

The Peloponnese

written by Marcus | 29 December, 2014



While travelling through Eastern Europe we've brushed up on a lot of our knowledge of modern history so have a much better idea of how all these countries have changed shape over the past decades. I'm not sure I'd be any more capable of remembering the date lines that Mr Symonds used to try and get us to learn back in junior school but in rough terms we've got a fair idea what has happened. Now we're in Greece it's time to think back to my Classics and Latin lessons with Mr Hooper as we've started to see some familiar names like Mycenea, Sparta and Argos cropping up on the map that until now only existed in my ancient history books.



Friendly grasshopper

Back on the mainland after the ferry from Kefalonia and straight away we start to see brown signs on almost every road to indicate an ancient some-thing-other or a very important historical place-you-must-see. The country is full of artefacts, bits of column, statues, carvings, temples at every turn so it would take a while to stop and look at every single one. We've decided to pick Olympia to visit as fans of the modern interpretation of the Olympic Games it will be great to see where it all began 2,500 years ago.

On our way we stop at Lidl for supplies in Pyrgos. Make no mistake it's not Tesco that is taking over Europe it's the Germans as the big yellow and blue signs have been one of the few constants in almost all the countries we've been to so far. They're also a meeting place for anyone shopping on a budget so it's no surprise to find another couple of cycle tourists just coming out. Irma and Or have ridden from Spain

on bikes and with kit they've acquired for free and are travelling with barely any cash and aiming for Or's home country of Israel. What's more remarkable is that they also have another companion in the form of Bemba the dog who rides in an improvised trailer. Apparently the Alps had been particularly difficult for them through Bemba does get out and walk on the hills. Like everyone else they're heading across the Peloponnese then onto Crete but hope to hitch a lift on a fishing boat to save on the cost of the ferry. This sounds optimistic but if they've got this far then they must have confidence in their blagging abilities.



Or, Irma and Bemba

An hour after Pyrgos we pass a sign telling us it's 2km to Olympia, followed 100m later by another saying it's now 1km. The distances on Greek road signs seem to be measured with an accuracy of +/- 5km so after 2km it's no surprise that we're still riding up a hill with no sign of Olympia. What is

surprising is that the bike has started bouncing gently up and down at the back. This could be either a dodgy, undulating road surface or there's a problem with the wheel. It turns out to be the wheel as the tyre wall has torn and caused a bulge that could burst at any second. It's the cheap tyre that we bought as a temporary fix way back in Lithuania so to be fair it's done remarkably well to get this far but now it's beyond repair and we have to walk the remaining 2km into Olympia. It's not a big town but when we ask if there's anywhere to buy bike tyres we're directed down the road 'about 500m'. 1km later we're still walking and ask for directions at a petrol station where we're told there's a shop in another 1km. 1km later we flag down a cyclist who might have a better idea and he tells us the nearest place for bike parts is Pyrgos, now 18km away.



Dead tyre

It would be a tedious walk with the bike and we wouldn't get

there before the shops shut so I leave Kirsty to hide behind a church and get the tent set up and stick out my thumb for a lift. No joy after half an hour so I ask a nearby hotel to call a cab and in under an hour I'm back at the tent with a brand new tyre ready to fit. Adding in the taxi fare it's the most expensive cheap tyre I've had to buy but with it being a Monday most shops were shut so I had to get whatever was available there and then. Luckily the taxi driver had had a heavy right foot, knew where all the bike shops were and even lent me the cash to pay for the tyre until we passed a cash machine on the way back to Olympia. Another case of what could have been a major disaster in another location was just a bit of an inconvenience here.



The church has a tap alongside that could well be dispensing holy water so the next morning we fill up our bottles and hope it brings better luck. The site of Ancient Olympia is fascinating and we get the chance to race in the very first

Olympic stadium (Kirsty wins). There's no sign or mention of the velodrome though, or the sponsors enclosures or even the room that would have served as the volunteer's canteen but I expect these are all yet to be uncovered.



