

## **Sylvia Benton 1887-1985 M.A., B. Litt. F. S. A. (Sct), F. S. A.**

**By Helen Waterhouse**

Sylvia Benton was born 18 August 1887 in India at Lahore, where her father Alexander Hay Benton was Chief Judge in the Punjab. He and his wife, Jane Rose of Sheriffton arrived in India in 1864; they had four children, a son William (who subsequently made a career in the army) and three daughters, Mary, Rose and Sylvia, the youngest. For health reasons Judge Benton left India in 1894 and settled at Polmont (Stirlingshire). After the death of his wife in 1901 the family moved to Wimbledon. Sylvia's schooling was thus divided between St. Margaret's School Polmont and Wimbledon High School.

In 1907 Sylvia went up to Girton College Cambridge to read Classics; her tutor was the formidable and autocratic K. Jex Blake. She did not do as well as might have been expected, gaining only a low second class in her final Tripos in 1910; it has been suggested that, strong-minded as she clearly was, she in some way "got across" Miss Jex Blake, or it may be that, playing both hockey and tennis for the college and women's university teams, too much of her time and energy was devoted to athletics. She went from Cambridge to teach at Bolton High School, returned to gain a Teachers Training Certificate, and thereafter held teaching posts in schools at Oldham, Reading and Clapham until circumstances allowed her to devote herself to archaeology.

A somewhat inaccurate obituary published in The Northern Scott writes that "her passion for archaeology was sparked off during several holiday trips to Greece as a child." Certainly she was the one member of his family with whom Judge Benton shared his classical interests. Sylvia's own handwritten accounts of her journeys begin in 1926; each year she went further and, where she could, on foot and alone. In 1927-8 she was a student at the British School at Athens and assisted at some of Walter Heurtley's excavations in Macedonia. The Director, Arthur Woodward, urged her to acquire further qualifications for work in Greece, but, exceptionally, refused to admit her for the School's next session because she had persisted, in spite of his definite prohibition, in climbing Taygetos alone. She settled in Oxford and, encouraged by Professor J. L. Myres, was accepted in 1929 by Lady Margaret Hall, to read for the Diploma in Classical Archaeology, which she obtained in 1932. Later, in 1934, she went on to acquire a B. Litt. with a dissertation on "the Barony of Odysseus."

Sylvia was duly readmitted to the School at Athens in 1929 and in most years thereafter. In 1929 and 1930 she again assisted Heurtley in Macedonia, but an increasing interest in and affection for Ithaca drew her westwards, and her most important work at this time was her extended exploration of the Ionian Islands, including the seldom visited islets off the Acarnanian coast and the comparatively distant Kythera. Her results (BSA 32) not only covered much little-known ground but in particular included the discovery of the Astakos cave which she dug in 1932, and of the important Minoan site in Kythera later so fruitfully excavated by Coldstream and Huxley (Kythera: Excavations and Studies, London, 1972).

She was thus an obvious choice to assist in the excavations of Ithaca, financed by Lord Rennell of Rodd, under the direction of Heurtley. As well as working with the Heurtley team at Aetos she was put in charge of investigating the collapsed cave on the north corner of Polis Bay which had attracted the attention of Schliemann in 1863. The cave's floor had been submerged by the rise in sea-level, and work began largely under water. Sylvia quickly realized that it was a stratified site; pumps were installed, with the assistance of Radford and George Tait, and its excavation was successfully achieved. The finds were of great importance; first they established continuity of use, probably cultic, from Mycenaean through the Dark Age to late classical times. Remains of 12 bronze tripod-lebetes, dating from the 9<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> centuries BC, showed the importance of the cult; and terracottas with dedications to the Nymphs and to Odysseus provided impressive confirmation of the identity (often challenged) of modern with Homeric Ithaca and also a link with the Phaeacian tripods of the *Odyssey*. The wide chronological range of the dedications required for their publication a parallel width of knowledge. In particular the tripods involved Sylvia in an extended study of this class of object, and a new scheme of classification modifying that of Fürtwängler ("The evolution of the tripod lebes," BSA 35). This in turn led to her many studies on ancient bronzes, such as the unpublished bronzes from Palaikastro and Praisos (BSA 39). In her early years as an archaeologist she described herself as a prehistorian—as indeed she was—but work on the Polis material permanently extended her range to the geometric and later periods, and she was thus well equipped, in 1938, to complete the excavation of the shrine deposit at Aetos, partly cleared by Heurtley and Hilda Lorimer in 1930, when it was under threat from illegal digging. Her publication of this very important body of material is an achievement equaling that of Polis and its tripods.

