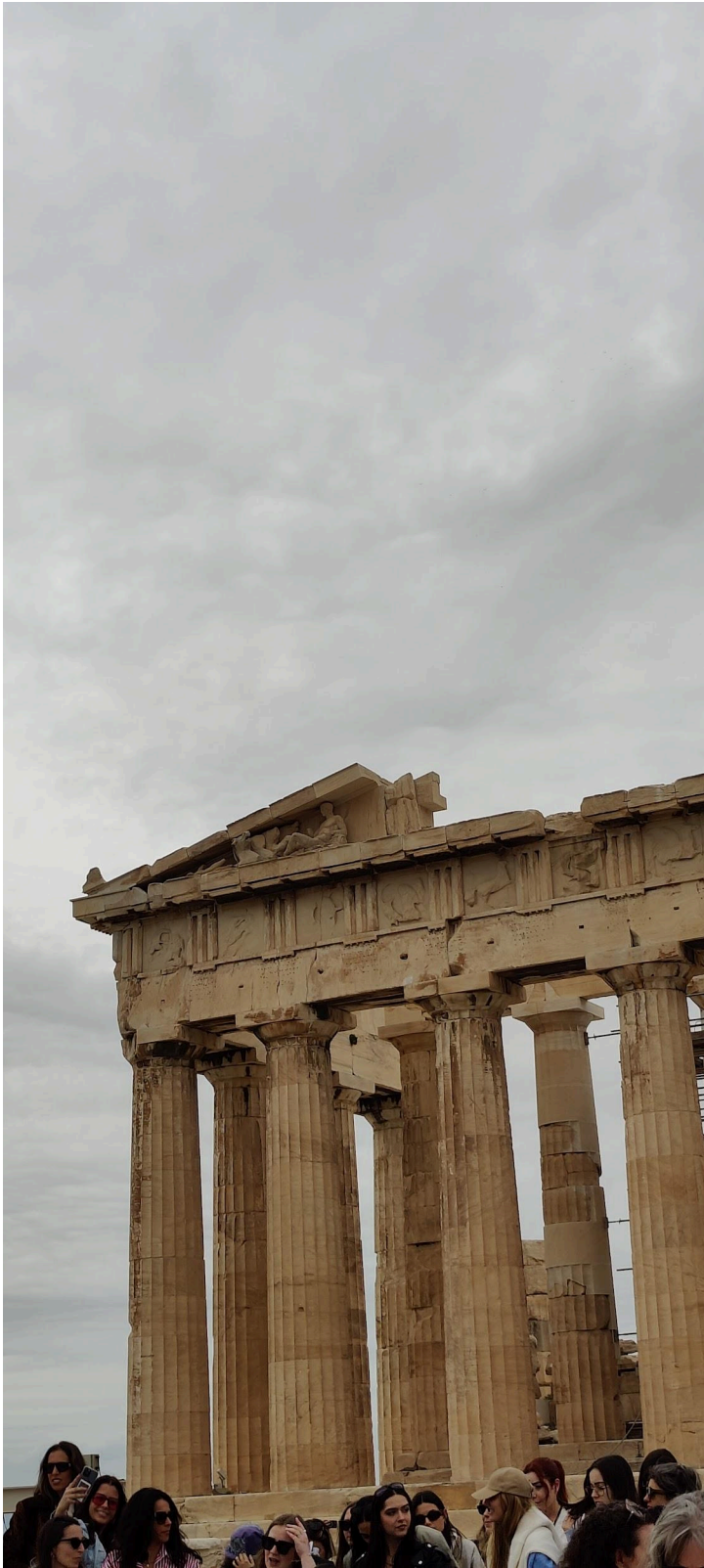
26 March

The next day, I decided to make my way up the hill. Walking up, I encountered the Theatre of Dionysus on the south slope before the much larger Odeon of Herodes Atticus, which I

planned to see later, on my way down. The Theatre of Dionysus was set low into the ground, with not many seats and completely open to the elements in a way which made me wonder about how the acoustics might have sounded. (The Herodeon, in comparison, had a dizzying number of seats, and very high walls.) I've become used to closed modern venues like the ADC Theatre and the Corpus Playroom, and realising this made me watch a play in an open-air venue upon returning to Cambridge.