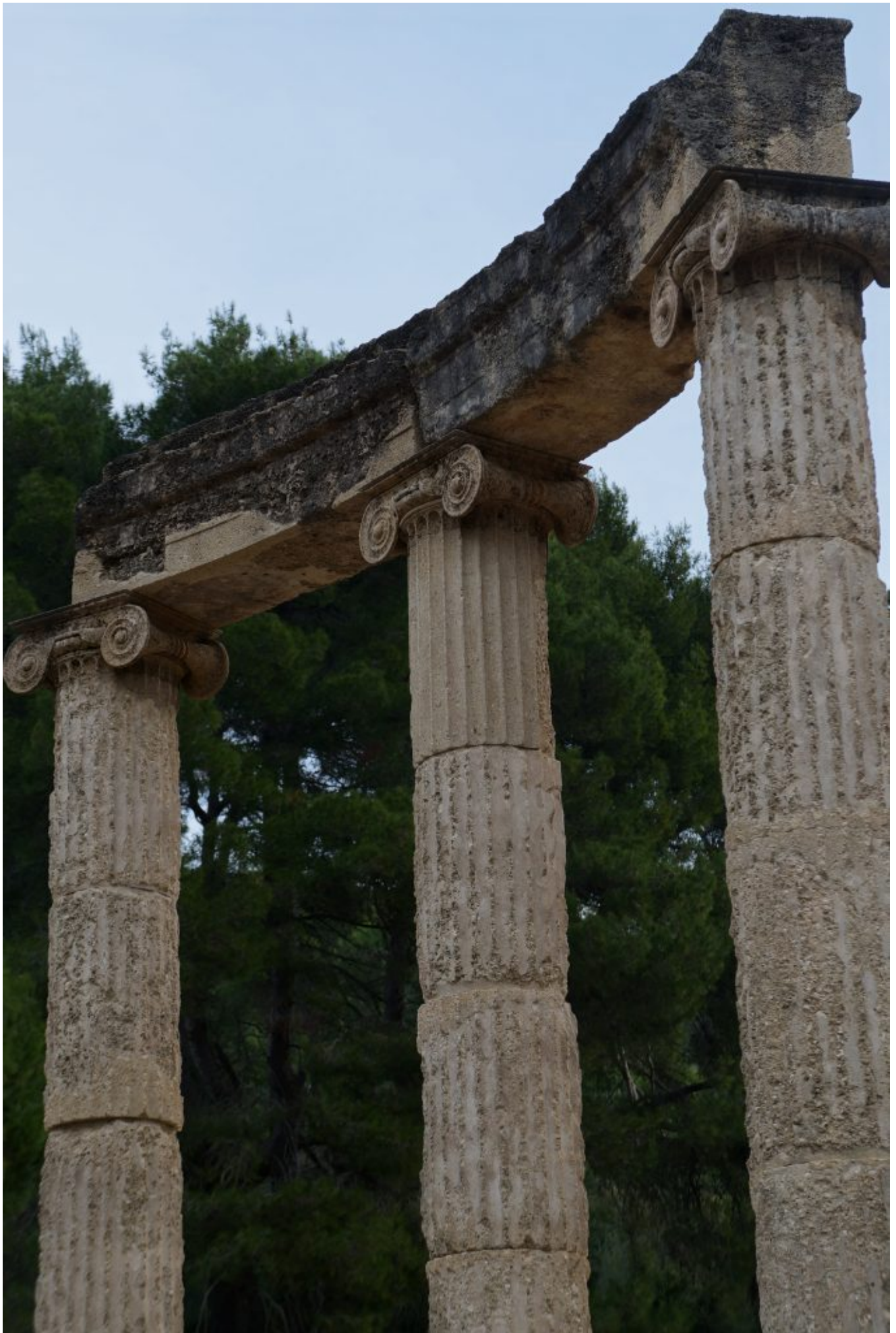
The original Olympic Stadium



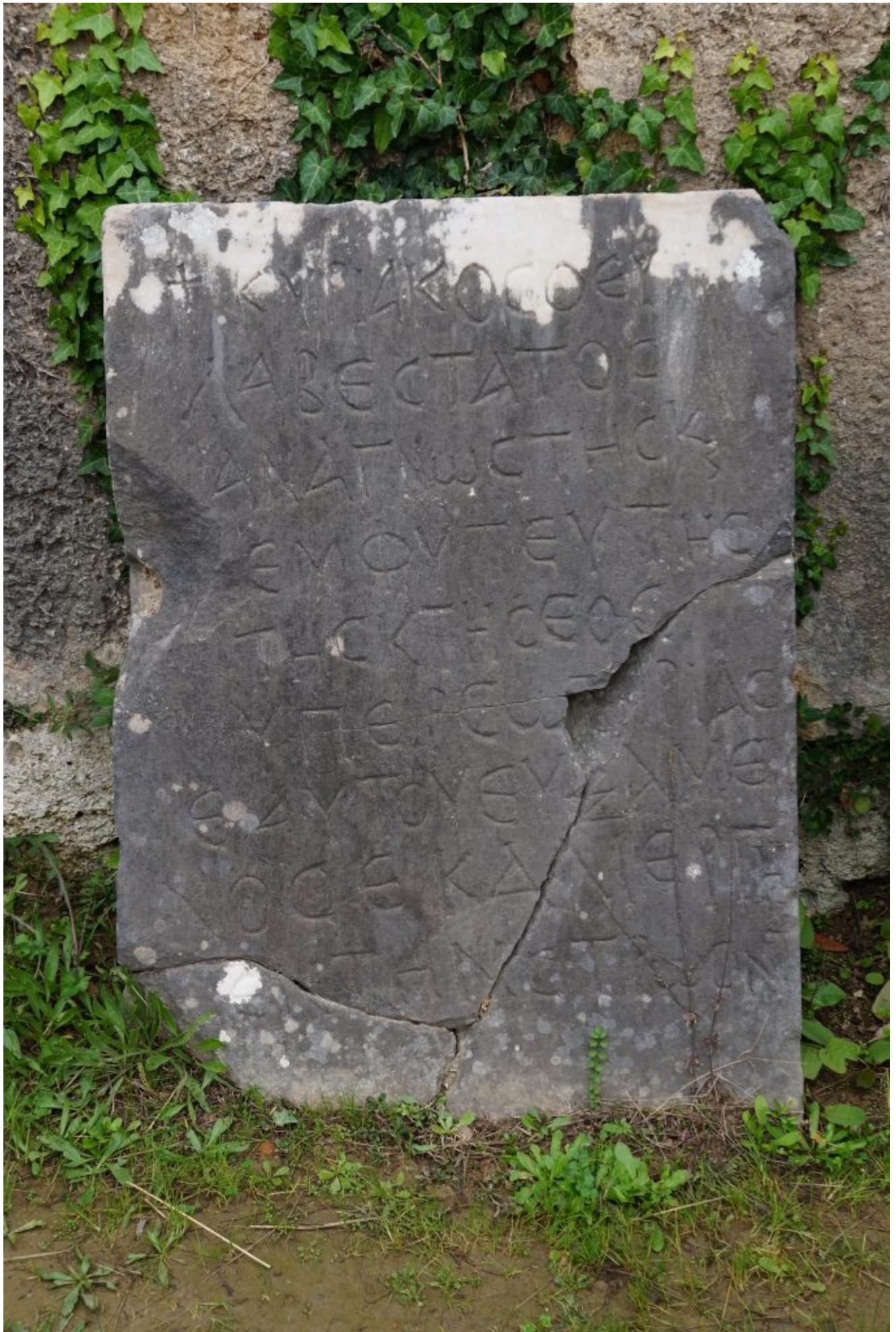
On your marks!



