Northern Greece Tour 1

Day 1: Thessaloniki — Where Myth, Empire,
and Daily Life Intersect

Explore the City of Thessaloniki—Myth, Empire, and Daily Life

The day breaks with the sound of a market bell ringing down the narrow cobbled lanes as the scent of warm sesame koulouri drifts from a bakery window. Steam rises from a vendor's fresh espresso under the shadow of ancient arches, and the sea breeze carries a hint of salt and spice through the busy Agora. Your journey through Northern Greece begins in Thessaloniki, where myth and memory are more than mere stories; they are also part of reality. As you walk through its streets, feel the weight of centuries gently resting upon your shoulders like a parent's loving hand on a child's back. It was never just stone and mortar; it has always been a meeting place, a crossroads where human ambition, dreams, and faith have converged and lingered. The city drew its name from the battlefield of a victorious siege after the death of Alexander the Great, while at the same time carrying the spirit of beginnings and endings, of hope and loss. As you wander through its streets, be sure to listen intently for the whispers of merchants and craftsmen who once walked these same roads, hear the echoes of their footfalls as they travelled over the ancient stones of this metropolis, and feel the silence of history seeping into your very bones. You are invited to be moulded by thousands of years' worth of layers of history, as the stories of the city become part of your own. Today, Thessaloniki is an incredible mix of old and new, surrounded by ancient ruins, yet proud of its modern architecture alongside bustling marketplaces and lively neighbourhoods, with colourful food to entice you from every corner. In Thessaloniki, observance will not only allow you to witness the heartbeat of the city, but by participating, you will feel its pulse resonate in your body.

The cobblestones of some of Thessaloniki's streets date back more than 2,000 years to antiquity—they speak of a lifelong struggle of civilisations' desire for order in an ever-restless world. Walking through this city (Thessaloniki) means you are experiencing the sound of everyday life, such as the merchants calling, children laughing, and the scent of cinnamon coming from one of the many market stalls, as it transports you to places both far away and long ago. As your eye catches a glimpse of colourful fabric, of a beautifully shaped pot made by hands that no longer exist, you come to understand that everything is connected to the endless tapestry of the city. Additionally, as you listen to the many voices around you speaking in various languages and hear the sounds of bronze clinking and silk brushing against each other, you are reminded that throughout history, the world has gathered together in this place.

In Thessaloniki, the sacred and the profane have always danced together. Fishermen rise at dawn to pull nets from the sea while the smell of salt is pungent and cool in the air. In the temples, priests start the fire and say prayers to Apollo and Athena, in the hopes of getting music, wisdom, and some good luck. The public baths were a place to wash away the day's dirt, but they were also where people went to tell stories, share laughter, have arguments, and connect their lives together. In this city, every day is connected to something greater than itself.

Myth was a living framework through which people understood their world. The legend of Saint Demetrius, the soldier-martyr who was believed to watch over the city, became woven into the character of Thessaloniki with a sense of divine protection. Martyrdom of Christianity was represented in the city of Thessaloniki through Saint Demetrios, who suffered at the hands of the Romans. His martyrdom became emblematic of persistence and hope in defiance of the Roman

Empire's persecution. Also, he represents a connection between angels and people of faith and demonstrates the blending of civility and religious identity.

Thessaloniki's fortifications, which were built up by both Romans and Byzantines, represented not only a defence system but also the existence of survival and the continuity of Christian culture within this particular location. The fortification represented Christ's assurance of protection to the people of Thessaloniki, as they were constantly aware of being surrounded by enemies and future siege potential. Soldiers who guarded the fortifications would have been on constant alert for "enemy" forces, and their historical legacy was that "peace" existed at the same time that "war" existed.

In the Jewish section of the city, known as Ladadika, the Jewish population maintained their culture and faith while simultaneously adapting to the new situation imposed by Christian domination of the city. The combination of freshly baked bread and reciting prayers in the Synagogue created a multi-sensory experience for people in the Jewish district of Thessaloniki. The interaction of the two created a very transitional experience between myth and reality, with the reality of exile and survival being intertwined with the biblical stories of heroes.