I walked in through the huge pillars that made up the gates of the Acropolis and faced the Parthenon, a building which had looked large from the city below but seemed huge and unreal with a few steps between us. It was a building I'd been aware of since my childhood but only recognised the scale of then, with renovation crews actively working around one of the gaps in the walls caused three and a half centuries ago. Pulled out of postcards and Wikipedia pages, the Parthenon looked great but wounded – all us tourists like ants swarming around a piece of fruit.



I turned to look at the empty space which had once held the statue of the Athena Promachos, now nowhere to be seen. The statue had been unforgettable due to its sheer size, but I had seen the day before the multiple craftsmen, traders and devotees whose belongings had similar plaques in front of them at the Acropolis Museum, and felt less like history was

actively trying to forget its humans. My favourite building was the luxurious Erechtheion, with an olive tree at its back and beautifully intricate statues of korai supporting the roof over the porch. The sides of the roof were decorated with sunken-in cubes (which I found out was called a coffered ceiling). Standing there, I felt irrepressibly drawn to the city-in-amber on top of Athens, and knew I would try to return, despite the packed nature of my itinerary.

Athens in the morning and was staying around Makrygianni like me, and then we walked together to the Museum. I'd been overambitious, though – I'd mistakenly looked at the time it would take to get there by car and not foot, and the resulting journey was not fifteen minutes but forty-five. On the way, we saw a hollowed out space with metal barricades around it – it was a small archaeological site, right in the middle of two bustling lanes – the site of the City Hall (Kotzia). We eventually made it and I had to take a breather to rest outside the building. The National Archaeological Museum was yet another breathtaking monument; the wings fanning out from the main structure seemingly endless. This collection was larger than the Acropolis Museum; I thought multiple times over that I had seen it all only to discover a new room with a new favourite piece of artwork.

I noticed that there was a Hadrian and Athens exhibition in one of the rooms, but it was cordoned off from the public and I was informed that it was not currently open. Inside, I could see various busts of the Emperor bathed in blue light. The rest of the museum still had its fair share of Hadrian busts; so I didn't feel like I was missing out. I put on a podcast about the Emperor whose speakers were talking about the problems inherent to venerating histories which are seen as culturally queer now without recognition of the – often exploitative – power dynamics within those relationships. It was an insightful listen that did not degrade queer people for looking for threads of similarity within history, but reminded them to do their research on a deeper level as well. My favourite piece in the museum was the Statue of the Sleeping Maenad in Pentelic Marble.



She looked lovingly carved, even though sections of detail had been shaved off by time and movement. At dinner, I tried ouzo for the first time – it reminded me of the toasted fennel seeds that my mother often passed around after a particularly heavy dinner.

27 March

The monuments I visited on the 27th seemed less removed from the city than the others – the Library and the Agora were surrounded by restaurants and souvenir shops. Hadrian had put his Library – which contained lecture spaces and reading rooms as well, near the Agora, a place for gathering and commercial activity in the city. I walked around the Agora, looking at the remains of buildings long gone. In a corner, there were a set of toilets with water channels running around them. At the very back of the site stood the Tower of the Winds, an octagonal tower which used to house a water clock, hence helping visitors keep track of time.