Ancient Olympia



Ancient Olympia



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Ancient Olympia



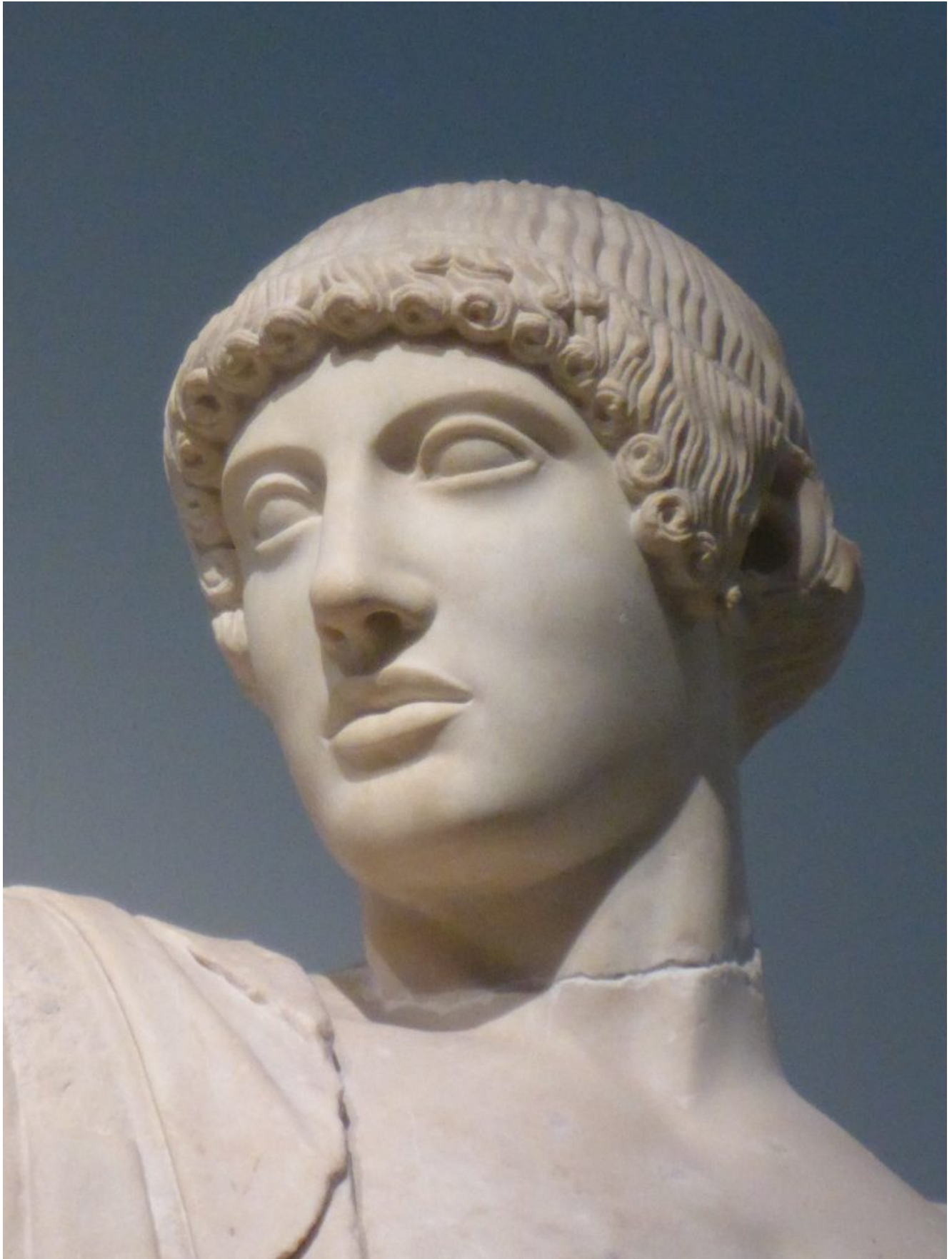
Museum of Olympia



Still some digging to be done



Museum of Olympia



Museum of Olympia

After lunch we bump into Irma, Or and Bemba who have taken a day to cover the 20km from Pyrgos so have a slightly more

sedate travelling pace than us.