It says much for her stamina that she went straight on from Aetos to her site begun the previous year at Tris Langadas (hereafter, TL), above Polis Bay. The mishaps which cut short the clearing of this purely Mycenaean site were a great disappointment; its publication, delayed by war, earthquake and its aftermath, was achieved in BSA 68, 1973. After her 1937 season she had proposed a further exploration, with John Cook, of the "School of Homer" at Agios Athanasios, but this site, already dug over by Vollgraff and others, proved of minimal interest and she never returned to it.

Sylvia returned to England late in August 1939 and found war work in London, initially for Naval Hydrography, collaborating in the production of "Gazetteer of Greece" and a "Glossary of Modern Greek." Later she worked in Postal and Telegraph Censorship (Uncommon Languages Department), with fire-fighting at night. In 1945 her room was destroyed and she herself badly injured by bombing. By the spring of 1947 she was able to return to Athens and then to Ithaca where she was fully occupied in the restoration of the museums at Vathy and Stavros and in working on the Aetos and TL material.

By 1953 this was sufficiently advanced for her to spend five weeks in the Chaeronea museum studying its (chiefly Neolithic) material. Her interest in the Neolithic may have been revived by the need to publish the excavation of the cave at Astakos (BSA 42). It was also a notable effort at salvage; "Marion Pascoe (Sarafis) made a long study of pottery from sites in Phokis...she felt it needed more revision than she could give it

and...handed it over to me.” Sylvia’s long text, with accompanying drawings) by M. Pascoe and A. Petty) and many photographs (some by Hood), was set aside by her immediate and urgent response to the terrible earthquakes which hit the Ionian Islands in August; it remains unpublished and is to be lodged in the Athens archive of the British School.

As soon as it was possible for her to reach the stricken island Sylvia was conveyed to Ithaca by a British destroyer carrying relief supplies. The Vathy museum was badly damaged , many of its contents shattered. Stavros fared better, but the tripods and other valuable finds were taken for conservation to Patras and Athens, and their return, a matter of great concern in northern Ithaca, required the exertion of considerable pressure. Reconstruction and repairs in both museums occupied Sylvia for many years; as late as 1965 she was conducting BSA students to Ithaca to assist with drawings and so on; Roger Howell’s drawings of TL pottery probably date from this time. Sylvia seldom lacked for devoted assistance, like that of Jock Anderson for the Aetos Corinthian and Helen Brock, and she did not fail to acknowledge it, though in her last forays to Greece, in 1974, at 84, she delighted in eluding the surveillance of those detailed to accompany her.

For Greek archaeologists Sylvia’s work in Ithaca is of course of the first importance, but her findings in the Sculptor’s Cave at Covesea did much to reshape the history of the Bronze Age in northern Europe. It is not instantly clear what took her to this cave on the Moray Firth, but her sister Rose lived at Lossiemouth and her family had abiding connections with the area. In 1928 to 1930, with the encouragement of the local laird, she excavated the cave, bringing out pieces of its clay floor and sieving them in the gale at the cave’s mouth; under interesting relics of Roman times (the 360s AD) she found Bronze Age occupation with metal objects and bone implements for which she noted the closest parallels in Central Europe. Her conclusion that their users had been immigrants was revolutionary, and supported at the time only by Gordon Clilde, as was its corollary that the comparable objects in Swiss Museums must be down-dated from the Neolithic. Thirty years later the “Covesea phase” is recognized as the most important horizon of the Scottish Bronze Age. The area of floor which she had deliberately left untouched was excavated in 1978-9 by Ian A. G. Shepherd; noting that her conclusions had stood up very well, he observed that “the sieving of every bucket/spadeful of deposit was remarkable for its time in Scotland, as was the amount of horizontal control she exercised through her grid.”

After Sylvia’s retirement to Lossiemouth in 1970 she was for a time Honorary Curator of the Elgin Museum, and visitors to Four Winds found “tables and chairs covered with publications concerning the Sculptor’s Cave...stimulated, it seemed, by enquiries concerning the site and finds recently made by Colin Reafew.”