The mythology of the divine was not just used for religious purposes; it was used to justify authority. The reliefs located on the Arch of Galerius glorify the emperor through images of divine intervention. These images helped to convey to both citizens and visitors alike that the fate of the city and its citizens depended on the will of the gods.

The streets of Thessaloniki, therefore, tell the story of a people who dwelt in the convergence of myth, authority, and the struggles of daily life, where divine protection and human effort converge, and the sacred is part of everyday life. On the underside of Thessaloniki, or through its basilicas; across its ancient Roman arches; in its marketplaces, where the winds of the Aegean Sea bring the scent of salt and spice; there exists a second map—a map that you feel as much as you see. This is a city of thresholds, where roads that come from the north meet the open hand of the Gulf of Thermaikos; everything moves through the city: language, wheat, soldiers, pilgrims, love, and rumour. In such places, the world feels as though it is much closer together; anything can occur.

Yet, amid this grand tapestry, it is the small, present moments that keep the spirit of Thessaloniki alive. Yannis, a local baker whose family has worked the same street for generations, smiles as he pulls loaves from his oven and says, "Every morning, I knead my dough at dawn, just like my grandfather did. When the city wakes, I feel like I'm part of a story that began long before me." A university student rushing past the ruins on her way to class might glance up and remark, "I love how, between lectures, you can sit on ancient stones and eat a koulouri, as if the past was always just within reach." In these voices, the dance of sacred and ordinary continues—myth living side by side with everyday life.

It is not just geography that defines a crossroads; it is the location of fate; it is where omens accumulate. You may taste that mixture presently within the food you eat, hear it in the music you listen to, and see it in the people that surround you.

Thessaloniki is a doorway; on the other side of the doorway lie Vergina and Olympus, each waiting for you to add their narratives to your own narrative.

Imagine Thessaloniki during the time period understood as late antiquity; a time when Christianity was gaining strength, and yet the old gods had not yet fled into poetry. Somewhere within the city, in the shadows of a colonnade, a household has left behind a small statue of Hermes beside the entrance to their home, used not in "worship," but as a habit concerning how they store their keys.

Somewhere in the city, sailors are still known to speak to Poseidon before a storm and make the sign of the cross afterwards. No city has ever made a clean transition to Christianity before; cities build one layer upon another.

Then, there is the marker of a long history of empire—the second city of Byzantium, the northern lungs of the empire. Thessaloniki has become a location where commerce and doctrine are as much influenced by the ocean as by the sea itself; where sermons, saints, and imperial proclamations arrive like a change in the weather. Even tragedy has contributed to the city's evolving mythology: each fire, siege, plague or rebellion adds to the city's layer of meaning, and the city continues to write its own epitaph only to defy its own death.

If Day 1 is representative of the internal rhythm of Thessaloniki, then this internal rhythm is that Thessaloniki is not only an archive of history but a base for the creation of identity through history, identity through story, and story through the daily customs or practices of the people living in Thessaloniki; both sacred and mundane are different expressions that describe the same street.

Day 2: Vergina (Aigai) — Sacred Kingship, Myth, and the Rhythm of Life

The Sacred Kingship and the Rhythm of Life is the ancient city of Vergina, or Aigai, which has been the circling hub of early Macedonia, with its kings ruling not just through war but also through supernatural imagery and lineage in their myths. The significant archaeological discovery of the tomb of Philip II (the father of Alexander the Great) speaks to the nature of divinely gaining power through the rituals of divinity, with myths as strong as bloodlines were in creating identity. When you stand before Philip's gilded oak wreath, there is a sudden hush, as if the gold itself still holds its breath, catching a fragment of the awe once reserved for kings.

