

Ida Thallon Hill (1875-1954) by Natalia Vogeikoff

The Early Years

A life committed to archaeology, especially the archaeology of Greece, began in Brooklyn, New York. Ida Carleton Thallon was born on August 11, 1875, one of the two daughters of John and Grace Green Thallon. From Packer Collegiate Institute she moved to Vassar College, where she received her A.B. degree in 1897. Two years later she set sail for Europe to attend the program of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens. On this trip, she was accompanied by another Vassar graduate, Lida Shaw King. After three months of touring in Holland, Germany, and Austria, visiting museums and learning German, the two women finally reached Greece.

The two years spent in Greece had a tremendous effect on Ida Thallon's scholarly career. In addition to the stimulating academic program of the American School, she praised the lectures of William Dörpfeld, *a leading German archaeologist of the day*¹. Students were expected to attend Dörpfeld's lectures *on the topography of Athens and participate in his tours of the Peloponnese and the islands. She also benefited from conversations with fellow student Harriet Boyd* (q.v. Breaking Ground). The impact of both these figures on Thallon's subsequent commitment to archaeology should not be underestimated.

Rufus Richardson was then the Director of the School and he was very popular with the students because he took much interest in them. Also on the faculty were Professor H. W. Smyth of Bryn Mawr as the Annual Visiting Professor, who was the

author of the widely used Greek Grammar, and also Dr. Wilhelm, Director of the Austrian Institute, who offered lectures on epigraphy.

From her personal diary and letters to her mother, Ida Thallon appears to have enjoyed her year in Greece enormously, but it is also clear that she was dismayed by School policies which provided more opportunities for male students than female students, something she was always quick to point out. More importantly, when possible she took an active role in reversing such discrimination.

In particular, she was frustrated by the fact that the American School did not allow women to participate in the excavations at Corinth, on the pretext that there were not enough accommodations. The lack of access for female students to the excavations was clearly a point of contention at the School. Just the previous year, another female member, Harriet Boyd, had also complained of similar inconsistencies in the School's treatment of its female members and students.²

Nevertheless and against all odds, the following year, in 1900, Harriet Boyd obtained the consent of the School's Director to excavate, and with the encouragement of David Hogarth, Director of the British School, and Sir Arthur Evans, she set out to find a suitable site on Crete. During *W. Dörpfeld's trip to the Islands with the students*, *Ida Thallon had the opportunity to talk to Harriet Boyd and* reported home that "Miss Boyd is one of the cleverest women I have ever seen, brimful of ideas and energy...If anyone ought to succeed, she should, for she has great ability..."³

It is very likely that Ida Thallon was already contemplating the idea of digging herself. Indeed, when she was trying to convince her parents to let her stay for a second year in Greece, Thallon mentioned the possibility of excavating " ...we have just had a letter from Mabel Dunlap saying that a friend has given her \$2000. to excavated...the

funds seem to be on hand and only the difficulty now will be choosing which site will suite us...” Although this plan did not work out in the end, Ida Thallon managed to get first hand experience in excavating the following year by participating in Charles Weller’s excavations at the Vari cave in Attika.

Despite the original hesitation of her parents, both Ida Thallon and her Professor Leach at Vassar College persuaded them that it was important for her career to spend a second year at the School. Ida had a very productive second year. As soon as she and Lida King came back (King was the Agnes Hoppin Fellow), the director of the School offered them the publication of the terracottas from Corinth. At the same time, Ida began studying geometric vases for her Master’s thesis at Vassar. Later, in February of 1901, she even succeeded in participating in the excavation at the Vari Cave.

This cave in southern Attica was well known to archaeologists, but it had not occurred to anyone to excavate there until Charles Weller, one of the School Fellows suggested it.⁴ His team included Maurice E. Dunham, Ida, and Lida King both of whom contributed \$15.00 to the excavation. In her diary, Ida describes the day by day progress which yielded several inscriptions, hundreds of lamps and coins, and seven reliefs of Pan, Hermes, and the Nymphs. Thallon was assigned the study of the reliefs which she published in 1903.⁵

Previously, in the summer of 1900, Harriet Boyd had offered both Thallon and King the publication of the pottery from her excavations near Kavousi, and in March of 1901, the women set out to Crete to catalogue it. After working for two weeks, the women returned to Athens where Boyd expressed her displeasure with their work and neither ever published the pottery.⁶ However, by the end of her second year in Athens, Thallon had completed her Master’s thesis and also been offered the publication of the

terracottas from Corinth; she had participated in the excavation at Vari, and been assigned the publication of the reliefs. Finally, she had been offered a position as an instructor of Greek at Vassar. She taught for two years before enrolling at Columbia University for graduate work. She earned her Ph.D. therein 1905 for her dissertation on *Lycosura and the Date of Damophon*, part of which was published in the *American Journal of Archaeology*.

