

The Philadelphia Inquirer, August 13, 2002

Greece prepares for Olympics by ravaging a historic area

By E.G. Vallianatos

Herodotus, the father of history and a great Greek historian who lived during Greece's golden age some 2,500 years ago, says the Persian kings led armies against the Greeks because they did not want the sun to shine on any land but that of Persia. King Xerxes was planning to make Persia so large that its territories ended at the sky.

All those ambitions were wrecked with the Persian invasion of Greece. The defeat of the vast Persian army at Marathon in 490 B.C. stopped Persia's globalization project.

There's little doubt that if the Persians had won at Marathon, there would have been no Golden-age Athens, and that Greece, had it survived at all, would have been of little consequence. And without "the miracle that was Greece" -- without the legacy of Greek democracy, philosophy, science and literature -- the arts of civilization probably would not have taken roots in Europe.

Despite the seminal importance of Marathon, the site itself, where the Greeks defeated the Persians, is being annihilated. The Greek government is converting it into a rowing and canoeing playground for the 2004 Olympics. This means, above all, destroying Schinias, Marathon's forest and coastal wetland, and building two artificial lakes of some 2,500 meters in length, including grandstands for 10,000 spectators.

Such massive human intervention, wiping out the great marsh and wood where the battle between Greeks and Persians took place, is an act of barbarism. In addition, Schinias is a rare ecological site in Greece with numerous threatened and endangered species of birds, reptiles, amphibians, insects, and plants. It is a botanical garden with more than 750 species of flora; many of them found nowhere else.

Schinias also deserves the ecological protection of the European Union. If the Greek government is allowed to continue on its foolish path, it intends to remove the park's legal status so it can be privatized after the 2004 Olympics. Developers are already pressuring the government in that direction.

Now that the bulldozes are winning the battle of Marathon, a lot of people the world over may be questioning the wisdom of holding the Olympics in a country that is pouring cement over its history and culture.

That is a painful thing for me to say because I was born in Greece and love the country. In fact, I would like to see the Olympic Games permanently stay in Greece that gave them birth.

The tragedy, of course, is that Greece, the destroyer of Marathon in the dawn of the 21st century, is the same country that made the West what it is. About 3,000 to 2,400

years ago, Greeks invented science, medicine, philosophy, art, the city-state, democracy, the civilian control of the military, libraries and theater. These are the values that made civilization possible in the West. During that creative period of Greek history, the Greeks also invented the Olympics to honor their chief god, Zeus, and to celebrate their polytheistic Hellenic culture.

Today, the Greeks are largely Christians, however. They look at their Hellenic culture with suspicion. Last July, Greek archaeologists uncovered a classical-era grave in Marathon. That discovery had no impact on the government's policy, despite the vigorous protests of Greek archaeologists and classical scholars from around the world.

It's still not late for the Greek government to find an alternative venue for the water sports of the 2004 Olympics. I was in Marathon in May and the Olympics project has barely begun. The bulldozers are digging at Schinias, but the destruction is not yet irreversible. There's an alternative site: the abandoned Hellenikon airport in Athens.

Lord Byron, a passionate lover of Greek culture who gave his life for Greek freedom during the Greek War of Independence in the 1820s, was inspired by Marathon to dream that "Greece might still be free."

"Standing on the Persian's grave," he said, "I could not deem myself a slave." Neither could I.

Marathon remains a potent symbol of Greek and Western freedom.

E.G. Vallianatos is author of "From Graikos to Hellene," a book on the Greek Revolution.