

Peering into the ancient past

STORIES of cities shrouded in mystery and forgotten for millennia are nothing new to Greek archaeology, but the ancient city of Kassopi, near Preveza in Epirus, having never been built upon, reveals what a metropolis actually looked like more than 2,000 years ago.

In the 4th century BC, the local tribe of the Kassopeans, who lived in scattered farming villages in western Epirus, decided to reorganise their community by founding a city modelled on older Greek cities that existed in the region, such as the nearby Corinthian colony of Ambracia (modern Arta).

For this new, carefully planned population centre, they chose a safe and defensible location, a small mountainside ledge overlooking the west coast at a height of about 550m.

Short run

In the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC, Kassopi thrived, reaching a population of more than 10,000 residents, but without ever becoming a truly major player. Then, in 31BC, the Romans forced the inhabitants of several cities in the area to settle at the newly founded metropolis of Nikopolis, thus ending Kassopi's short history.

Its brief existence, coupled with the fact that the location was never again settled, is a blessing for the present-day visitor, as the site lay forgotten until the 19th century and underwent excavation in the 1950s and 1970s.

Because it is the result of deliberate planning, but also because it was never disrupted by subsequent building, Kassopi



gives an incredibly clear and accessible view of an ancient city with its typical features and structures.

There are, of course, impressive and picturesque sites all across the country, but Kassopi is one of the most beautiful and memorable, an absolute must-see, far from the regular streams of tourists and therefore unknown even to many connoisseurs of travel in Greece.

Gorgeous

Moreover, it does so in a breathtakingly beautiful setting, perched high above the coast. On a clear sunny day in winter or spring, the view encompasses the adjacent coastal plain, the Ionian sea, the Preveza peninsula and the Ambracian Gulf. And in the distance: Corfu, Lefkada and Kefalonia.

This stunning panorama, contrasting with the relatively small and tranquil site, surrounded by forests and high cliffs, produces a sense of dignity comparable to that found at Delphi.

Kassopi (also Kassiope) lies



above the villages of Myrsini and Kamarina, 20km north of Preveza. It is signposted from the main road to Igoumenitsa. Admission is 2 euros (concessions 1 euro), winter opening times 8am-3pm (but the gate is sometimes left open outside these times). The area has more cultural attractions to offer, including the Classical town of Orraon, Byzantine Arta and Roman Nikopolis

Home sweet home

A FEW OF Kassopi's blocks

of residential homes have been excavated, making clearly visible how the planned town was organised: two broad 6m-wide streets ran east to west and were crossed every 30m by streets only 4.5m wide, which formed the housing blocks, each containing four 225m² houses placed back to back, with a narrow lane or drainage channel between.

The houses are all similar in type, with small rooms arranged around a modest courtyard and a larger oikos, the covered space that served as kitchen and living area. Some houses had an upper floor. Each also contains an andron, a room reserved for the symposium. Courtyards, doorsteps and other features are clearly visible.

The bulk of the residential area remains unexcavated, but it is worth following the road to the western edge of town through pleasant forested terrain.

After about 300m, the unexcavated but impressive theatre is uphill to the right, while the left leads along the well-preserved city wall to a clifftop promontory. On it is a strange monument, a plastered domed chamber, with a small underground passage leading to it. Perhaps this was the grave and

shrine of the city's founder.

Visible from across the site are its defensive walls, far up the sheer mountain. Even more striking is the 1961 monument to the women of Souli, who jumped to their deaths with their children - singing and dancing - off Mt Zalongo in 1803 to escape being captured by the troops of Ali Pasha.

A 'plateia' with a view

NOT FAR behind the modern-day entrance to the ancient city of Kassopi lies a large open square: the agora, the administrative and commercial centre of the city.

Unusually, it is not located in the centre of Kassopi, but at its very periphery, with its southern end marked by a cliff edge offering sweeping views.

On the other three sides, it is surrounded by public buildings: a theatre-like *vouleuterion*, or council chamber to the east; to the north a simple stoa, or colonnade; and to the west a second stoa in front of the *prytaneion*, seat of the city administration. It consists of various small rooms grouped around a courtyard and included designated spaces for symposia. In the square itself are several bases that once supported statues.

Behind the north stoa are the well-preserved remains of a large structure with 17 small rooms arranged around a large courtyard. Only the lower part was built of stone. An upper floor was of mud-brick and wood.

In each room, the base for a pillar or beam supporting the upper floor is visible. The function of this complex is unclear. Some believe it to be a *katagogion*, a guesthouse for honoured visitors. Others think it is a market hall.

A closer look

Um, it's empty

(National Museum, Room 6)

This painted clay pyxis, or storage container, was perhaps used to hold cosmetics. It was found in the Early Cycladic Bronze Age cemetery of Chalandriani, on Syros, and belongs to the 2800-2300BC Keros-Syros culture. Its fine shape and careful decoration show a different side of the people from this period, who are better known for their striking marble figurines. The holes were for tying the lid on.

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