

# **Lost Worlds of Ancient and Modern Greece**

**Gilbert Bagnani: The Adventures of a Young Italo-Canadian  
Archaeologist In Greece, 1921-1924**

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## 2021 Ancient Greek and Roman Studies Colloquium

Monday, April 12, 2021

9:40am-3:00pm

OPEN TO ALL

Zoom link: <https://trentu.zoom.us/j/94607611918?pwd=Q2xSNmF4Zm53V29FSGhEd044WWYvZz09>



### Trent AGRS and Archaeology students share their research on:

The Funerary games of Patroklus  
Guest-friendship in Herodotus  
Middle Comedy

Attila and the Huns  
Roman Religion  
Early Christianity

As part of this year's meeting, there will be a book launch for Dr. Ian Begg's new book: *Lost Worlds of Ancient and Modern Greece*. Gilbert Bagnani: *The Adventures of a Young Italo-Canadian Archaeologist in Greece, 1921-1924*.

The book launch is scheduled for 11:10am-11:40am.



I wish to thank the organisers of this Colloquium for inviting me to launch my book in Canada on this occasion. Indeed, I can think of no more appropriate venue than Ancient Greek and Roman Studies at Trent University, where Gilbert and Stewart Bagnani both taught.



I would like to dedicate this launching of *Lost Worlds* to the memory of the late Professor Thomas Symons. My debt of gratitude to Professor Symons for his constant encouragement and steadfast support of my research both personally and through the Bagnani Trustees is profound. I very much regret that he is not here to share in the joy of this occasion.

I am likewise grateful to the Trustees of the Gilbert and Stewart Bagnani Endowment for their support of my research and the production of the book. Indeed the high quality of its physical appearance is due to their generosity.

I should also like to express my sincere gratitude to the Trent Archivists, Dr. Bernadine Dodge, Janice Millard, and Jodi Aoki, for their assistance, patience and permission to research and publish the Bagnani archives.

My first acquaintance of Gilbert and Stewart Bagnani was at the auction sale of the contents of their houses in December 1994, when Prof. Ian Storey and I acquired some of their books. It wasn't until January of 1998 that I heard their papers had arrived in the Trent Archives in the Bata Library and the Trent archivist said these contained Egyptian hieroglyphs! In my eagerness to examine their papers, little did I anticipate that this would grow into a life-changing project.

It was not until 2002 that I learned that Stewart Bagnani had donated many cartons of letters and photos to the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto. Of course these dovetail very well with all the papers, etc. at Trent.



Gilbert Bagnani was born in 1900 in Rome, the only child of Ugo Bagnani, who had risen rapidly through the ranks of the elite Bersaglieri to become Italy's first Military Attaché posted to London, and of Florence Ruby Dewar, an heiress from Port Hope, Ontario. Gilbert attended Gibb's prep school from 1908 to 1911. As foreign diplomats, his parents were among those invited to attend the 1911 Coronation of King George V at Westminster Abbey in London. Gilbert's father, Gen. Ugo Bagnani, died in 1917 at the British front in France.

Her Royal Highness Princess  
Maximilian of Baden.

Walter Badock, Esq., C.S.I.

Lieutenant-Colonel Ugo Bagnani,  
Honorary A.D.C.

Signora Bagnani.

Captain Josceline Bagot, M.P.

Mrs. Bagot.

The Honourable Mrs. Walter Bagot.

Miss Marjorie Bagot.

Honorary Colonel His Highness  
Maharaja Sir Ganga Singh  
Ruler of Bikaner, G.C.I.E.,



Gilbert was not only fluently bilingual but also brilliant with a near photographic memory. After reluctantly attending the Royal Military Academy in Turin at the end of WWI and graduating from the University of Rome, he studied archaeology at the Italian School in Athens from 1921 to 1923. He frequented the British and American Schools in Athens too and considered them “marble sepulchres” instead of ivory towers.

Gilbert traveled around the Greek countryside exploring ancient sites and taking photographs, writing letters to his mother in Rome every week, in English of course. They both loved gossip about the rich and famous and used bilingual coded abbreviations to refer to individuals. For example, the Director of the Italian School was Alessandro della Seta and, since Seta means silkWorm in English, Gilbert referred to him as the W.



The students began their excursions around the Peloponnese by donkey, carriage, rowboat, train, automobile (very rarely), and most of all on foot. Gilbert was fascinated by Mistra, which had been both the capital of Late Byzantine Greece and an abandoned outpost after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Before its own capture in 1460, Mistra flourished as a transmitter of Byzantine culture to the West and recipient of Italian Renaissance artistic influences in the East. Here the last-built church of the Pantanassa had a bell-tower or campanile, an architectural feature reminiscent of those being built in Italy.







Some of Gilbert's photos illustrate monuments no longer extant, such as the church of Aghia Theodora at Arta where the bell-tower still standing in Gilbert's photo has since been demolished. The local inhabitants attributed its disappearance to the Germans during the war but in actuality it was the Greek Byzantinist archaeologist Orlandos who removed it to "purify" the church of its later non-Greek accretions. Now, of course, such an addition would be considered as part of the architectural history integral to the monument.

Young Gilbert had arrived in Athens with letters of introduction from his influential friends back in Rome. So by day Gilbert studied archaeology around Greece, but by night he socialised with the elite of Athenian society, the politicians out of power and the wives of politicians in power. This facilitated Gilbert's secret identity as a foreign correspondent writing anonymous political articles for the *Morning Post* newspaper in London. Within six weeks after his arrival in Greece, he attended a gala celebration with Greek King Constantine in this downtown mansion of one of the richest families in Greece.

