

Elizabeth Pierce Blegen (1888-1966 by Elizabeth Langridge-Noti)

American Classical archaeologist Elizabeth Denny Pierce was born in Allegheny, Pennsylvania on June 26, 1888 to Flora McKnight and her husband William Lemmex Pierce. Elizabeth attended Vassar College from 1906-1910, where she developed a love for the Classical world and continued through 1912 to receive an M A in Latin.

A number of women at Vassar served as role models for her interest in the Classics and encouraged her to pursue this line of study. The most important of these women was to become her lifelong companion, Ida Thallon (Hill) (q.v.), who was credited by Elizabeth with introducing her to Greek archaeology and to many of the classicists and archaeologists who formed part of this community. Another influence at Vassar was Elizabeth Hazelton Haight, a feminist classicist who focused on the Roman world and pushed forward the role of women in the Classics in a number of ways, being the first woman to serve on the board of the American School of Classical Studies at Rome and the first woman chair of the American Philological Association. Other professors and later colleagues who influenced Elizabeth's intellectual development were Grace Harriet Macurdy (q.v.) and Catherine Saunders, both of the Vassar Classics department.

From 1912 to 1915 Elizabeth Pierce did further graduate work at Columbia University, possibly because Ida Thallon had done so, obtaining her Ph.D. in 1922. While there, she taught at her alma mater, Vassar College, from 1915 to 1922 in the field of Art History and also served as assistant curator in the school's Art Gallery for seven

years. At Columbia, she attended classes with J.R. Wheeler and C.H. Young on Greek architecture and sculpture and any class that the historian G.W. Botsford taught. This last professor probably served as a member of her dissertation committee until his untimely death in 1917. Her doctoral dissertation examined the intellectual life of G. Asinius Pollio the Roman Consul and historian who had already been the topic of her Master's thesis.

In 1922, she was encouraged to come to the American School of Classical Studies at Athens to spend a year visiting the archaeological sites and "to study material at firsthand for my teaching."¹ The encouragement to come to Athens was probably spurred in part by Ida Thallon (Hill) who had come there in 1899, as well as by a trip to Greece that the two had taken together in the summer of 1921.²

Elizabeth participated fully in the trips taken by the American School, acknowledging in her letters how important they were, while bemoaning her inability to get anything else accomplished while they happened. The group of students for the year of 1922-23 was a pleasant one. Of the first year students, Natalie Gifford (Wyatt) remained a close friend throughout the rest of Elizabeth's life. The instructors that year included Natalie Gifford's uncle, Augustus Murray from Stanford; Leicester B. Holland in architecture, Carl Blegen in prehistory and general topography; and Bert H. Hill, director of the School, in architecture, when he could be spared from his other duties. Alice Walker (Kosmopoulos) gave a few lectures on prehistoric pottery and Helen Negreponite taught the students Modern Greek. Elizabeth clearly enjoyed learning from all of them. During this year at the American School, she did the basic preparation for her first and only lecture for the Archaeological Institute of America: "A Daedalic in the Skimatari Museum."³ Students were encouraged to have a project during their year at the

School and she had come over thinking that she might write an update to Frazer, with particular reference to the museums of Greece.⁴ Although this never was completed, clearly this idea formed the basis of “Newsletter from Athens,” which she would write for the *American Journal of Archaeology* from 1925 until 1952. Her reports were “the results of close, careful, understanding first-hand observation and discussion with the excavators whom she grew to know well and who admired her and trusted her with their latest discoveries and thoughts about them [the excavations].”⁵

The basic structure that Elizabeth adopted for these brief articles, discussing new finds from Athens, was then used by Eugene Vanderpool, when he took over the writing of “Newsletter from Athens” in 1953. These notes were and are invaluable to the student of archaeology as they often revealed new discoveries many years before they were fully published. Their publication in a readily available American archaeological journal means that this glimpse into the latest happenings in Greek archaeology was easily available to both student and scholar.

The years 1922-24 were transitional ones for Elizabeth. Although Ida Thallon (Hill) worked hard to have her continue at Vassar with a promotion, overlapping teaching responsibilities with Kate McKnight (Elderkin), her cousin, Vassar did not have a permanent place for Elizabeth. However, an offer came in 1923 of an internship at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, under Gisela Richter. Richter had met Elizabeth years before and felt that she would be a good addition to the Museum if she were willing to stay there for much of the year. This however, Elizabeth was reluctant to do and accepted no offer at the Metropolitan, although she did spend much of the spring of 1924 doing “odd jobs” for Richter.⁶ While in New York City, Elizabeth regularly attended meetings of the Archaeological Club to which Ms. Richter had introduced her.

Finally, E. Capps, chairman of the American School's managing committee, suggested that Elizabeth serve either as the Secretary of the American School in Athens or as the Dean of Women, appointments that both Bert H. Hill and Carl Blegen welcomed.⁷ In the end, however, Elizabeth accepted neither of these positions, but married, in the summer of 1924, Carl Blegen and returned to Greece. During Elizabeth's first year back in Athens she lectured on sculpture to the first year students. Ida Thallon joined her a little later and soon married Bert Hodge Hill.

