The Tymphaean Symphony

Exploring the Nature of a Greek Mountain

Michael David Jones

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Dedication

For Mary
and all
who made this
Journey possible

Front cover:
The Forest of Ghiol in the shadow of the cliffs of Goura.

Back cover:
Top left to right: *Linum punctatum* ssp *pycnophyllum*; Northern face of Tymphi from the Magoula Meadows, Scarce Swallowtail
Bottom left to right: *Minuartia pseudosaxifraga*; The summit ridge west of Goura, *Globularia cordifolia*.

About the Author

After a decade working as a museum-geologist and university tutor the author spent twenty-five years organising and leading natural history expeditions, introducing others to the floristic and wildlife wonders of some of the world's wild places of which the mountains of north-west Greece is but one of many. From the arctic to the Sahara and the Cantabrians to the Himalayas, those explorations nurtured a personal affinity with the natural environment seeded during formative years in the English countryside and mountains of Wales. Childhood quests for Emperor moths and Merlin on the Stiperstones and Long Mynd, and for the saxifrages of Snowdonia were the prelude to searches for Musk Oxen and Snowy Owl in the tundra, Houbara and Bibron's Agama in the Sahara and rare rhododendrons and primulas in the Garhwal Himalaya. The author now divides his time between Wales, the east Aegean islands, and Lycian Turkey, the subject of further writings.

Preface

From a time even before my earliest childhood memories the call of the unknown was an irresistable siren sound. Parental night-time searches would find me asleep between potato rows or nestled amidst stooked wheat sheaves in the neighbourhood fields of those formative years. Not surprisingly, those nocturnal forays led to a fascination with moths so began a lifetime's interest in the natural world and an affinity with the wild. The association has of necessity been a solitary one, but there have often been times when the desire to share with others has prevailed. Now is such a time and in the form of this account of a mountainous enclave in Greece.

For many, remote places offer physical and mental challenges, a provocation to overcome, whether it be to scale and bestride the summits, to navigate the trackless waste or to unmask and expose the previously unknown. Such has its appeal, but there are deeper and more satisfying rewards to be gained from knowledge and experience of place, the satisfaction which comes from a long and intimate association with all that constitutes the whole, whether it be the rocks beneath one's feet, the form of the land or the diversity and interrelationships of plant and animal life which contribute to make a place what it is. The attainment of such a relationship is only possible over time and demands an affinity with place which, in the Greek context, perhaps allows some empathy with the ancient's concept of the *daimon* or *genius* of place; those characteristics greater than the sum of the parts and which manifest the soul or being of a place. If the words of this book

convey some sense of the *daimon* of the place called Tymphi I will have succeeded in my purpose, in part at least.

What follows in these pages is a summation of many visits during twenty years, distilled into an eight-day walk across the Tymphaean massif of Zagori in June 1991. That time saw the exceptional confluence of deep winter snows and heavy spring rains, conditions conducive to a remarkably prolific floristic display, one which I was privileged to witness only rarely in my long association with the mountain. All that is described was seen and all events were as experienced, the combined narrative being as true a recollection as the combination of detailed field note-books and memory will allow.

In describing some of the natural wonders of the mountain, the use of taxonomic binomials, especially for many plants, has been unavoidable. Understandably, most Greek plants do not have an English common name equivalent. If the unfamiliarity of these Linnean binomials induces unease do as I have always done, enunciate the words aloud. They are to be savoured, rolled over the tongue and expelled with appreciation of the physical formulation, and of the sound they create – *Eryngium amethystinum*, *Sempervivum marmoreum*, *Hypericum rumeliacum*; recite them repeatedly and they become an incantation, hypnotic and the well-spring of imagination, a siren call of the mountain. Faintly on the wind, *Linum punctatum pycnophyllum* has always summoned my every return, its rarely seen beauty as seductive as the intonation of its syllables.

Having attained an age when change can be contemplated within the context of a lifetime, I view the present state of much of the English countryside as a pale shadow of the bounteous natural world I inhabited as a child. The profusion and diversity which allowed the gathering of wild flowers and even the netting of butterflies or selective collection of birds eggs without deletereous effect has long gone. The plenty of my youth has become the scarcity of more recent years, a

contrast which only a lifetime reveals and which one fears will be the experience of succeeding generations as human detrimental influence on species abundance and diversity increases. Whilst reading of the natural wonders of Tymphi and of the manifold influences which have nurtured the mountain, one should be reminded that this is a microcosm of the natural world. It is as vulnerable to ecological degradation as were those lost meadows, marshlands, mires, heathlands and carr woodlands of England. In the absence of awareness alas lies the seed of destruction.