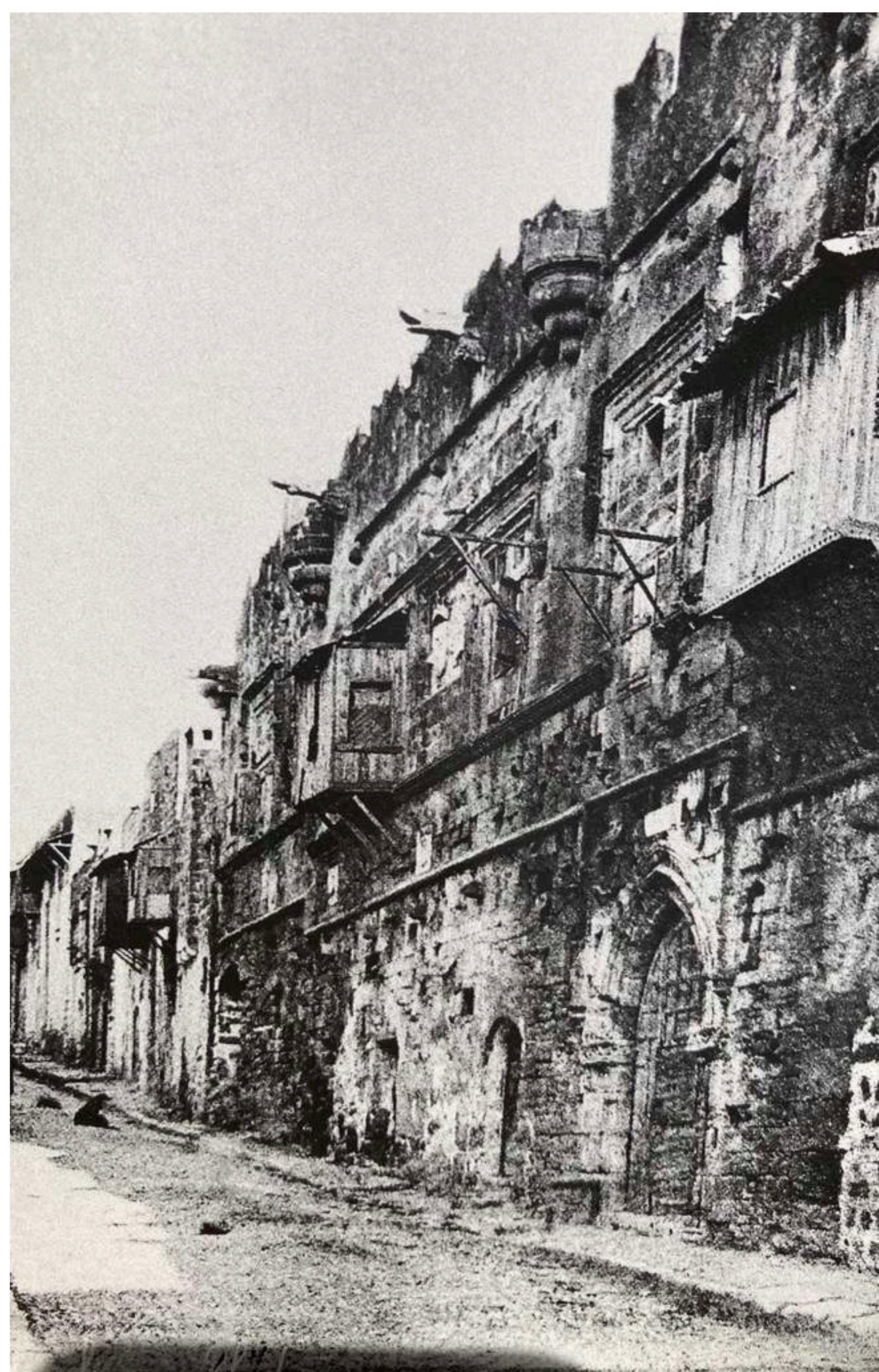


Gilbert's connections with the Italian authorities beyond archaeology are not yet clear. Vincenzo Fago stopped by the Italian School and met Gilbert at dinner. Fago was not only an internationally recognised librarian but also the official Italian agent in south-eastern Anatolia who had covertly arranged for Italian military supplies to be shipped to the Turks. His purpose in stopping at the Italian School of Archaeology remains mysterious.

At a dinner party with a Parisian banker, everyone was surprised that Gilbert knew of Basil Zaharoff, the "mystery man of Europe," who had become very wealthy by selling armaments to both sides of warring conflicts, the archetype of Bernard Shaw's arms merchant.



In the Dodecanese, the Crusader castles captivated Gilbert as evidence of western culture in the East. After seizing the Dodecanese from the Turks in 1912, the Italians had started to restore the extensive castle walls and the Palace of the Grand Masters on Rhodes. Gilbert was enthralled by the well-preserved buildings and streets of the old town of the Knights Hospitaller of St. John on Rhodes, “almost entirely western in character.” The city had changed little since the Knights of St. John surrendered after a six month siege in 1522. They were allowed to take their treasures with them and were eventually relocated on the island of Malta, where an ancestor of Gilbert’s was buried among the later Knights.