Not far out of Olympia we set up camp in an orange orchard and gorge on freshly picked fruit. We're also becoming addicted to fresh sheeps yoghurt and greek honey with the honey inevitably being used on our porridge each morning too. But we must have made the gods angry as the rumble of thunder overnight and heavy rain indicate that Zeus is unhappy. He allows some respite with enough time to pack the tent in the morning before the rain starts again and carries on all day.



Angry gods, angry sea

We keep moving to keep warm and head back to the coast and follow it for 40km before turning inland again and into some rolling hills. It would have been very picturesque if it wasn't masked in grey clouds and yet more rain.



Sheltering at a church for lunch

Just before we stop to set up camp in an olive grove the rain stops and the sun comes out so we get to see the wonderful evening light on the mountains at last.



Palm avenue

There's more of the wet stuff in the night but again it stops just long enough for us to get packed up in the morning and dash to the nearest petrol station with a convenient cafe attached. The sky looks very ominous and as we're due to climb quite high that day we decide to wait for the impending storm to pass before setting off again.

It proves a sensible decision as there's plenty of thunder and lightning accompanied by heavy rain for the next 2 hours and it would have been no fun being on the side of a mountain in those conditions. Unfortunately we've run out of cash and like a lot of places in Greece the cafe doesn't take cards so we have to sit in the corner and hope they won't mind. But the staff eventually feel sorry enough for us to bring us some tea on the house which is just what we need.

The storm passes and blue sky follows so we crack on with the

climb. It's steady for most of the way before we drop down to the town of Megalopolis. Not as impressive as it's name might suggest but a convenient spot for lunch and we watch some workers busy with a cherry picker hanging Christmas lights. This is the week before Christmas so they clearly don't like to get into the Christmas spirit quite as early as in the UK round here.





After the storm

There's more climbing after lunch and then we drop onto a plateau at just over 700m above sea level to find our highest camp spot to date.

In the morning the tent flap swings open like a frozen door. There's been a heavy frost and as the tent is sopping wet from the previous nights it was very cold inside and out. The condensation that drips from the ceiling, a common problem with Hilleberg tents, did little to help.



Frozen camp site



Frosty saddles



As any physicist will tell you, for every 100m of height gain the temperature drops by 0.5 – 1 degree so while it was a pleasant temperature lower down, up here it sank below zero

overnight. Thankfully as soon as the sun peeps over the mountains things warm up and dry off quickly. We've also got another climb to haul ourselves up which gets the blood pumping to all extremities.

Once over the top we get a great view of dense clouds sat just below us then we zoom down into them on our way to Tripolis, lunch stop then out the other side and inevitably more mountain roads.



Above the clouds



Riding back into the hills





This time the huge rock cliff faces are being lit by the setting sun and we get treated to some amazing colours on all sides of the steep valley.



Sunset in the mountains





The road tops out at 800m and we're keen to lose as much altitude as possible this time before pitching the tent. It's a lovely swooping road at a shallow gradient with long corners allowing the brakes to stay off and the speed to pick up. At 50kph I often wonder what would happen if we punctured and the answer is that the back of the bike starts to squirm, it's hard to steer and all the brakes need to be applied to bring us to a controlled stop to avoid disappearing over the edge of the mountain. The brand new but cheap rear tyre has less puncture protection and has just proved it's not really designed for this sort of hardship. We're still over 500m above sea level but are conveniently next to a nice flat patch of grass so as the light is fading fast we decide to pitch up there and then fix the tyre in the morning.