It is customary in most published works to acknowledge the contributions of others, however in this instance I shall not name names, not in deference to any delusional notion of self-importance but wholly to the contrary. Life has progressed to the point of realisation that much of what we accomplish is the result of the influence and prior endeavours of others; we build using the blocks and mortar created by our predecessors, only the form of the edifice is of our making, and even that is largely determined by the influential properties of the materials serendipitously placed at our disposal. Of the materials I have been fortunate to have had available, those listed as 'Sources' are acknowledged as having been in-dispensible. Similarly there are many whose knowledge and companion-ship in its generous sharing has contributed in varying degrees throughout life to that creative process, although to name any would be to deny similarly deserved recognition to those who remained anonymous. They know who they are and share in the dedication of this book to all. Finally, that recognition does not imply any shared burden of blame for error, inaccurancy or any other deficiency in this text; for those, if such exist, are entirely my own responsibility. Even so, I naturally sincerely thank Nicola and Hugh Loxdale of Brambleby Books for the editing of the original text.

Contents

Chapter 1

The Molossian Way

Stiff from a night on unyielding ground and chilled by a down-draught from snowy heights, I shifted uneasily in my sleeping-bag, reluctant to face the unfolding dawn. Weary limbs reminded me of the previous day's long walk from the plains of Ioannina, to this my overnight resting place below the monastery of Rongovou, on the southern flanks of Mount Tymphi. Whilst climbing the steep slopes of Mitsikeli, with the mountainous bulwark of Albania rising before me to fill the north-western sky, I had paused to gaze reverentially southwards beyond Ioannina towards distant cloud-wreathed Tomaros, guardian of Dodona and of the oracle of Zeus which had guided the ancient world for more than a thousand years. There too, amidst the patchwork of fields spread below me, was the site of Passaron, where in 307-306 BC Pyrrhus, who traced descent from Neoptolemus, son of the Homeric hero Achilles, was at the age of twelve proclaimed King of the Molossians. As I resumed my ascent I had been conscious of walking in the footsteps of those transhumant shepherds who had acclaimed his enthronement. For the route I was following, still used today by their spiritual, if not filial descendents, the Sarakatsani, would lead to the Molossian summer mountain pasturage and the lands of their then Macedonian neighbours, the Tymphaeans.

From the summit of Mitsikeli it had been an undemanding meander towards the rising sun and the depths of the Vikos Canyon, before the ascent beyond Kepesovo and Vradeto to where, on rounding a mountain spur, the magnificent sweep of the Tymphaean massif draws the eye northwards. I had travelled that way before, and would do so many times again, into the realm of Zagori, 'the place beyond the mountain' as the Slavic name enticingly portrays. Here, the land between the Voidomatis and the Aoos Rivers, homeland of the Sarakatsani and Arumani, is a remnant of the natural world where bear, Wolf and Imperial Eagle still survive in an environment nurtured and moulded by the millennial-old pastoral practices of a former nomadic people. I had come, in the early summer of 1991 once more to this Greek mountain fastness, to wander its wooded sanctuaries, karstic slopes and frost shattered summits in awe of its floral wonders, to witness again the grandeur of the Lammergeier's flight, the shimmer of the Swallowtails' wing and to savour those moments of ancestral fear and exultation which only lone encounters with the wilderness can provide.

Below, the waters of the Skamneliotikos flowed swift and clear, not so swift that I could not ford the shallows with ease, but sufficiently so to know the snows on Tymphi had been heavy that winter. Meltwater travels quickly through the cavernous limestones of the mountain, and here, below the village of Tsepelovo, the river was ice cold, even now in mid-June. In the pale light of dawn the distant summits of Kousta and Koziakas lay like blackened beached hulks on a lake of mist above the eastern limits of the valley where Black Pine darkly forested the slopes, whilst to the south Aleppo Pine cast a torn and tattered paler mantle over deeply eroded hills of brick-red shale and sandstone, denuded of ground vegetation and with a meagre soil barely shrouding the lithological skeleton beneath. Before me a patchwork of coppiced hazel and oak scrub,

impenetrable but for the incursion of grassy breaks and clearings, rose skywards to the village and curved upstream towards Skamneli, the only other habitation in the valley.