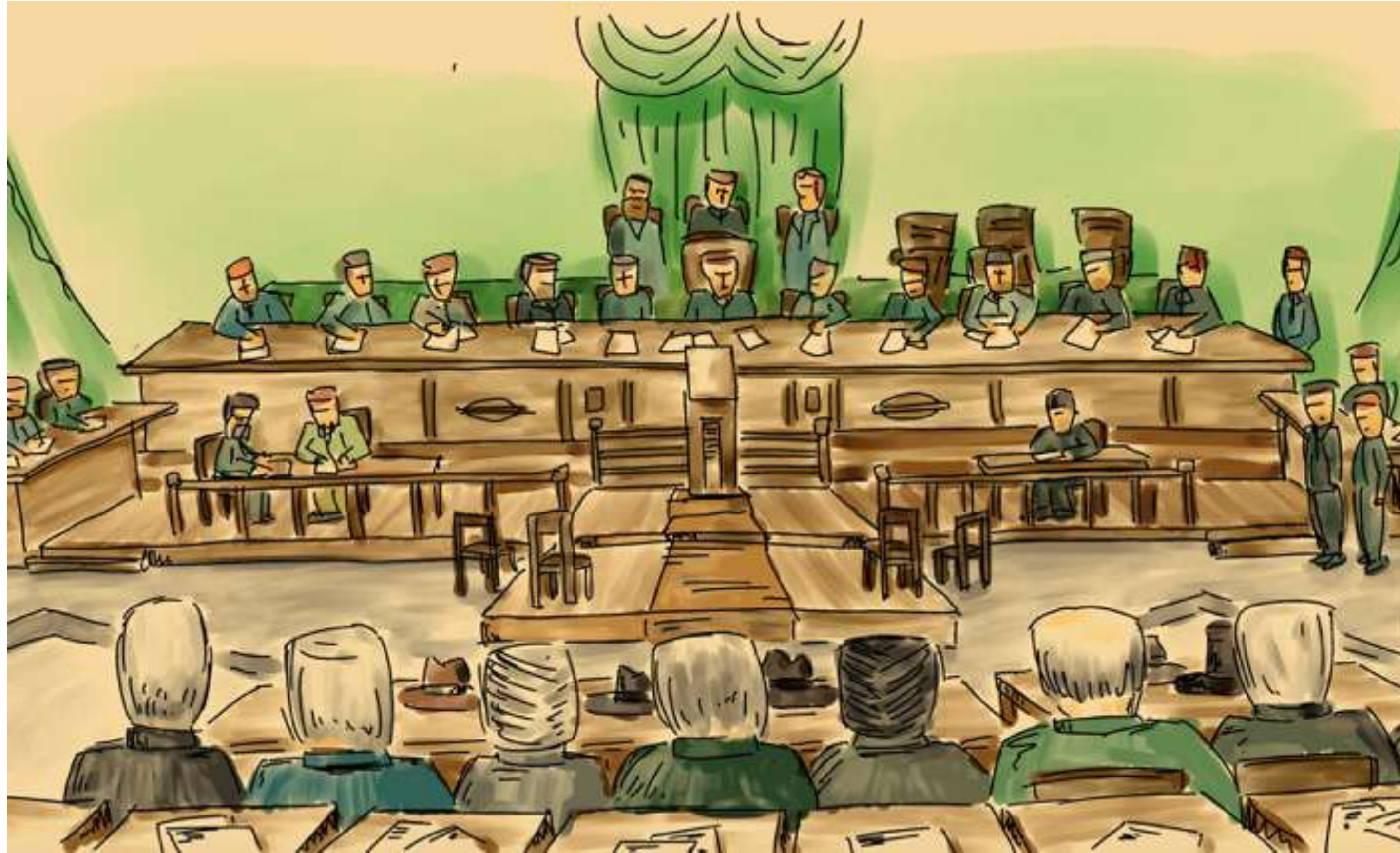
The summer of 1922 was one of the hottest on record. Gilbert was compelled to sail to Crete to visit the Italian excavations at Phaistos and Gortyn. The distinctive Minoan culture had disappeared suddenly c. 1450 BCE, leaving only the largest city of Knossos in control. Excavated and partly restored by Sir Arthur Evans, the remains struck Gilbert as “too much Evans, too little Minos!” By the time Gilbert reached the south coast of Crete with temperatures over 50, he nearly had a breakdown suffering from sunstroke.



On the west coast of Turkey, Smyrna was the largest exporting city in the Ottoman Empire. Out of about 400,000 inhabitants, its economic life was dominated by Greeks, Armenians, Italians and Levantines. On July 12, 1922, Gilbert sailed there to visit the brother of the Bagnani's maid there, and took this photo, one of the last ever taken before the fire.



Hundreds of miles inland the Greek army had occupied central Anatolia since 1919, but in late August 1922 the Turkish Armies under Gen. Kemal routed the overstretched Greek armies, which scattered and fled to the west coast. Beginning September 13, the Greek and Armenian sections of Smyrna were torched and tens of thousands were killed, trapped between the inferno and the water. The international ships out in the bay were under orders not to intervene in the Greek-Turkish conflict until, only after hours of inaction, finally one British admiral disobeyed orders and began to send boats to rescue the frantic masses.



A million Greek Christian refugees either fled or were later forcibly expelled from Turkey after three thousand years of occupation there.

Across the Aegean Sea back in Athens a military coup forced King Constantine into exile and, after a hurried show trial, executed half a dozen politicians, whom Gilbert knew, and imprisoned two generals, whom Gilbert later interviewed despite the danger.