Teaching Career

Ida Thallon then returned to Vassar, first as a teacher of Latin (1906-07), but later she was appointed to the Department of History, where she served until 1924, becoming an Associate Professor in 1916. This period is known largely through letters between Thallon and the Chair of the History Department, Professor Lucy Salmon, who inspired and supported Ida throughout her career at Vassar.⁷

In 1914, Thallon published her first book, entitled *Readings in Greek History*, a source book which received excellent reviews. A.T. Olmstead reported : “No book equals it in the use of the inscriptions of the writers on geography, while the large number of selections from the orators is another welcome novelty. The work of selecting has been well done and work can scarcely be bettered...”⁸ Almost forty years later, Elizabeth H. Haight characterized the book “still the best of its kind.”⁹

Ida Thallon also kept abreast of contemporary methodological approaches regarding the study of history, especially the relationship between history and geography, and that between history and archaeology. In 1916, she published an article on connections between archaeology and history, and the interdependence of these two disciplines. In the same article she wrote: “...the day is past when...the student of history or literature

with the text of the classic authors feels nothing but lofty scorn for the battered fragments...the archaeologist must realize that he cannot be sufficient unto himself and that without the vivifying power of literature and history his discoveries have the value only of disconnected facts.¹⁰

In 1919, in an article on Troy's connection with the Balkans and the Danube, Thallon placed great emphasis on the physical location of Troy in arguing that her material culture showed more affinities with the Danube area than with the Aegean.¹¹ Finally, in 1921, in a discussion of recent scholarship on prehistoric and Classical Greece and Italy, Thallon again underlined the close connection between history and geography stating that: "we are learning also that despite man's ingenuity certain fixed conditions in the physical characteristics of an area have made him follow the same routes from time immemorial either by land or by sea and have determined his economic, if not always his political, fate."¹²

In 1923, Thallon spent a semester in Italy and Greece collecting material for a book on pre-Roman Italy as seen from both an historical and an archaeological perspective. Published in 1925, *Rome of the Kings* received mixed reviews.¹³ Despite the fact that she spent more than fifteen years teaching ancient history, Thallon seems never to have considered herself an historian. In 1923, in a very revealing letter from Rome, she wrote to Lucy Salmon: "...it really is not my special field and I keep feeling more and more drawn to Greek and Roman archaeology in their historical significance..." More importantly, for the first time she was contemplating her resignation from Vassar.¹⁴ In the summer of the same year, while visiting Greece for two months, Thallon resumed her old friendship with Bert Hodge Hill, then Director of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens. A year later, in 1924, they married and she resigned from her

position at Vassar and she moved to Greece permanently.

Return to Greece and Archaeology

As the wife of the Director of the American School at Athens, Ida was surrounded by archaeologists. Her best friend and former student at Vassar Elizabeth Pierce was also married the same year to another archaeologist, Carl W. Blegen. For the rest of their lives the two couples (the Hills and the Blegens) would share the same premises. Now free of her teaching obligations, Thallon devoted herself to archaeology.

In 1924, Harold N. Fowler was appointed editor-in-chief of the Corinth publications. He spent that same year in Athens surveying the situation at Corinth, mapping out a series of volumes that would cover all of the excavated material and buildings. At once, he began looking for people to write the various volumes. Thallon-Hill committed herself to the publication of the Corinthian terracottas, a project she had started long before with Lida Shaw King. With the help of Elizabeth van Buren, an expert on architectural terracottas, Thallon-Hill and Elizabeth Blegen revised her old notes and catalogued the new material. Indeed, Thallon-Hill's book on the Corinthian terracottas was the first volume to be published in the Corinth series in 1929.¹⁵

While working on this book, Thallon-Hill was also occupied with other tasks. In 1925, Carl Blegen conducted an excavation at Heraeum in Argos unearthing an important Bronze Age settlement, Prosymna. In addition to participating in the campaign, Thallon-Hill and Elizabeth Blegen undertook the task of inventorying all finds from the excavation.¹⁶ At the same time, Thallon-Hill contributed heavily to the writing of the Corinth annual report by Bert Hodges Hill.

The latter is remembered to the history of the American School as a very skillful

excavator and a somewhat successful Director. However, the one notable shortcoming in B.H. Hill's twenty year tenure was his poor record of publication, and as a result he was forced to resign from the School's directorship in 1926. A year earlier, Ida had put pressure on her husband to finish his annual report on time and even offered to write it herself.¹⁷ Not only did she assist with its writing, but she also did all the "dog work" of editing and typing.¹⁸ In addition to the annual report, Ida and Elizabeth Blegen also undertook editing Hill's ill-fated manuscript on Peirene, which was supposed to go to publication in 1926. Ida was very methodical and efficient with her scholarly work and one wonders whether her husband could have avoided his dismissal if he had only married her sooner!