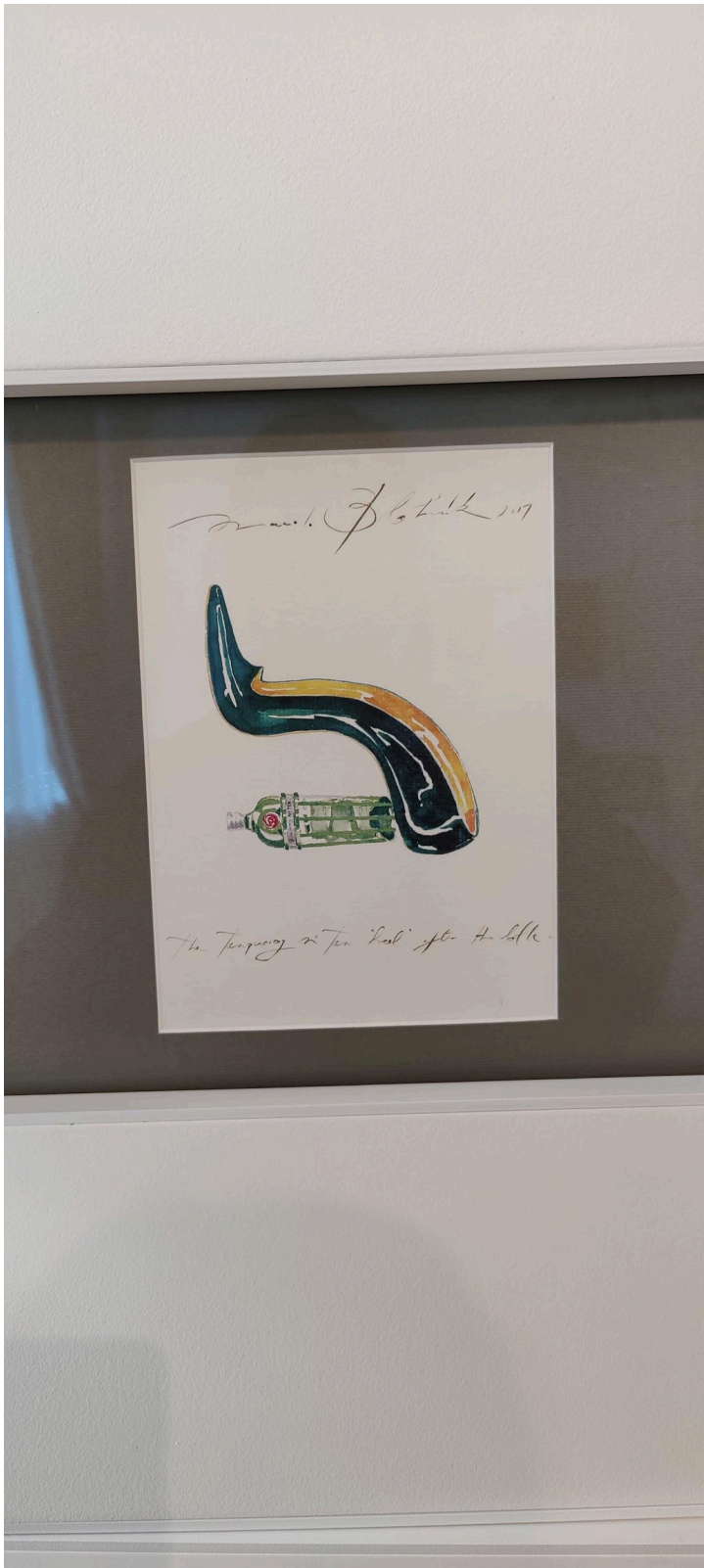


The top of the building was decorated with intricate figures – some reading informed me that they depicted the eight winds. After my time at the Agora, I walked the short distance to Hadrian's Library to spend what would become in hindsight my favourite isolated hour during my entire trip. The Library was characterised by the towering columns left of it. I sat

down with my back against one of them and simply wrote for a while, enjoying the midday sun and indulging myself.



After the Library, I had to choose my museum of the day, and picked the Maria Callas Museum. While I hadn't listened to much opera, I'd read about Callas while doing research earlier in the year and thought it was about time to look at more recent history. The Callas Museum was divided into three floors, the ground floor housing the cafe and store and the upper floors having the museum. I was told to go to the second floor and make my way down. The elevator opened not onto a floor of memorabilia as I had expected but a dark room made up to look like a forest, with a projection of Maria singing *Casta Diva* from the opera *Norma*. Her shadow flickered on the wall as I sat on a faux tree stump, alone in the room with goosebumps up my arms. The second room was a recreation of her balcony in Paris, with projected gauze sheets moving lazily in the 'wind' and Maria serenading us with what was to become my favourite aria performed by her, *Sempre Libere* from *La Traviata*. The third room was made up to look like a box at the London Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, where she had performed for the last time – one could sit upon a tufted chair and listen to her *Vissi d'arte*.