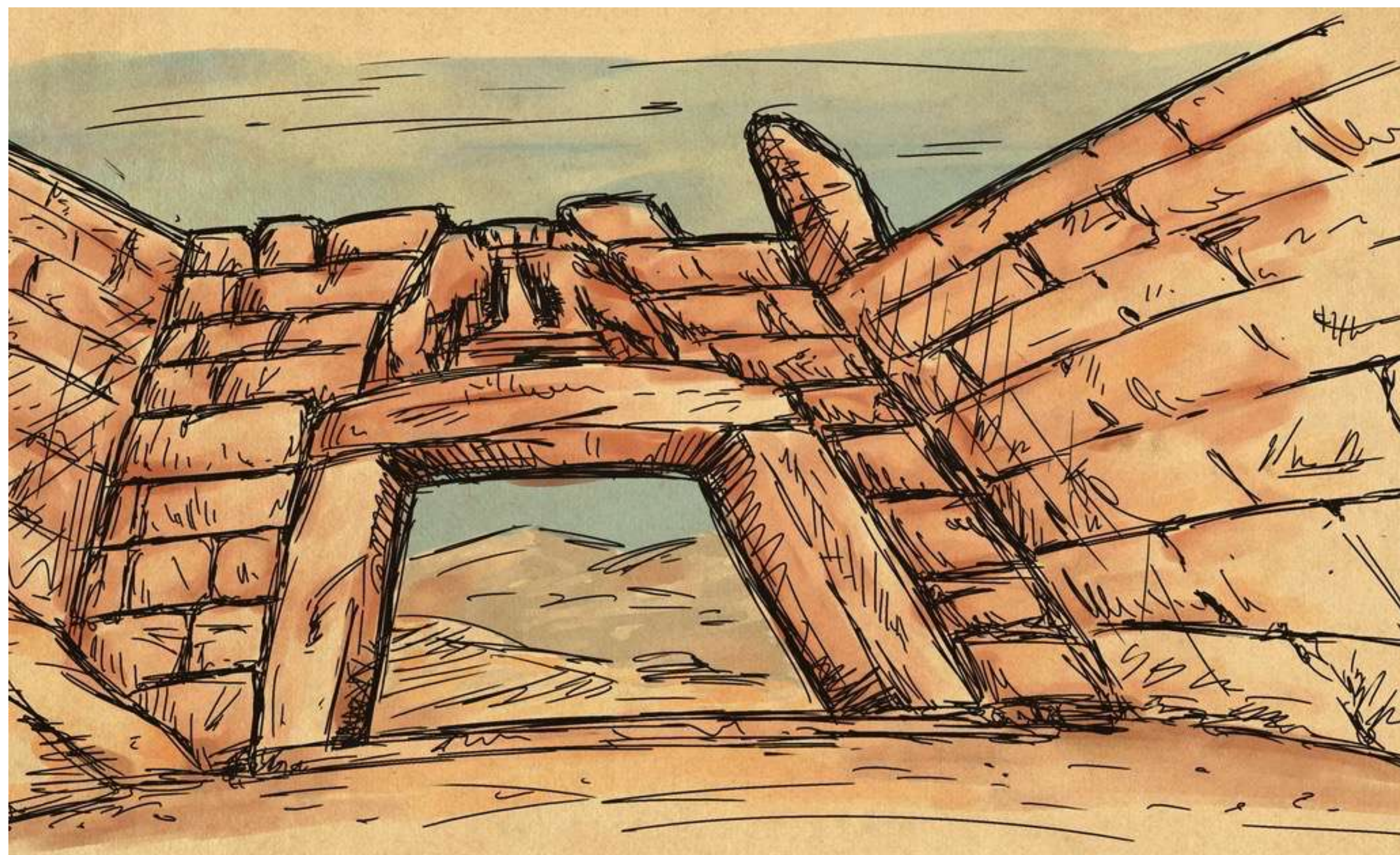
Prince Andrew, a brother of exiled King Constantine, was arrested and sentenced only to permanent exile, thanks to very secret negotiations with British agents. He surreptitiously sailed away from Athens on a British warship with his wife Princess Alice. They stopped only briefly at the island of Corfu on the west coast to pick up their four daughters and eighteen month old son, Prince Philip.



In a letter dated February 1923, while mentioning Egypt Gilbert wrote "How dreadful Allan's murder" with no other reference. After several years of sleuthing I finally identified this as Travers Allan, a grandson of Sir High Allan, one of the richest men in Canada. He had traveled to Egypt to witness the excavation of Tut's tomb with his cousin, James Allan, a friend of Gilbert's who lived in Rome. One evening during his nightly stroll he was robbed and murdered on the outskirts of Luxor.



When Gilbert returned to Greece in January 1923 for his second year there, his political worlds had utterly changed; Gen. Kemal was in complete charge of Turkey, a military junta ruled Greece, Mussolini had taken power in Italy and British Prime Minister Lloyd George had been thrown out of office. In Greece the socio-economic change was profound: the Aegean islands, Athens and Salonika were filled with destitute women and children as refugees sheltered in schools, churches, theatres and ramshackle huts.



Gilbert's mother Florence and a family acquaintance, Verschoyle Blake, visited Gilbert in Greece in March - April 1923. Verschoyle's letters help make up for the absence of Gilbert's letters to his mother at this time. They visited the remains at Mycenae, the cultural successor to the Minoans on Crete. Only years later was it proven that the Mycenaeans on the Greek mainland spoke Greek.