I cannot place exactly in time when “in her early days at Oxford” Sylvia attended Professor Beazley’s archaeological seminars whose senior members were Professor Jacobstal, Miss Lorimer, and Alan Blakeway (the latter’s death in 1936 provides an ante quem). Perhaps it was these occasions which enlarged her range of literary reference,

which became extensive. I choose as an example of this the article on “Echelos’ Hippodrome” (BSA 57), which also shows her, by then absorbing interest in birds and also the characteristic plunge in medias res which occasionally confused her friends and colleagues! Also from this time, if not earlier, must date her admiration and friendship for Hilda Lorimer, reinforced as it was by their work with Heurtley in northern Greece and Ithaca. Miss Lorimer was one of the examiners who awarded Sylvia her B. Litt. degree, and they conducted a small joint excavation in Zakynthos in 1934 (funded by Girton and Somerville colleges) the meager results of which were unfortunately never published.

In spite of his assistance in establishing her at LMH Professor Myres was not a scholar whom Sylvia particularly valued. Her greatest veneration was reserved for Beazley, whose help her articles repeatedly record. In the *Aetos* publication she pays tribute to his influence (BSA 48, 259), “Sir John Beazley’s pupils like myself are apt to put style first, but it is nice if stratification goes the same way.” Among younger scholars Humphry Payne, Tom Dunbabin and Martin Robertson were warmly regarded. Of Heurtley to whom she owed much, especially in excavation experience, she became increasingly critical as her own results in Ithaca led her to devalue his work in the island, especially at Pelikata. In contrast her profound disagreement with Hilda Lorimer over Homeric Ithaca caused sorrow, not a loss of regard.

About 1957 Sylvia turned her attention to monsters, winds, and above all birds in Greek art and literature. She published a number of articles on these topics, but it was a great disappointment to her that the book on birds for which she had amassed material over more than a dozen years could not be accepted for publication. This was in part due to her steady refusal to wear glasses; “they will make people think me effete” was her reason for her obstinacy in this rather vital matter, though she did wear them in her work in Censorship, possibly to cope with difficult hand-writings. Her actual knowledge of birds and their behavior had to rely largely on manuals. Many of her published observations were nonetheless acute, and, though begging the question of the intended ornithological accuracy of Greek artists, did make valid points of historical importance, as for example with the Arkesilas kylix. In this as in other archaeological fields, her initial judgments might be hasty and (verbally) rashly expressed, but her considered studies, if not avoiding controversy, were sober, soundly based and thoroughly argued, and her views, even when not accepted, were treated with proper respect by such authorities as Karo, Kunze and Salomon Reinach.

An essential part of Sylvia’s make-up was her devotion to and pride in physical prowess (this, indeed, seems to have been the one interest she shared with her siblings, of whom Mary was lady golf champion for Scotland). Her accounts of her travels are full of exhausting feats of cross-country walking, and the desire to go alone, where possible untrammelled by weaker spirits or the slower pace of—occasionally obligatory—guides with mules. Her archaeological companions on extended excursions were without exception tough and seasoned males whose speed and endurance provided a challenge. Thus she describes a horrific walk in late winter in southern Euboea with Oliver Davies, an exhausting—even for her—tour over Parnassos, through the Aetolian mountains up to

Jannina and over Pindos, ending finally at Ochrid, with Raleigh Radford; another of equal hardship with Radford through Chalkidike. On a spring “walk” in the Argolid with Heurtley and John Pendlebury, two of the School’s most noted speed walkers, she records with pride how she matched her pace and endurance to theirs. A strong, though not stylish swimmer, she made double crossing of Polis Bay every evening after work at Stavros, and, visiting the excavations at Kythera for whose site her researchers were responsible, regularly swam round the headland. When conveyed by the Royal Navy to help in relief work after the horrific earthquakes in the Ionian Islands in 1953 she could not bring herself, at 66, to use a ladder to get into the sea, but dived off the deck.

The televising of sport brought great pleasure to Sylvia in her comparatively sedentary old age. Even invited visitors found they must postpone discussion of archaeological matters to her impassioned commentary on a good innings at cricket.

It cannot have been easy for Sylvia, in her forties, to accommodate herself to the, largely much younger and always competitive society of the School at Athens. She was assisted not only by her athletic gifts but by a sense of personal authority acquired by years of teaching in schools. Her, justified, sense of self-worth on occasion made her over-ready to detect slights where none was intended, and encouraged the fabrication, and elaboration, of legends about her referred to by John Cook. In conversation she was positive, her judgments down-to-earth but not devoid of the humor which, when it escaped the editorial sieve, can be found in her book reviews or lightening her excavation reports; “No one would willingly travel with a tripod lebes” (BSA 35, 125); of the plastic monkey the long tail of which others had unwisely identified as a snake; “the group would tend to be less peaceful if she found she was sitting on a snake” (BSA 48, 347, note 664). The arresting first paragraphs of Astakos gives lasting pleasure.