The fourth room was entirely panelled in light wood, and covered with recordings, both video and audio, of her teaching students at Juilliard. By the time I walked down to the first floor, which was filled with relevant accoutrements from her life as well as a timeline, I felt like I knew a lot more than I did half an hour ago. I spent the rest of my time marvelling at letters

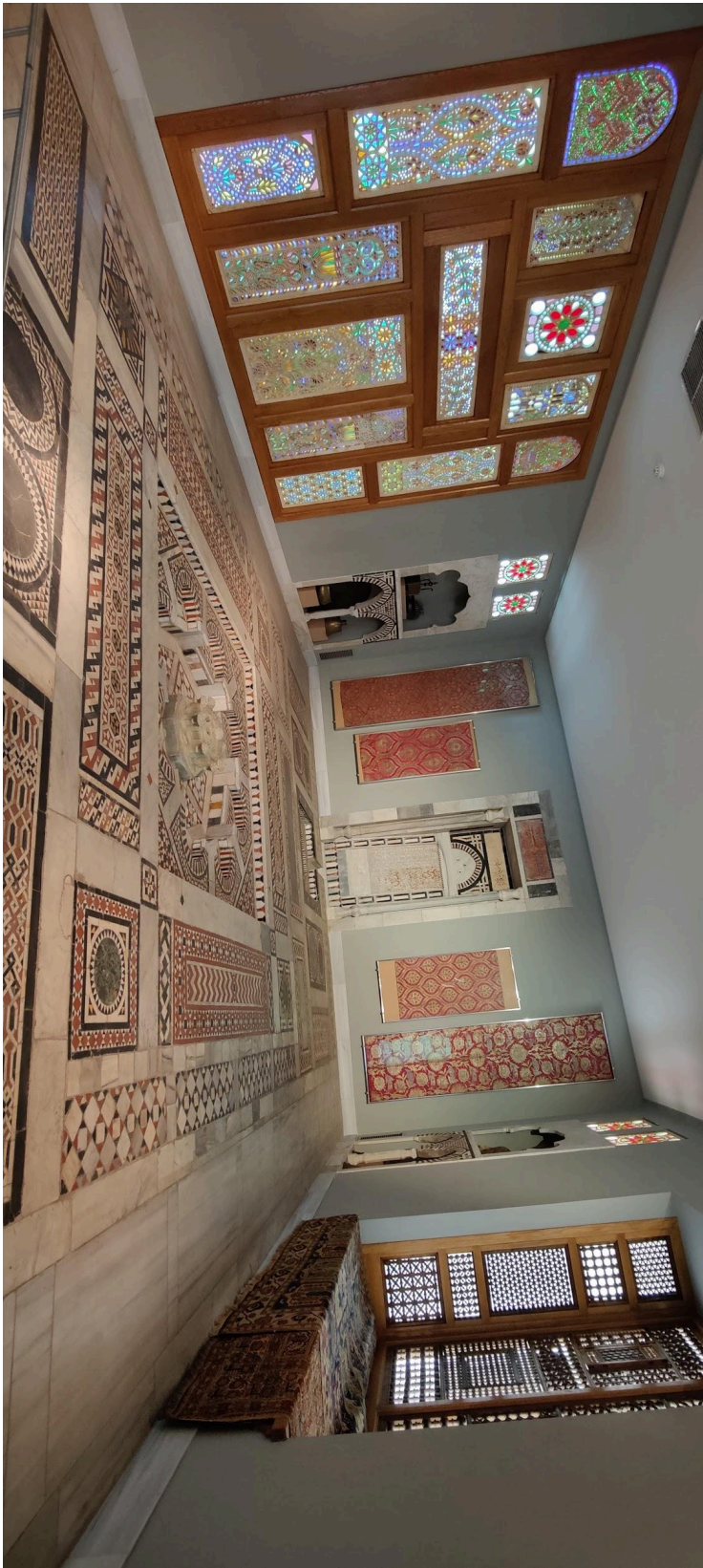
behind glass and the discolouring of satin gloves which she'd worn numerous times. Callas was made into a monument by legions of ardent supporters and a media blitz the likes of which would be indecipherable to the people in other museums I'd visited recently. She was respected due to the incredibly hard work she'd put in as training, and when famous was put under a microscope for her relationships with famous men. Her story was a relatively recent one – elevation due to a mixture of talent and luck, not the passage of centuries.