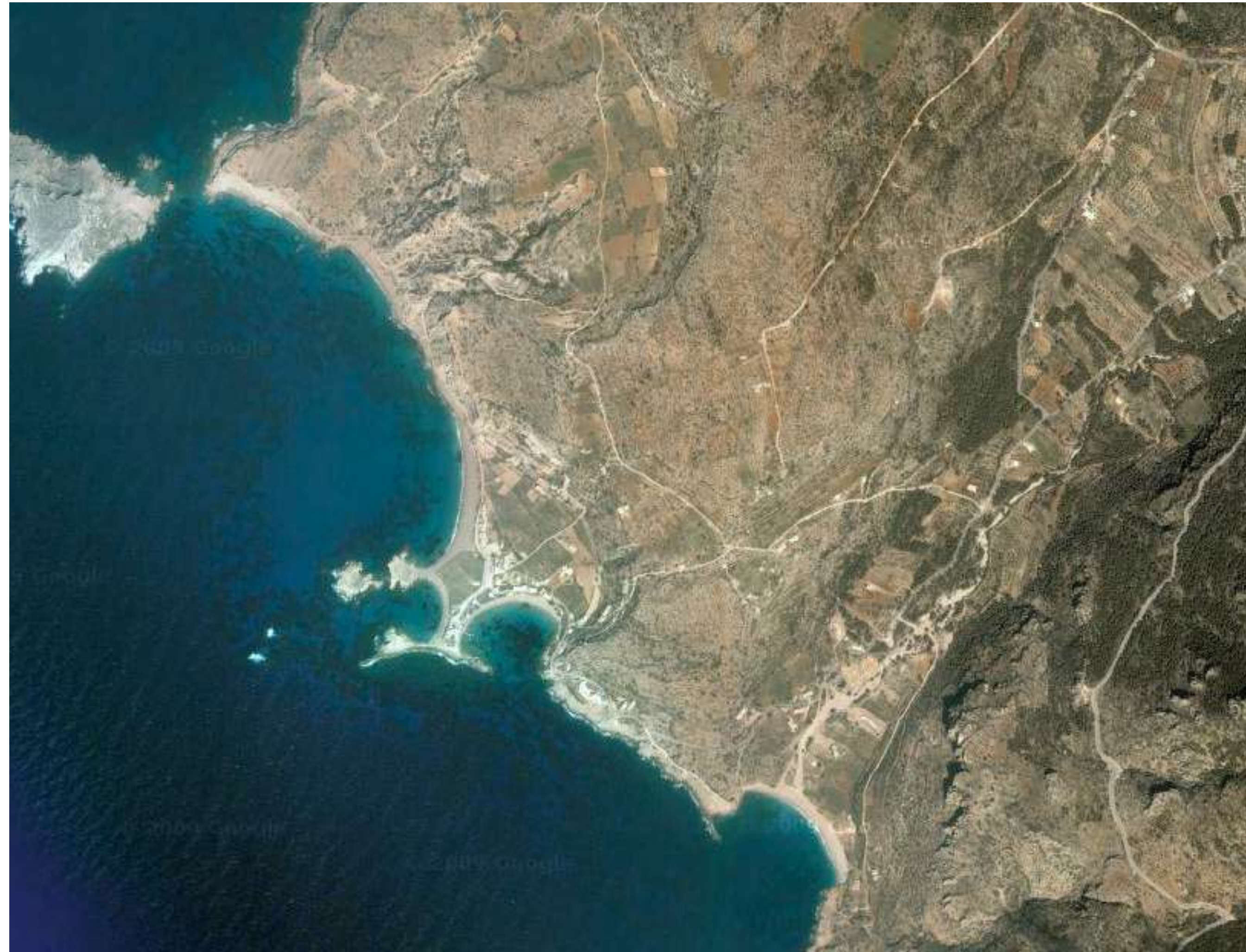


In northern Greece there is a peninsula jutting out into the Aegean Sea. For over a thousand years Mt Athos has been a semi-independent theocratic state consisting of about two dozen fortified Orthodox monasteries in which monks continue to live a Byzantine lifestyle. Gilbert visited a few to these like Iviron, whose library has the largest collection of ancient Byzantine music in the world. He enjoyed the life there and hoped to return but never did.



In June 1923, Gilbert explored and excavated on the island of Karpathos between Crete and Rhodes and discerned the traces of a city at Leukos on the west coast. After discovering Gilbert's unpublished report on it at the Italian School, I initiated four seasons of an international survey at Leukos and the off-shore islet of Sokastro from 2008 to 2011 with the support of the Canadian Institute in Greece.

Briefly, the remains around the harbour are Late Roman/Early Byzantine and the remains on Socastro are Middle Byzantine.



Gilbert suggested that the remains were of the lost city of Nisyros mentioned by Strabo, although most scholars located Nisyros on another island. On this sketch of a medieval map of Karpathos can be read “paleo nisiro,” ancient Nisyros. This is evidence unknown to Gilbert and supports his proposed identification.







In August 1923 the newly ensconced Italian dictator Mussolini bombarded and occupied the island of Corfu along Greece's west coast and Gilbert was asked by the Italian Ambassador in Athens to check out the rail lines along the Gulf of Corinth. Gilbert commented that he was amused to have been asked to "spy" for his country. So as a cover he went on a hiking expedition with two Greek friends to explore the so-called source of the River Styx, a waterfall in Arcadia but in legend the entrance to the underworld. It so happens that this part of Greece also has underground lakes.

In 1924 Gilbert was officially sent on a mission to Turkey and stayed at the Italian embassy in Constantinople, where he finally had an opportunity to explore the remains of the capital of the Byzantine Empire. It was probably not a coincidence that at the same time there was an international conference taking place in Constantinople between the Turks and British negotiating over who should get the oil fields around Mosul in Iraq. Indeed, several western countries were competing to sign contracts for oil with Kemal's Turkey.





Gilbert sailed east cross the Black Sea to Trebizond and proceeded inland to what had been Armenia, passing by the recently abandoned Greek monastery of Sumela embedded high up in the cliffs. He then crossed the Russian border to Batumi in Georgia, once the legendary land of the Golden Fleece, but now the source of oil, whose military significance increased greatly during and after WWI. He wrote a final article about the prospects for war between Turkey and Russia before returning to Constantinople and home.

Gilbert's weekly letters from Greece to his mother in Rome reveal his Odyssey-like adventures on a voyage of discovery through the origins of western civilisation. As an archaeologist in Greece, he travelled through time seeing history repeat itself: Minoan Knossos, Byzantine Constantinople and Ottoman Smyrna were all violently destroyed, but the survivors escaped to the new worlds respectively of Mycenaean Greece, Renaissance Venice and modern Greece.