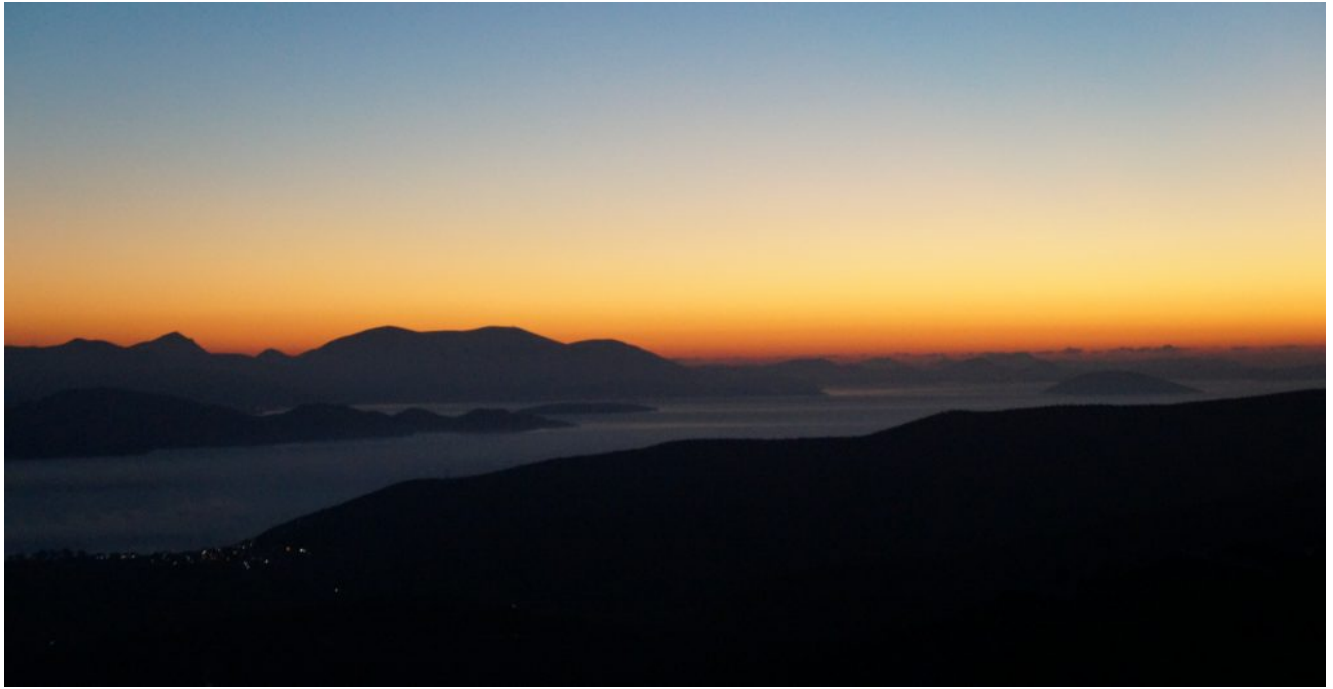
There are a few rocks lying around so it's entirely possible this is the site of some kind of ancient monument. I pick up what could well be the remains of a valuable artefact and use

it to knock in the pegs.



View of Argos from the tent

It's a much warmer evening than the previous night and in the morning while fixing the tyre I get to enjoy a glorious sunrise over the bay of Argos below. Annoyingly an important bolt that holds the cable for the drag brake goes missing amongst the stones, gorse bushes and goat droppings and despite a lengthy search it stays hidden.



Sunrise over the bay of Argos



Campsite near Argos at dawn



Puncture repair with a view

With only the rim brakes to rely on, the descent is taken carefully which is fortunate as we pick up another puncture part way down, this time thanks to a rogue shard of glass. The front tyre has been fine which shows that Schwalbe Marathons are worth the extra cost.