28 March

On the 28th, I visited the Kerameikos Cemetery. I viewed it from a raised platform above the actual site, since a group of tourists near me let me know that it was closed for the day. The graves looked tiny in the distance, and I reshuffled my plans for the day and tried to pick a museum to go to. The Benaki Museum of Islamic Art was nearby, and so I decided to spend my afternoon there after some time at a nearby fruit market.



The museum was completely empty – it was a weekday and a slow morning. I decided to begin on the ceramics floor where a beautifully patterned collection of wall tiles in indigo and green caught my eye. On the other side of the room sat a recreation of a room in a mansion, with intricately painted windows and a fountain set into the floor.



The Museum of Islamic Art was the smallest collection I'd been to so far, but the Benaki Museums in Athens were spread across over five buildings in different places in the city, and I planned to go to their central museum later on in the week.

29 March

The next day saw me at the Acropolis again, standing in line with my friend as she still hadn't been. I made a beeline straight for the Herodeion, determined not to miss it again, and experienced the almost dizzying feeling of looking down a wire fence into a very steep 17000 seat theatre.



The floor at the bottom was chequered black and white like a chessboard, and I quickly raised my eye to the skyline to combat the irrational fear in my stomach. Truly, I could not have been a theatregoer at the very top seats; I would have toppled down trying to fix my clothes or listen to a dialogue.

30 March

This morning, I walked to the Museum of Contemporary Art and discovered that The Queer Archive had been a pop-up hosted at the Museum which had come to a recent end. Having been too late in realising that a famous weekly local drag night had already been hosted a couple of days ago, I came to the conclusion that my trip's queer focus was too pointed to be perfectly realised. The Museum was full of art by queer artists like Lola Flash, whose gender-bending photographic work, halfway between documentary and fantasy, I really loved.

31 March

The last day of the month was beach day! I took the metro from the Acropolis to Elliniko and after that assumed that it would be a straight shot to the beach. Unfortunately, I took a wrong

turn and ended up at a huge construction site blocking the way to the beach, after which I turned around and made my way back to the metro station, from where I booked an Uber. After having walked for twice the time I expected, I was wiped and unwilling to take the risk. Google Maps hadn't failed me so far, but there was a first time for everything! Glyfada Beach was a pebbly beach, and the sun shone pleasantly down on blue waters. The water was too cold to swim in, but I unfolded a towel and relaxed for a while before making my way back to my hostel.



Dinner that day was the one restaurant I'd booked the entire trip, a place I'd seen recommended online called Cerdo Negro 1985. The place was moody and atmospheric, with dim lighting and kalamata olives served hot in lashings of olive oil. My friend arrived soon after I did, and we talked about our days: she'd spent her time painting.

1 April

On my last full day of the trip, I decided to visit my last museum, the Benaki Museum of Greek Culture. The Museum was showing its small collection of Byron's belongings on the top floor in its section with Greek independence relics, so I was glad to have visited.