AD 1922  
Destruction of Smyrna

AD 1834  
Greece declares Independence form Ottoman Empire

AD 1522  
Siege of Rhodes

AD 1453  
Capture of Constantinople by Ottoman Turks

AD 1204  
Capture of Constantinople by 4th Crusaders

AD 330  
Founding of Constantinople

31 BC  
Last Roman Civil War at Actium

479 BC  
Final Defeat of the Persian invasions at Salamis and Plataia

776 BC  
Olympic Games and advent of Greek alphabet

1200 BC  
End of Mycenaean and Hittite Societies

1400  
BC Destruction of Knossos

1600 BC  
Minoan Civilization and Eruption of Santorini volcano

c. 3000 BC  
Late Neolithic Athens

xix

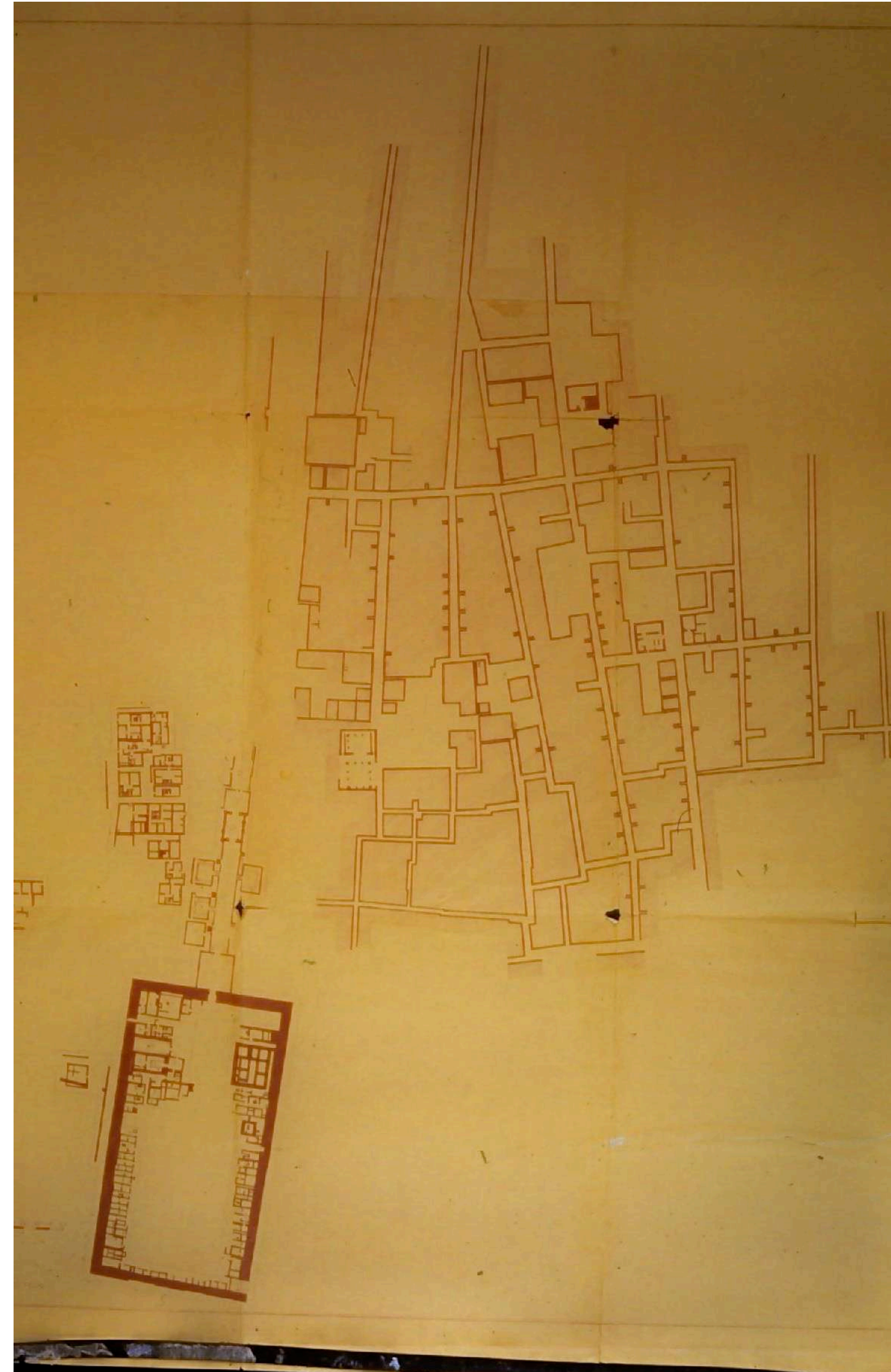


Settled back home in Rome, in December 1924 Gilbert met Mary Augusta Stewart Huston, a descendant of one of the most distinguished families in Ontario. They travelled separately around Europe and North America until they married in Toronto in June 1929.

In 1930 Gilbert was invited by the Classical archaeologist Carlo Anti, an old acquaintance, to join him as his Egyptological assistant, excavating at the site of the Graeco-Roman town of Tebtunis, about three hours southwest of Cairo. With his facility for languages, Gilbert quickly learned not only to read ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and hieratic but also to speak modern Arabic fluently.



In 1931 Anti and Bagnani discovered a complete sanctuary with the priests' houses and workshops intact, its vestibule lined with a sculpted frieze, and a mass of papyri once belonging to the temple library, each discovery unique in Egypt. It was the find of a lifetime and, if they had ever published it, their names would have been as well known to Egyptologists as Howard Carter's, who discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun.



Gilbert's wife Stewart joined him on the dig in 1932. Her letters to her mother are an additional treasure trove for ethnographers. She described living with the Bedouin and how their habits differed from the local Egyptian fellahin.

At the end of this season, Carlo Anti was promoted to being the Rector of the University of Padua and left Gilbert in charge of the excavations until 1936. Anti's archival papers have recently been rediscovered in Venice as well as in Padua. Several years ago Italian scholars contacted me to collaborate with them on researching and publishing the Egyptian excavations at Tebtunis.





Gilbert's interest in photography led him to arrange for a series of aerial photos to be taken over the site in 1934 and 1936. The nearly four dozen photos are a unique documentation of an excavation at that time and illustrate buildings no longer preserved.



1935 was a pivotal year for both Gilbert and Stewart as both their mothers died unexpectedly, after which their letters and our sources of information cease. Since Mussolini was threatening to seize the overseas assets of Italian citizens, Gilbert and Stewart decided to immigrate to Canada, in particular to Port Hope, where Gilbert's Canadian mother had been born.