Unlike her work at Polis, where she had more (and better funded) professional help—Nicholas Hammond, Raleigh Radford, George Tait, Piet de Jong to draw the tripods—Sylvia’s own digs were run on the proverbial shoestring. She had excellent foremen and an enthusiastic Ithacan workforce, but only at Aetos in 1938 a regular architect and surveyor (Nigel Bruce, killed in the war). She taught her student helpers to use a theodolite, to draw plans and sections, and herself did most of the photography. Her excellent system of a common dig notebook (additional to individual records), written up at leisure each evening, greatly assisted in the task of publication after the interruptions of war and other mishaps.

Domestic skills had no interest for her. In spite of a healthy interest in food she never learnt to cook. She could not type either, and exasperation with those who reinscribed her manuscripts often delayed their publication. Her digs, on the other hand, were comfortably run; to live under canvas not far from the sea was no hardship in the Ithacan spring and summer. The commissariat was generous and only the sudden death of the cook at Tris Langadas seriously disrupted her arrangements.

Sylvia prided herself on a hard-bitten no-nonsense exterior. Her Athens hairdresser complained that he was expected to cut her hair “as if round a pudding basin.”

She took little notice of fashion (even if her skirts might be silk, and she always wore a bracelet) so it is a surprise to find her in old age in a flowered frock.

Though seldom expressed, her attachments were deep and long-lasting, for Ithaca, for chosen works of art, for the beauties of mountain, sky and sea. This last determined her final move in 1970 from Oxford to the house in Lossiemouth which had been her sister's; she felt she could not abandon this loved landscape for the rest of her life. Her friends must rejoice that this lasted for 15 years, in which she was largely in good health—except when her arm was broken in fending off a thuggish burglar—her mind fully occupied with archaeology and reminiscence; as always she had a fund of good stories. As John Cook writes, she had attained serenity. Towards the end she was cared for by her great-niece Mrs. Elizabeth Neill and her husband at Kincraig. After a fall she died in hospital in Aberdeen on 12<sup>th</sup> September 1985.

### Sylvia Benton—Bibliography

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- 1931 "The Ionian Islands," BSA 32, 213-246.
- "The Excavation of the Sculptor's Cave, Covesea, Morayshire," Proc. Soc. Ant. Soc. 65, 177-216.
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- "The evolution of the tripod-lebes," BSA 35, 74-130.
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- 1941 "Notes on Crete," Geographical Journal 98, 77-83.
- 1945(?)      "Unpublished objects from Palaikastro and Praisos II," BSA 40,  
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- 1952 "The Pelynt sword-hilt," PPS 18/19, 237-8.
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- 1965 "Studi in onore di Luisa Banti," Bluebeard 47-49.
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- 1972 "Notes on sea-birds," JHS 92, 172-73.  
"Echelos' Hippodrome," BSA 67, 13-18.
- 1973 With H. Waterhouse, "Excavations in Ithaca: Tris Langadas," BSA 68, 1-24.

### **For Naval Hydrography**

- 1042 P.C.G. N. 1) Glossary I- Modern Greek (topographical terms)  
2) Gazetteer of Greece

S. Benton did many book reviews, but the author could not track them all down (JHS) for which many were written has no relevant index. She found three in the Antiquaries Journal:

- 1958 38, 254f "Dreifusskessel von Olympia."
- 1959 39, 102f, "Mycenaean pottery in Italy and adjacent areas."
- 1960 40, 232f "Greek painted pottery."

### **Sources:**

The author states: “It will be clear to all how much this account of Sylvia Benton is indebted to the obituary published in BSA 81, 1985 written by John Cook, who of all survivors knew her best. His text was to a certain extent “domestic,” written that is to say for persons connected with the British School in Athens and familiar with its memorable figures and their legends. The tone of this essay is more exotic, cooler perhaps, but infused with the same personal knowledge and regard for its subject. I have drawn so extensively on Cook’s essay that he should be considered as co-author of this essay.

Mrs. Elizabeth Neill, great-niece of Sylvia Benton, provided the information about the Benton family.

Girton College Roll, and A. Duke, former Registrar of the Roll.

Lady Margaret Hall archive.

Unpublished accounts of her travels in Greece from 1927 onwards written b Sylvia Benton (she did not date them by year).

Personal reminiscences of H. Hughes-Brock, J. M. and N. Cook, H. W. Catling and H. Waterhouse.

Girton Review for 1954, 28-9. S. Benton’s note on H. L. Lorimer.

For a convenient summary of work in Ithaca see “From Ithaca to the Odyssey,” BSA 91, 1966.

[MSJ]