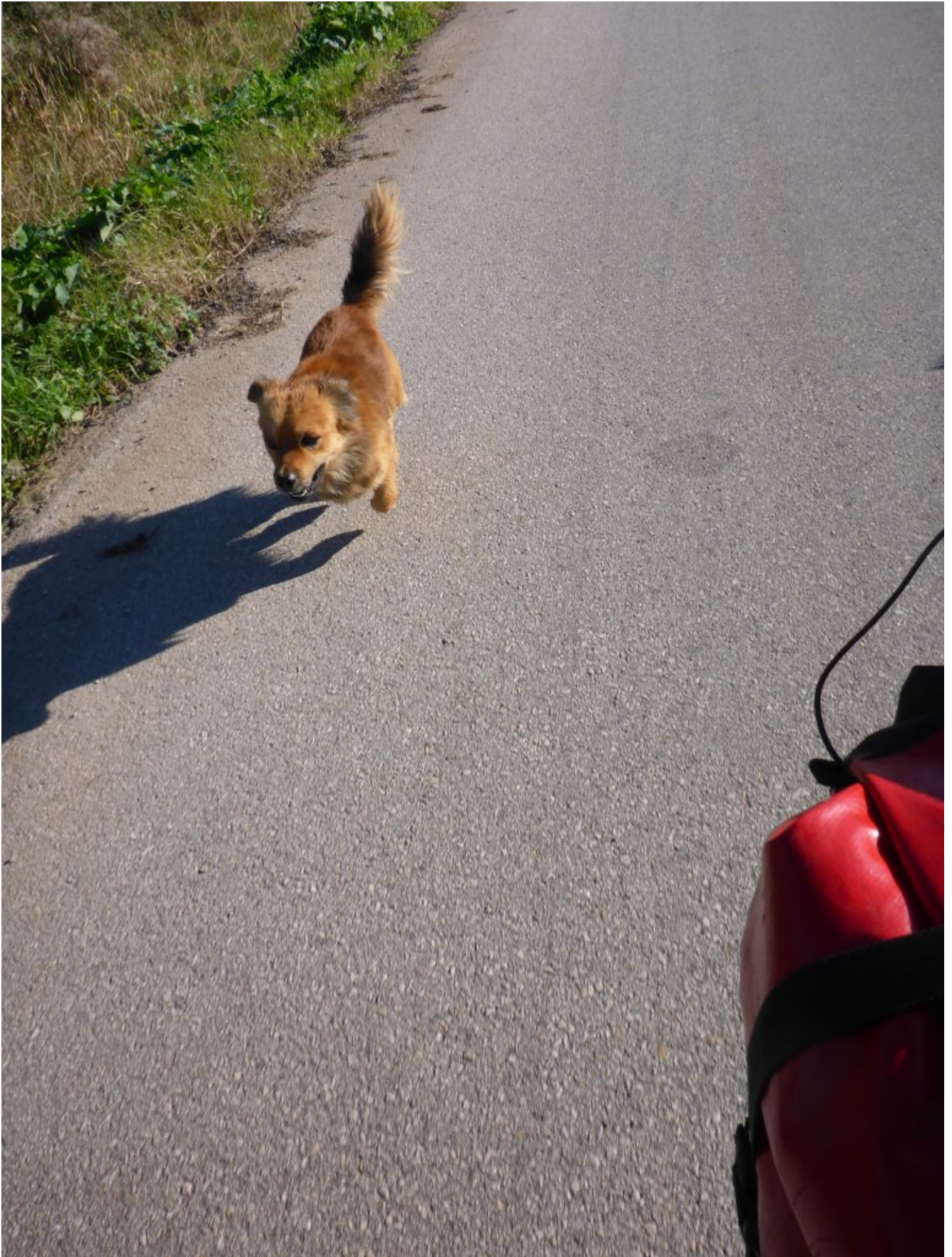


Roadside Shrine

It gets fixed and this time we make it down to the sea and on to Argos to find a bike shop. The bolt we need for the drum brake is not a common bike part so my expectations of finding a replacement are low but 5 minutes after stopping at the very first shop we find the owner has dug out exactly what we need, fitted it and sent us on our way. You really can buy anything in Argos!



Heron in the bay of Argos



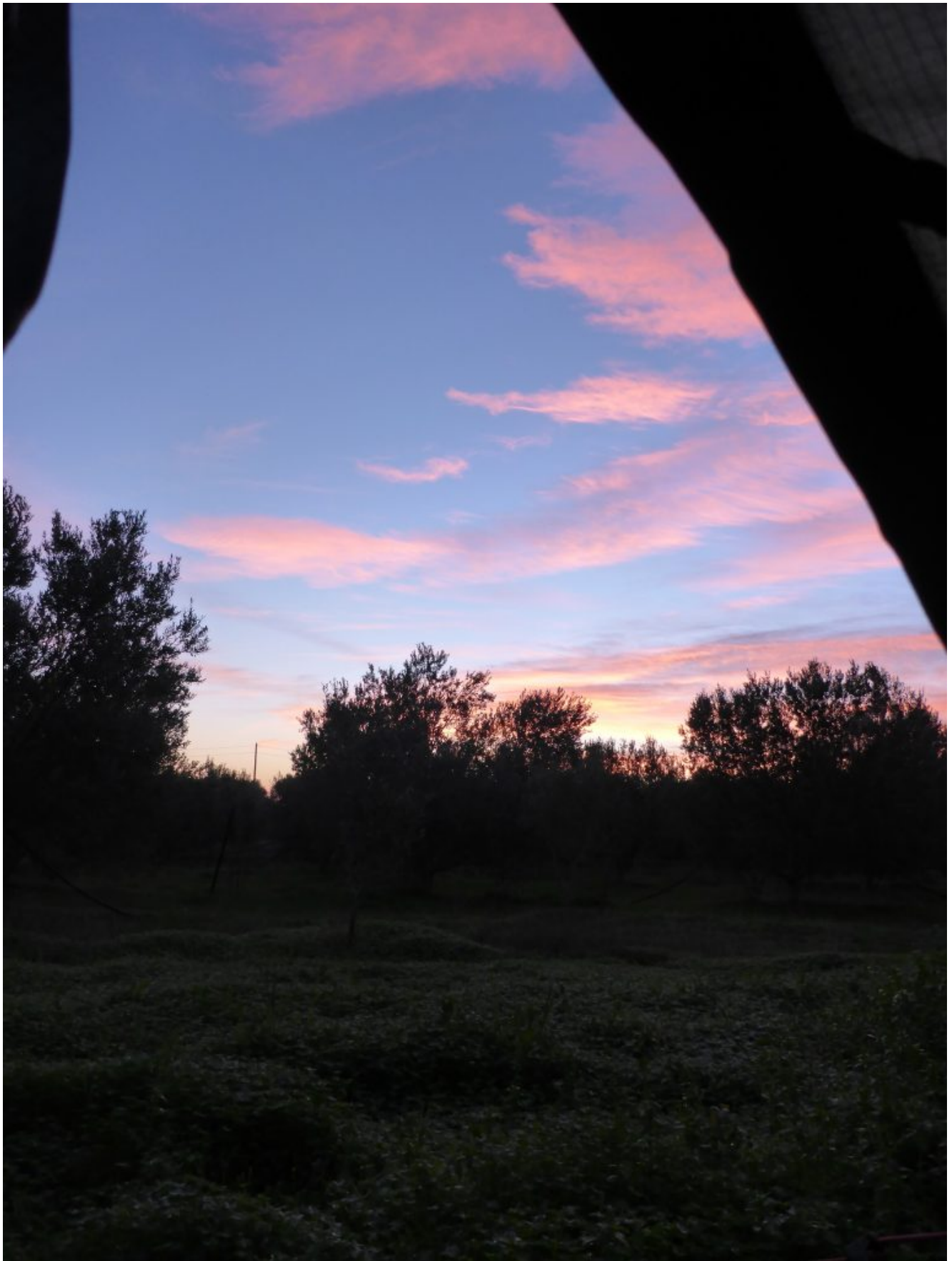
Chasing dog



After another short climb we're nearly out of the mountains and have a lovely long descent to stop at an olive grove for the night just outside Corinth. On the way down we call in at a petrol station for more fuel for the stove and the owner is very concerned that we are filling a bottle with unleaded and not water. Despite trying to explain that it's for cooking she just doesn't understand so I make a motorbike noise to add to the confusion while she looks for the engine on the bike.