Gilbert bought a cattle farm and enlarged the already large farm house with a new wing to accommodate and display his library and art collection. Vogrie became an English country house in the backwoods of Ontario where guests would be dazzled by conversation surrounded by rare books, medieval and pioneer artifacts, Baroque and modern art.

During the war, as a resident alien Gilbert was not allowed to travel far from home without permission. In 1945, however, he was invited by Gilbert Norwood to teach in the Classics Department at the University of Toronto, where he remained for the next two decades, until retiring from there in 1965. It was while at the University of Toronto that Gilbert taught Tom Symons and was also his neighbour.





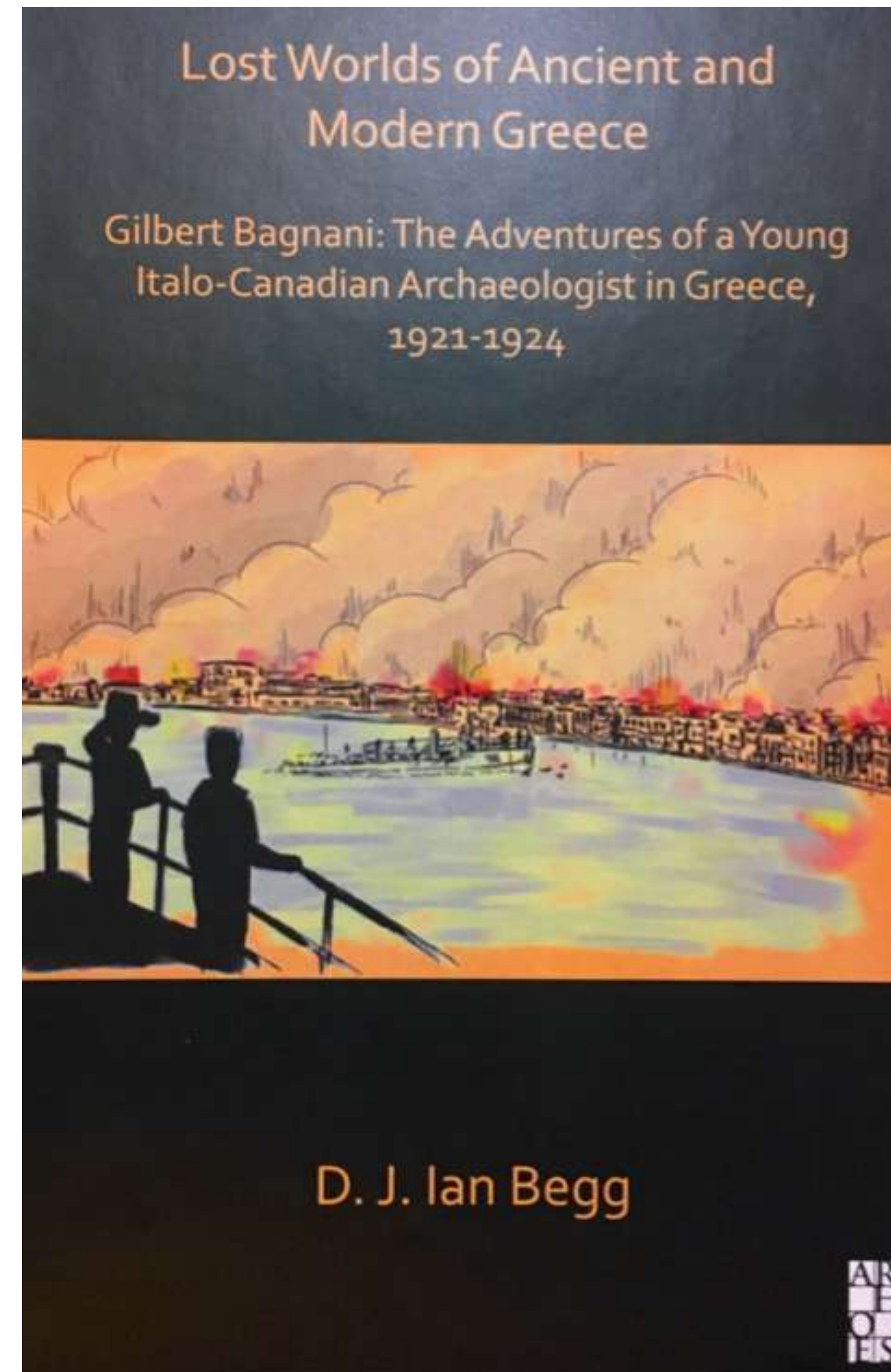
Gilbert never returned to his unfinished Egyptian writings and obligations, but began studying Petronius Arbiter, the Neronian author of the Satyricon. Through this latter pursuit, Gilbert was selected to join the Royal Society of Canada.

After Gilbert's retirement from Toronto, Professor Symons invited Gilbert and Stewart to teach part-time at then new Trent University. Gilbert died in February 1985, leaving his papers and property to Trent. Trent established scholarships and built Bagnani Hall in his memory.

In summary, the archival papers of Gilbert and Stewart Bagnani at Trent and the AGO document their early lives before they immigrated to Ontario in 1936-37 and subdivide neatly into three distinct chronological and geographic parts: the early 1920s, when Gilbert was a student of archaeology in Greece; the late 1920s when he and Stewart travelled around Italy, Europe and North America until they married in Toronto in 1929; and the 1930s when Gilbert excavated in Egypt and travelled in Europe.

*Lost Worlds of Ancient and Modern Greece* is intended to be the first volume in a trilogy of the Bagnanis' early lives in Europe and Egypt based on their letters. I also choose to think of their archives as another part of their legacy worthy of publication.