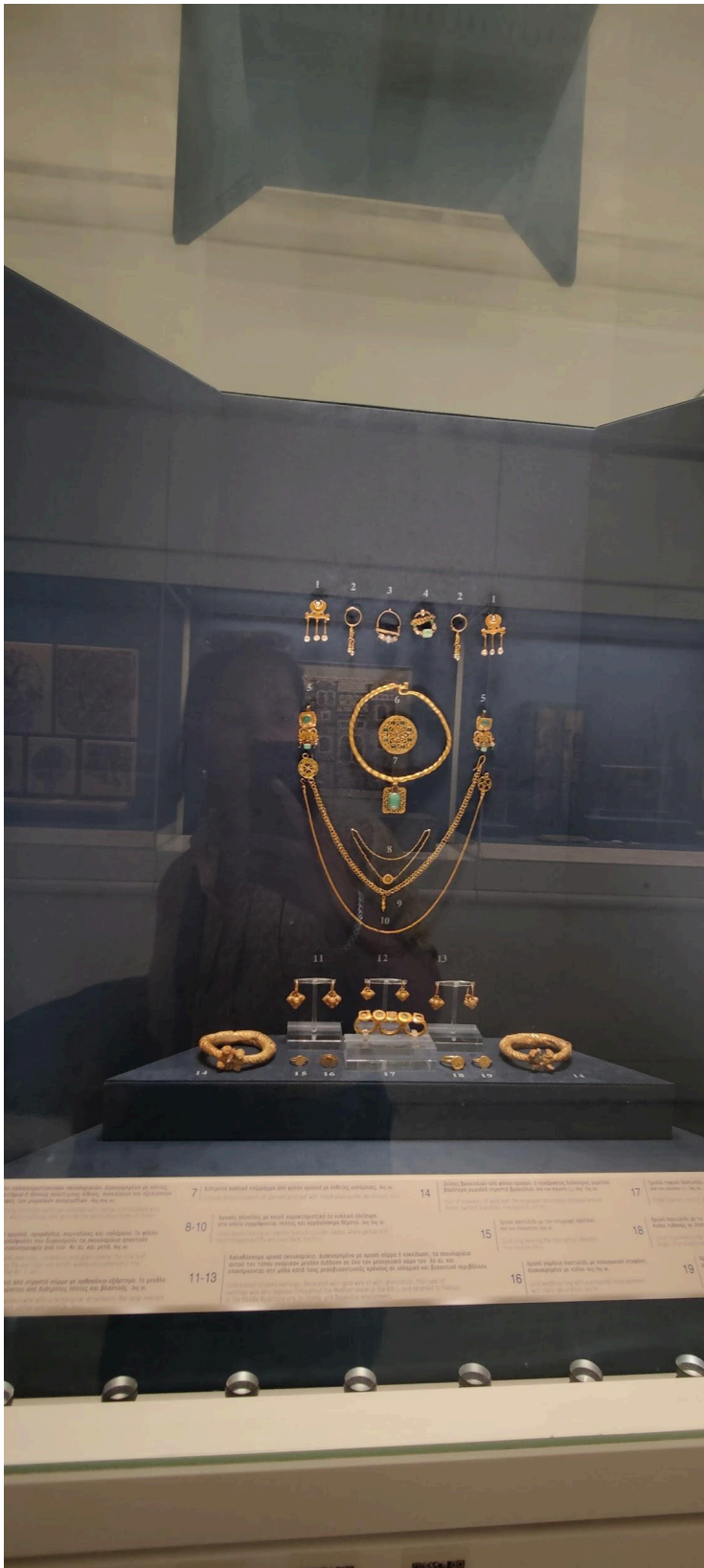
Gordon Noel Byron (1788-1824),
 Λονδίνο 1860, με αφιέρωση
 ερίνας και του Luigi Beschi
 γέλυου Δελφισσορία

8. Το φορητό γραφείο του
 λόρδου Βύρωνα, από μαύρο
 με επένδυση βελούδου, έργο
 του άγγλου τεχνίτη Turner.
 Lord Byron's portable desk,
 with velvet

9. Πιστόλια του λόρδου
 Βύρωνα
 Δωρεά Παμύρας Λάμπα
 Pistols once owned by
 Lord Byron
 Donated by Palmyra Lampsa

10. ΑΓΝΩΣΤΟΣ ΚΑΛΙΤΕΧΝΗΣ
 Ο όρκος του Λόρδου Βύρωνα στο Μεσολόγγι
 Αντίγραφο έργου του Ludovico Lipparini (1860)
 Λάδι σε ξύλο
 UNKNOWN ARTIST
 The Oath of Lord Byron in Missolonghi, 1826
 Copy of the work by Ludovico Lipparini (1860)

On the lower floors, it had a beautiful assortment of gold bridal jewellery which reminded me of pieces my mother had worn, and I was pleasantly surprised by the aesthetic similarities – surface-level though they may be – in Indian and Greek adornments.



Most of the rest of my day was spent walking through the winding residential lanes near the neighbourhood of my hostel and admiring the vibrantly coloured architecture. I'd miss Athens' wooden windows and thin balconies, and for my last evening there, I had a

risotto-like rice dish with succulently cooked lamb and a dollop of ricotta which melted in my mouth.

2 April

My flight was in the late afternoon, so I had to leave in the morning. When I was making my way to the metro station, I decided to not use the Acropolis metro station but one which would take me on a walk along the National Gardens, a decision I made entirely on the fly. While walking, I would come across a marble statue whose plaque I couldn't quite read – but I thought vaguely recognised the figure. When I consulted Google, I would know I was right. It was a statue of Lord Byron, the man who'd in some ways inspired my trip to Athens being the one to end it.