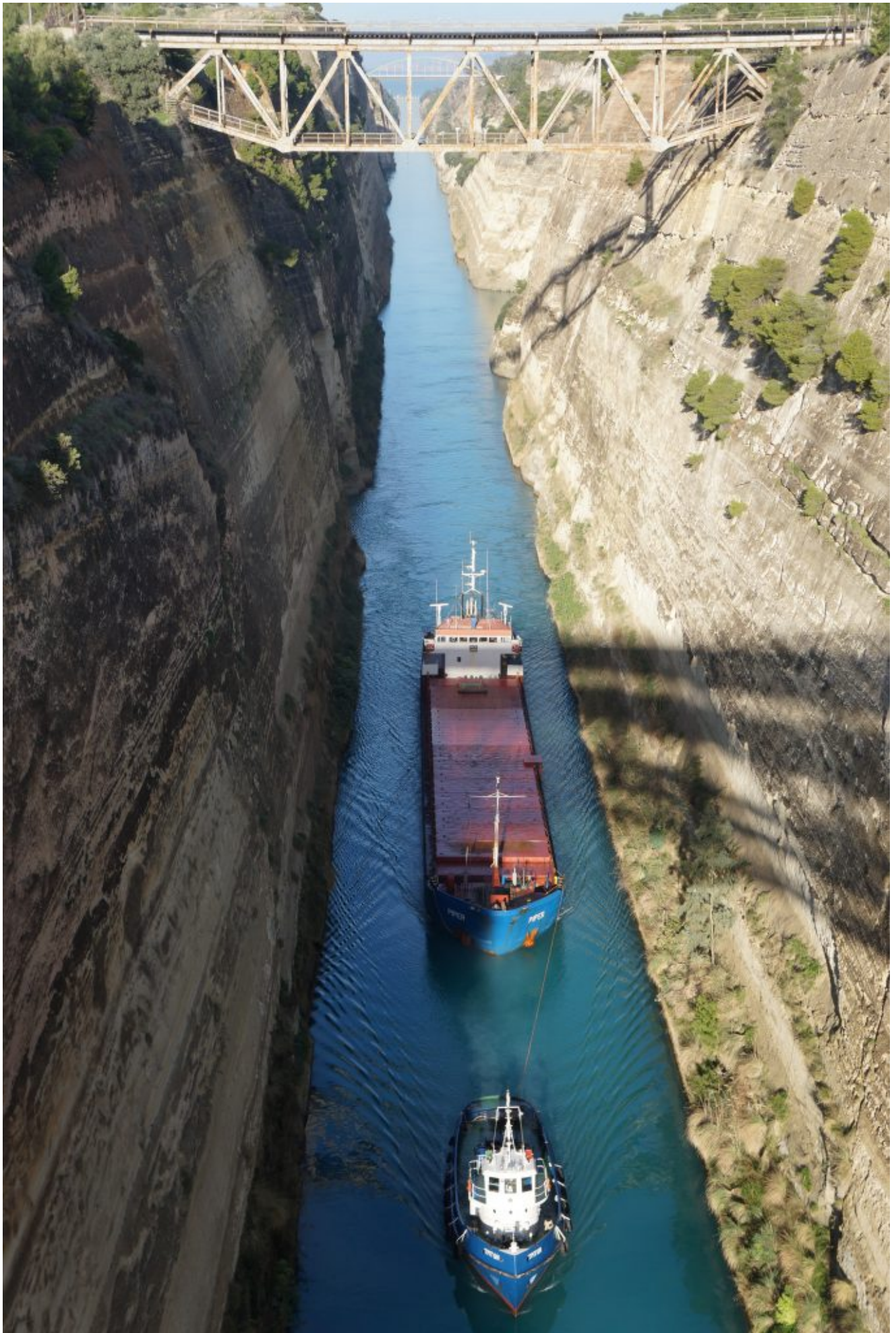
Acrocorinth Castle



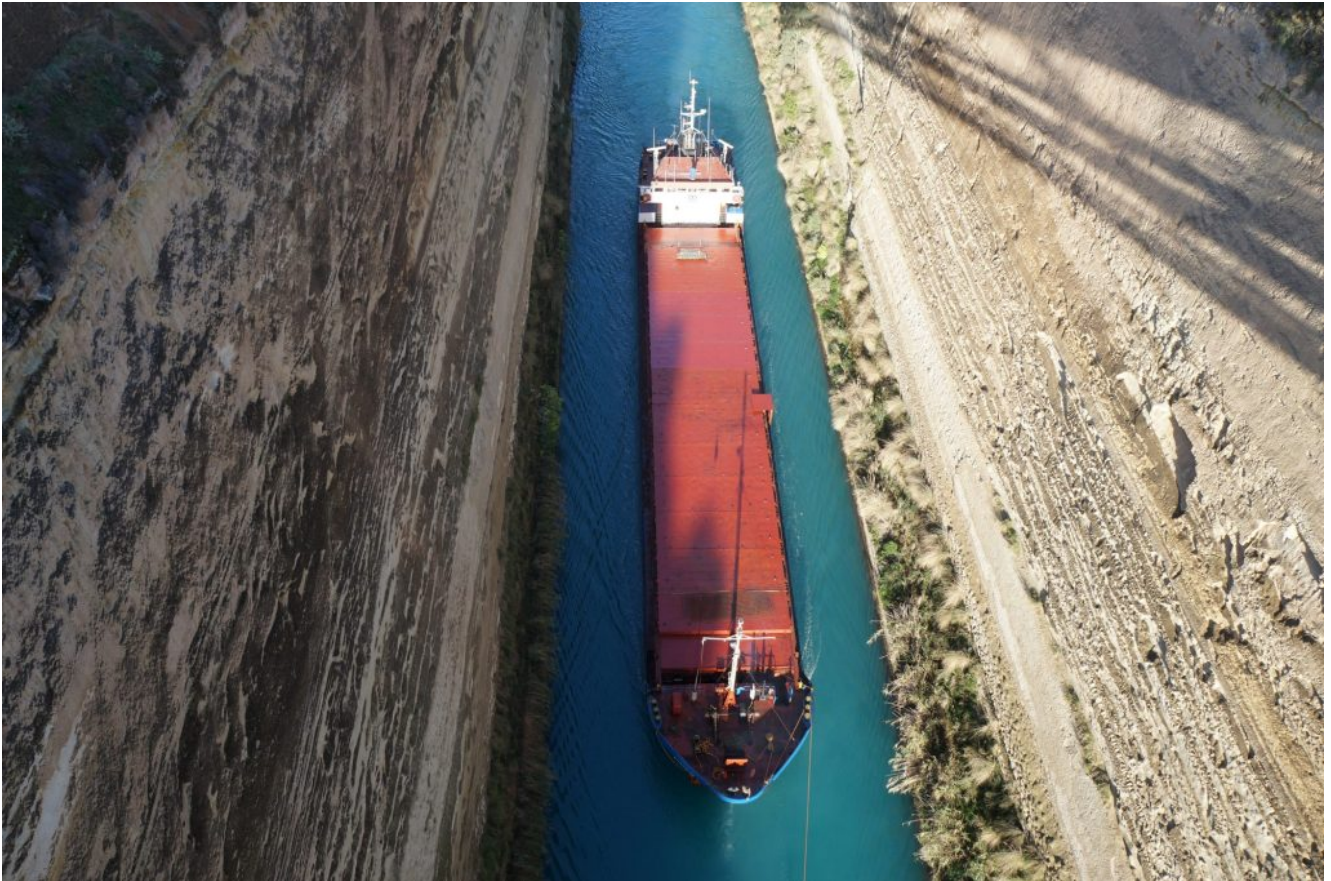
Sunset in the olive grove

The next day we cross the Corinth Canal which is a very impressive piece of engineering. The 6km passage through 90m

of rock was finished in 1893 but what's even more impressive is that the first 700m were dug in the 1st century with emperor Nero collecting the first basket of dirt. It was not completed though as they thought the sea was higher on one side than the other as the tides were at different times.



Corinth Canal



Corinth Canal

From Corinth we pass a few huge oil refineries and out in the bay there are several tankers waiting to offload their cargo. Our small road sticks to the coast with the main highway higher up the cliff to our left and we get some great views out towards the Saronic Gulf. It's a Sunday and there are lots of road cyclists out on club rides. Given it's over 20 degrees we're in short sleeves but most of the locals are dressed up in full winter gear, clearly feeling the 'cold'. At one point a small peloton comes past and we manage to latch on to the back for a couple of km but then our road turns right while they carry on straight on so we have to wave goodbye.



Tankers at Corinth



Catching the Peloton

Our destination is the Port of Piraeus and to avoid the beginnings of the urban sprawl of Athens we decide to hop onto the island of Salamis with a ferry from there taking us stright into Pireaus. We roll down into the first harbour just as the ferry is lifting its ramp but they spot us just in time to lower it and allow us to ride straight on with perfect timing. The tent comes out at lunch time for some much needed drying out in the sunshine then we ride to the other side of the island to catch the next ferry into Piraeus.



Riding towards Piraeus



Riding towards Piraeus

The final boat trip of the day is the overnight crossing to Crete but we have a couple of hours to kill until the 9pm departure time so we install ourselves in a cafe and dig out the kindles while munching on gyros kebabs and greek salad. While we sit there a man comes in trying to sell us enormous watches, phone chargers and fake Ray Bans which we politely decline. Half an hour later another chap turns up with a similar assortment of tat. By the time the fifth one comes round to bother us we're losing patience so politeness goes out the window.

Eventually it's time to board the ferry for the 10 hour crossing and as expected the boat is busy with lots of people either heading home or heading off on holiday for the Christmas break. We're looking forward to a few easy days on the island too though it's going to be an odd Christmas compared to usual.



No matter how much they dream about it, I doubt they'll be getting a white Christmas here