Thank you



As an addendum, at a traditional book launch the author would be present to sign copies of the newly purchased books. Although the signing cannot happen, the publisher has nevertheless asked me to mention that Archaeopress is offering a 20% book launch discount off the cover price of the book through the use of the code: BH2021 at their website: [www.archaeopress.com](http://www.archaeopress.com)

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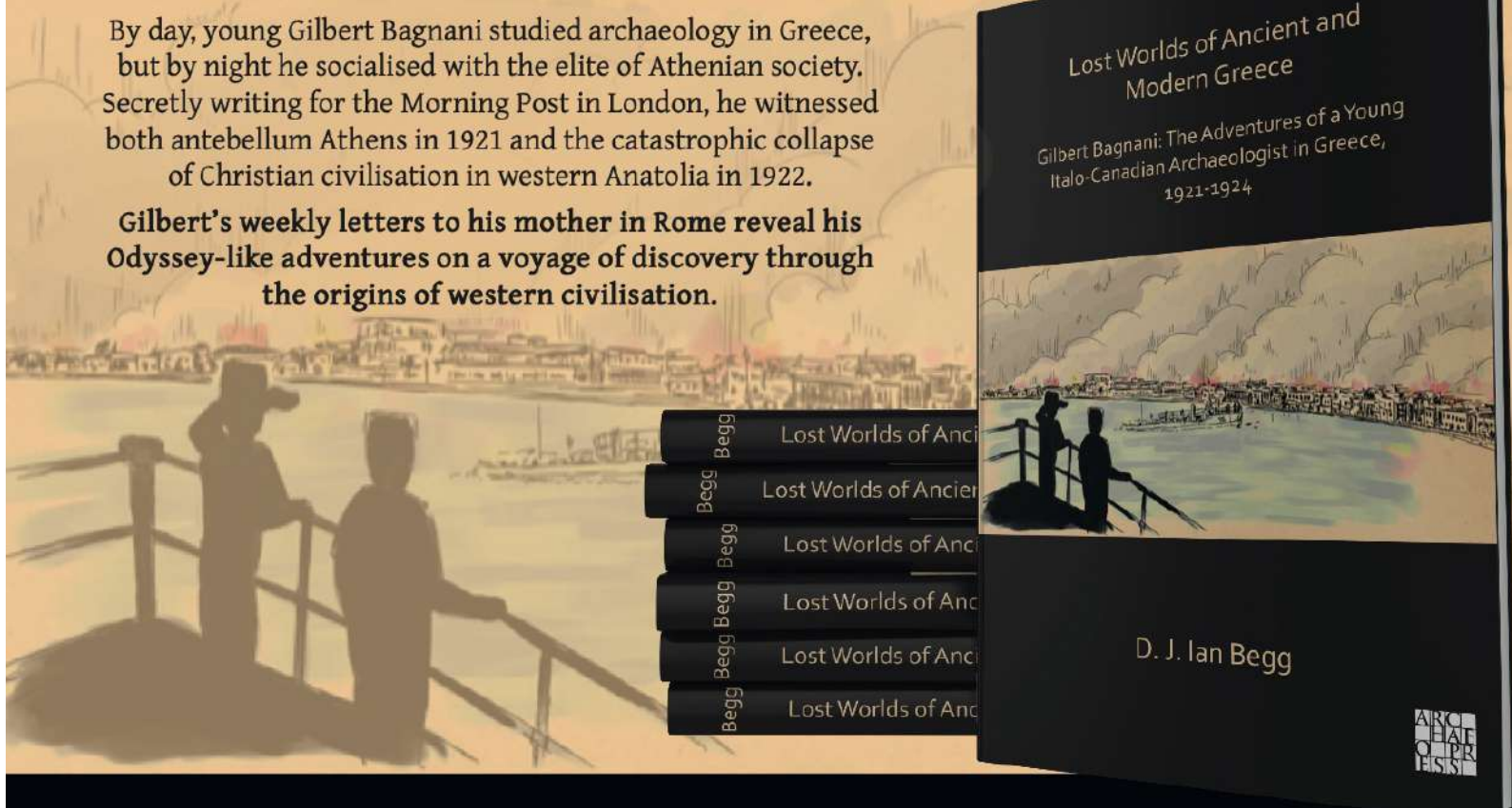
## Lost Worlds of Ancient and Modern Greece

### Gilbert Bagnani: The Adventures of a Young Italian Archaeologist in Greece, 1921-1924

D. J. Ian Begg

By day, young Gilbert Bagnani studied archaeology in Greece, but by night he socialised with the elite of Athenian society. Secretly writing for the Morning Post in London, he witnessed both antebellum Athens in 1921 and the catastrophic collapse of Christian civilisation in western Anatolia in 1922.

Gilbert's weekly letters to his mother in Rome reveal his Odyssey-like adventures on a voyage of discovery through the origins of western civilisation.



Bagnani and Begg paint sparkling pen pictures of personalities such as Bosdari, the Italian ambassador during the Great War, Prince Demidoff the Russian ambassador, Harold Lamb the British Consul at Smyrna and family... Gilbert emerges as clever, sometimes arrogant, fascinated by people especially from high society, and with a weakness for royalty. Begg does him justice in [this] lively account of a formidable personality, scholar and archaeologist in the making.

— *Sir Michael Llewellyn Smith, British Ambassador to Greece 1996-99*

Gilbert Bagnani, of Italian and Canadian extraction, arrived in Greece at the age of 21, ostensibly to study Greek Archaeology and participate in fieldwork... However, secretly, he was sending well-informed reports on the dynamic political situation in Greece and between Greece and Turkey to a London newspaper, while later spying for Mussolini. This first of three volumes, based on his personal letters and news reports, covers the momentous years from 1921-1924, which witnessed the disastrous failure of the Greek invasion of Western Turkey, the sack of Smyrna, a military coup and executions in Greece... Informative, excellently-edited and a delight to read. — *Professor John Bintliff, Edinburgh University*

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