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Constantakopoulou, Christy (2016) (J.T.) Bent (edited by G. Brisch) The Dodecanese: Further Travels Among the Insular Greeks: Selected Writings of J. Theodore and Mabel V.A. Bent, 1885–1888. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015. Pp. xiv + 195. £15. 9781784910969. [Book Review]

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**BYZANTINE  
AND MODERN GREEK STUDIES**

BENT (J.T.) (edited by G. Brisch) **The Dodecanese: Further Travels Among the Insular Greeks: Selected Writings of J. Theodore and Mabel V.A. Bent, 1885–1888.** Oxford: Archaeopress, 2015. Pp. xiv + 195. £15. 9781784910969.

Theodore Bent is perhaps better known as the author of a book based on his travels to the Cyclades in 1883–1884. That book, entitled *The Cyclades, or, Life among the Insular Greeks*, was first published in 1885 and then republished in 2002 by Archaeopress. The book under review is essentially the second installment of the Cyclades book, as it is based on Bent's travels, along with his wife Mabel, to the Dodecanese in 1885–1888. Yet, Bent himself never published the notes from his travels to the Dodecanese as a book; rather, the editor, G. Brisch, has collected here in a neat little volume the relevant articles published by Bent based on his travels, as well as a transcription of notes made by Mabel Bent during the same period.

This is a fascinating book. It is a splendid read, as it gives the reader, very much like its predecessor on the Cyclades, an excellent insight into life in the Aegean at the end of the 19th century. Bent, of course, was interested in the archaeology of the region, from the Bronze Age to the Classical and Hellenistic periods. But while his articles and notes discuss the archaeology and landscape of the islands, it is the everyday life, customs and hardships of the islanders that are much more fascinating and rewarding for today's audience. Bent is very straightforward about his main aim: he turned his attention to the Dodecanese because he hoped that the region, which at that time was part of the Ottoman Empire, would be a more fruitful area for him to discover antiquities and take them back to Britain. Let's not mince our words here: what Bent does in the region is essentially looting. Indeed, he turned his attention to the Dodecanese because the government of the newly-founded Greek state imposed restrictions to his excavations in the Greek-owned territories; in other words, Greece would not allow Bent to dig and carry antiquities without permission. So Bent moved to the Dodecanese in the hope that the Ottomans would have no such concerns (he was partially right, but it seems that the period of indiscriminate looting in the Aegean was reaching its end in the 1880s).

The ownership of antiquities and the questions of looting and the illegal antiquities trade have been a focus of attention for modern scholarship for some time now. It is therefore strange that the introduction does not attempt to put Bent's activities in the Aegean (both in the Cyclades and in the Dodecanese) into some kind of appropriate historical context. What we get, instead, is sheer admiration for Bent as a scholar, and as an individual, who, along with his wife, suffered hardship while visiting such impoverished islands. There is no contextualization, no criticism provided. Bent's own words are a wonderful example of Victorian orientalism in action. I started making notes of all the attestations where the islanders (mostly Greeks, but also Turks) are characterized as 'uncultured savages', 'primitive' (even 'deliciously primitive' at p. 42 for Carpathos), 'simple', even 'beasts in the darkest ignorance' (5). The mourning songs in a funeral are called 'hideous wails' (30). But there were so many such attestations of cultural, one assumes European, superiority over the locals that I soon stopped. Bent occasionally acknowledges the hardship that the islanders faced in their everyday lives in order to survive, but mostly he has disdain. He complains about food (and the lack of food, especially during Orthodox Lent), accommodation and so on. The Bents, who were often the first European travellers to reach some of the islands, were given the best houses to stay in; but, obviously, none of these houses would be equivalent to the standard of living they were used to as upper class Brits back at home. Yet none of this essentially deeply colonialist attitude is addressed in the introduction; what we get is an uncritical edition, full of admiration, of a fascinating set of texts.

Bent was also deeply interested in what he perceived as an uninterrupted continuity between ancient customs and modern (ie. 19th-century) equivalent: for example, he links St Eleutherios on Carpathos with the goddess Eileithyia and sees the custom of food for the dead as a continuation of the festival of Proerosia. Certainly, such acceptance of uninterrupted continuation of customs is not an atypical feature of 19th-century attitudes to modern Greece. What I found more perplexing was that the same attitude is adopted by the editor in the captions of the modern photos (from the 1970s and 1980s) that accompany the text. I, for one, am not sure that adding modern photos of insular customs helps illuminate ancient practices, nor indeed 19th-century narratives.

That said, it is a very good thing that the writings of the Bents about their travels in the Dodecanese are now collected in one volume. I would have liked a more critical contextual approach to the texts, and indeed to the figure of the European archaeologist approaching the local ‘savages’ in order to buy from them – or indeed dig without permission – the constituent elements of their national past and identity. We do not get that from this book, but we do get glimpses of an insular life now long gone.

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