The four friends eventually took up residence together on Regilla Street and, in 1929, at 9 Ploutarchou Street in Athens. This last house was purchased by Elizabeth and was later willed to the American School upon the death of the four friends.

Their house had been the gathering place of archaeologists from all over the world, "...the house at 9 Ploutarchou Street...became...the center of archaeological information and discussion. Scholars and students of all nationalities gathered there for tea or dinner as friends to share the latest archaeological news and lively thought."⁸

Once married, Elizabeth participated fully in her husband's work. This meant gathering information on prehistoric pottery in museums that Blegen had not yet visited, putting together bibliography or indices for Blegen,⁹ and participating in his excavations at Prosymna (1927-28), Troy (1932-38), and Pylos (1939, 1952-58). Elizabeth gave herself over to furthering the investigations that Carl Blegen had begun.¹⁰ With Ida Thallon Hill as trench partner, she participated at all his excavations in the digging as well as in cataloguing the material from the excavations, so that it was available for study by specialists. Her final season at Pylos came after a devastating stroke in the fall of 1956 had left her in a wheelchair. At Prosymna, she herself studied the jewelry and ornament and contributed that chapter to the final publication. She and Ida also worked

with Bert Hodge Hill at Lapithos on Cyprus and at Corinth, helping to catalogue the material from the excavations, as well as trying to push Hill to finish his manuscripts so that they might be published. Finally it is clear that the two women usually traveled together. This meant that Elizabeth was companion, critic, and helper to Ida's scholarship as well. ¹¹ .

This type of assistance was not only given to her husband and to her companions, but also to many others in the field. Most prominent among the latter is Gisela Richter who often relied on Elizabeth's eye or ability to see artifacts in Greek museums to check on details or to photograph material that would appear in her books. ¹² Her help, however, was not restricted to those scholars already established in the field, but was also given to first-year students, as recalled by Lucy Shoe Meritt (q.v.).¹³

Aside from her work in archaeology, Elizabeth Blegen was also involved in a number of professional and women's organizations that demonstrated both her love of her chosen field and her interest in seeing women advance professionally. These included American Women in Greece, the Hellenic American women's club, the American Association of University Women, the American Historical Association, and the Archaeological Institute of America. She served as an officer for the first two organizations. It is probably through these clubs that she played a role in organizing the archaeological lectures that were given by the staff of the American School to the American Mission, starting in 1946. The gratitude of the American Mission for these lectures was expressed by a donation to the School in support of their excavations.

Upon her death, on September 21, 1966, Elizabeth was buried in the Protestant section of the First Cemetery of Athens, where she joined Ida Thallon Hill and Bert Hodge Hill. Carl Blegen would join them in 1971.

Sources:

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N. Mackechnie and E. Pike, Vassar College.

H. Halwell and J.R. Siegel, Columbia University

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Notes for this article:

1. Elizabeth Pierce, American School of Classical Studies at Athens admission for application, 1922.
2. Ida Thallon Hill Papers, Elizabeth Pierce to Ida Thallon, Fall, 1922.
3. Carl Blegen Papers, Elizabeth Pierce Blegen to Carl Blegen, November 18 and December 22, 1923. Later published as “A Daedalid in the Skimatari Museum,” *AJA* (1924), 267-75.

4. Ida Thallon Hill Papers, Elizabeth Pierce to Ida Thallon, October 22, 1922.
5. Personal correspondence from Lucy Shoe Meritt, May 4, 1997.
6. Carl Blegen Papers, Elizabeth Pierce Blegen to Carl Blegen, March 13, 1924.
7. Ida Thallon Hill papers, Elizabeth Pierce to Ida Thallon, December 1922;
Carl Blegen Papers, Elizabeth Pierce Blegen to Carl Blegen, March 15, 1923
and April 23, 1923.
8. Personal correspondence from Lucy Shoe Meritt, May 4, 1997. The couple remained childless and the house was deeded to the School in 1963. The School sold the house in November 1973 after much debate, but it still stands and had recently been restored.
9. For bibliography, see Carl Blegen Papers, Elizabeth Pierce Blegen to Carl Blegen, October 28, 1923. For indices, see the Preface of C. Blegen et al, *Troy*, Princeton, 1950; and the Foreword of C. Blegen et al, *The Palace of Nestor* 1.1, Princeton, 1966.
10. Carl Blegen acknowledged her assistance in the preface of many of his books, for instance *Zygouries*, Cambridge, 1929 and *Troy and the Trojans*, London, 1963, as well as the volumes noted above.
11. "Jewellery and ornament," in C. Blegen, *Prosymna: the Helladic Settlement preceding the Argive Heraeum*, Cambridge, 1937.
12. Carl Blegen Papers, Elizabeth Pierce Blegen to Carl Blegen, December 28, 1932; June 7, 1933. See also the Preface to Richter's *Kouroi*, New York and London, 1942.
13. Personal correspondence from Lucy Shoe Meritt, May 4, 1997.