B.H. Hill's forced resignation—fair or unfair—came as a shock to the archaeological community. The Hills together with the Blegens and other members of the School fought hard to overturn the decision of the Managing Committee. Thallon herself spilled quantities of ink writing to various members about Hill's effectiveness and leadership as Director of the School. But the Committee's decision was irreversible. Carl Blegen was appointed as Acting Director for 1926-27.

At the end of Blegen's term, the Hills and the Blegens moved first into a house on Regilla Street before settling into the well-known house at 9 Ploutarchou. Ida and Elizabeth led a very social life and their house became a meeting place for many of the leading archaeologists of the time.

During her years in Athens, Ida acquired more experience as a field archaeologist. In 1927-28, she participated in the Blegens' campaigns at Prosymna and from 1932-38 in the excavations at Troy, and finally at Pylos. Both Ida and Elizabeth worked extensively on the inventories for Troy and Prosymna, as well as for B.H. Hill's excavations at

Lapithos on Cyprus.

As soon as her book on the Corinthian terracottas went to press, Thallon began work on a textbook about Greek archaeology, which summarized the evidence from archaeological investigations of the previous fifty years. Unfortunately, her complete manuscript, “50 years of excavations,” was never published.

In 1935, Ida Thallon Hill had accepted the invitation of the Jane Harrison Memorial Committee of Newnham College to prepare a new edition of Harrison’s *Mythology and Monuments*.¹⁹ Ida’s edition—which she referred to as “Jane”—was ready by 1938, but its publication was interrupted by the War, during which the Hills and Blegens moved back to the States. During her years in America, Ida spent most of her time working on her other manuscript, the “50 years”. After the War, the Jane Harrison Memorial Committee withdrew its offer to publish her revised edition of Jane Harrison’s book. However, Ida continued to work on her manuscript, although its form was now different from Harrison’s original.

With the on-going excavations at the Athenian Agora, the North Slope of the Akropolis, and the Kerameikos, the need for a new book on Athenian topography became imperative. Thallon undertook the task of writing such a textbook—a combination of a guide-book and a scholarly publication, which was finally published in 1953 under the title *Ancient City of Athens*. The book was dedicated to Jane Harrison and was generally well-received, first because it summarized recent archaeological investigation in Athens and second because it also presented unpublished views of the “Athenian triumvirate” (B.H. Hill, G.P. Stevens, and W.B. Dinsmoor).¹⁸

Ida Thallon Hill died at sea on December 14, 1954, while traveling to Athens. She was seventy-nine years old, but in June of that same year she had excavated with

Carl Blegen at Pylos, for the last time. To the end of her life, she remained as ardent proponent of field archaeology. It might be said that a day did not pass in her life in Greece when Ida failed to visit an archaeological site or a museum. At the time of her death, she was working on the publication of her other manuscript, the “50 years of excavations.”

Sources:

Although without success, every effort has been made to contact the copyright holder of Ida Thallon Hill’s papers to obtain permission for reproducing excerpts from her correspondence. This is a scholarly work without any commercial interest on the writer’s part.

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Notes

1. Letter to her mother (Nov. 13, 1899), Ida Thallon Hill Papers
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3. Letter to her mother (May 11, 1900) Ida Thallon Hill Papers
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6. Ida Thallon’s personal diary (1900-01), entry for April 5, 1901, Ida Thallon Hill Papers.
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 11. Thallon, Ida C. "Some Balkan and Danubian Connexions of Troy," *Journal of Historical Studies* 39 (1919), 185-201.
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 13. Hill, Ida Thallon, *Rome of the Kings*, New York, 1925.
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 16. Personal diary (Oct. 1924-May 1926), 65-66, 136. Ida Thallon Hill Papers.
 17. Letter to Bert Hodge Hill (August 4, 1925), Bert Hodge Hill Papers, American School of Classical Studies at Athens.
 18. Personal diary (Oct. 1924-May 1926), 93-94; (May 1926-Swpt. 1927), 43-46, Ida Thallon Hill Papers.
 19. See the preface of Ida Thallon Hill, *The Ancient City of Athens*, London;Cambridge Mass., 1953. Thallon had first met Jane Harrison in Athens in 1901 and was much charmed by her. Later in 1916 the two women attended the so-called Russian Meeting at Oxford. See personal diary (1900-1901) 25 and letters of Jane Harrison in the Ida Thallon Hill Papers.