As I lay, still drowsily inert, the sounds of emergent day filtered through the somnolent accompaniment of wind and water. A distant mechanical coughing signalled the reluctant awakening of a heavy diesel engine. Foresters from Skamneli, off for a day's logging above Laista in the upper reaches of the Aoos River, their departure heralded by a cacophany of village dogs. As the rumblings of the lorry faded into the distance, the peace of dawn returned to accompany the call of a Woodlark. Often I have lain at the edge of sleep listening to that wonderful mellifluous song. The unpaired male birds habitually sing before sunset, but it is early morning from well before dawn on warm, windless and often moonlit nights when their performance attains perfection. In the sepulchral silence, those mellow melancholic tones so perfectly crafted into a series of descending phrases, each subtly different from the next, each slowly gaining in volume and tempo, invoke thoughts of Edward Thomas's *The Unknown Bird*, seeming to come from beyond the edge of this world, 'As if the bird or I were in a dream.'

It would be some time before the sun's warmth reached the slopes where I lay, so I was soon up and ready to move on. Shouldering my pack, it was a short descent to the Xatsiou Bridge which carries the *kaldereemee,* the old stone-paved way from Kipoi to Tsepelovo, across the Skamneliotikos. Pausing for a moment in crossing, as doubtless many had done during the two centuries since construction of the bridge, I wondered what thoughts those travellers might have entertained whilst lingering here to contemplate the scene. Merchants upon whose activities the prosperity of Zagori was founded, perhaps returning home from trading in Bessarabia, Constantinople or Moldova, would have been unlikely to have seen much change

other than perhaps in the immediate vicinity of the village. The same tranquil natural scene they had left on departure would have been here to greet them on their return. For much of history the pace of environmental change has been sufficiently slow to have appeared insignificant within an individual's lifetime. Cumulatively however, the effects have been profound.

Reappraise the scene with a more forensic eye and within a more extended time frame, and gradually this verdant landscape dissolves in ones mind's-eye into a place of cold, watery, stony desolation, its unremitting greyness broken only by the glassy greens and blues of icebergs newly released onto a melt-water lake. Sounds are elemental, of wind, water and ice in motion. A wall of crevassed ice darkly discoloured by rock-dust, the snout of an eight-kilometre-long glacier sweeping down from the Tymphaean heights through where Tsepelovo is now situated, dams the lake at this very place, creating an outflow torrent of such erosive force that it has cut a deep, narrow gorge through what had been a massive rock barrier, now behind me. Such was the scene 450,000 years before, during the time of the Skamnellian glaciers. Now the Skamneliotikos slides silently and dimly into that same defile, spanned by the arch of a small stone footbridge, and continues westwards into the wooded Vikaki ravine unseen even by the now shuttered eyes of the monastery poised above. Upstream, the smooth rounded limestone boulders and outcrops in the stream bed are welcome stepping stones for negotiating the narrower steep-banked sections, where the waters have undercut the slopes to reveal the sands, gravels and boulders deposited during that glacial episode. Many of these limestone boulders were scarred and scratched during their ice-bound journey and some are impressed into the finely layered silts of the lake bed, having fallen from the melting icebergs which had

carried them. The imprint of those times is deeply incised into the fabric of the mountain.

There is as much pleasure in revisiting old haunts as there is delight in discovering that which is new, a motivation which led me downstream from the Xatsiou Bridge on a short diversion. A tributary tumbling steeply down from the springs at Tsepelovo, although much obscured by dense scrub, is the seasonal abode of a spectacular and rarely seen nocturnal amphibian. Carefully searching amidst the more irregularly sculpted streamside rocks I soon found what I was looking for. The intense yellow spots and elongate blotches on a jet black background are the unmistakable and extraordinarily vibrant colouration of the Fire Salamander and a warning of the copious noxious skin secretions which irritate the mouth and eyes of would-be predators. With such a languid demeanour and somewhat doleful facial expression, it is difficult to associate this creature with so much legend and folk-lore implicating it with fire. However, its propensity for taking refuge in the cavities of wet logs would have fed the imagination of many a fireside assembly, witnessing its seemingly miraculous emergence from the flames. Here also, usually concealed beneath the edges of streamside rocks or floating conspicuously with limbs outstretched in shallow pools of the river, is a small warty toad of subdued but variable colour. Catch one, and in the palm of your hand it will voluntarily invert itself to expose a bright yellow or orange belly, another warning of distasteful and irritant cutaneous secretions. Gregarious and often prolific, the Yellow-bellied Toad provides a pleasant choral interlude during spring and summer evenings, wherever there is permanent water on the mountain. Here, however, it must contend with a far superior songster, as the clear liquid phrasing of a Nightingale descends from a streamside thicket below the village spring.