Philip II's over-the-top burial is symbolic of the belief of kingship as existing at a higher than earthly level, with his burial wanting to show that while on Earth, the king's existence was divine, and upon the death of that king, the king would then go on to live as a king in the afterlife. Inside his tomb, there is a gilded oak wreath, as well as a ceremonial shield displaying events from Philip's reign, all serving to show Philip's divinity and position within the cosmos and the universal approval of the god of the gods through the Vergina Sun, found within the tomb. These items were not simply items of decoration, but symbols of political power to invoke awe and loyalty in both allies and subjects alike. The ivory figurines located in the antechamber were probably used as decoration on the Royal Throne. When you arrive, you can visit the Vergina Museum, which has interactive presentations that will help you to appreciate the ancient world and understand the importance of the artifacts in the museum. You will see a multimedia presentation that will place the artifacts in their historical context and provide a detailed description that helps you understand Macedonian culture and history.

The people of Aigai lived as part of a rural settlement based on agriculture. The plains surrounding Aigai were fertile, providing large quantities of barley, wheat, and olives—a significant portion of the Macedonian diet. Smallholders, peasants, and artisans grew crops, created pottery on potter's wheels, forged bronze weapons, and dyed textiles.

The marketplace in Aigai would have been bustling with activity, with vendors selling freshly baked bread made from wheat flour, goat cheese, and honey collected by beekeepers from wild mountain bees. Wine was an essential part of religious ceremonies honouring Dionysus, the god of wine, in whom the people of Macedon had a strong belief. Festivals devoted to Dionysus were held

throughout the region, and they brought people together to have a great deal of fun and to experience the divine.
Mythology provided a sense of community for the people who worshipped in Aigai. The ruling family's claims of descent from Heracles created a link between the ruling family and the age of heroes, validating the ruling family's power and facilitating its ability to inspire loyal subjects. Heracles' feats of strength and courage were shared among groups of people around the fire as examples of loyalty and bravery. In many local tales, the Pierian Nymphs are mentioned as if they represent the significance of art and inspiration, indicating that all creativity originates from the gods and is important for both kings and common people alike.

Besides being a political centre, Aigai was also culturally significant. Courtiers and military personnel would move throughout the palace while debating strategy or politics, poets and musicians would make presentations that would support the heroic tale of the kingdom, and mosaics of the epic poetry of Homer were constantly reminding those within Macedonia that their fate was tied to the gods and to the old stories.

In Aigai, life was a partnership of hard work and faith, with everything being infused with the sacred. Kings ruled not only by sword but also through the authority of myth; farmers planted their crops, passing through religious rituals; artisans produced goods of symbolic nature. The combination of history, myth, and day-to-day life formed a world where each stone, story, and ritual cooperatively validated the identity and authority of Macedonia.

It is here that the Macedonian concept of authority can be seen as performance, and how theatre is transformed into policy. Kingship in Macedonia was not simply about ruling but was itself a grand spectacle, a performative action, shaped and supported by family history. Royal legitimacy was enacted again and again through vivid public ceremonies, which made myth real in the eyes of the people. One such ritual was the staged royal lion hunt, where the king, surrounded by nobles and witnessed by a crowd, would face a live lion in the arena. The king's triumph over the beast was more than a demonstration of bravery: it was a living tableau of Heracles, whose legendary defeat of the Nemean lion symbolised the taming of chaos and the founding of order. The blood on the king's hands became the myth made flesh, reassuring subjects that their ruler possessed heroic strength and the divine mandate to conquer all obstacles, whether those obstacles were border tribes, fractious nobles, or the armies of Persia.

Once, at the festival of Dion, the spectacle took on a life of its own. A rival chieftain from a neighbouring land, sceptical of the Macedonian claim to descent from Heracles, watched as the king strode into the arena. When the lion fell, and the crowd erupted in cheers, the chieftain was said to have turned pale, whispering to his counsellor that only a man favoured by the gods could win such a contest. Later, the same chieftain abandoned his own claim to the throne and swore fealty to the Macedonian king, having witnessed the myth in action and understanding that mere words could not stand against a story made real before thousands of eyes. In the carved reliefs and retold tales that followed, it was not only the lion that had been tamed, but also Macedonia's rivals, subdued by the public power of legend.

In the moment when the slain lion was displayed before the people, everyone present would see the legacy of Heracles not merely told but acted out, binding the royal house to the mythic past and making the acts of kingship a kind of ongoing epic. To inherit Heracles did not mean to claim a distant ancestor, but to embody a living moral ideal: strength in the service of order, and the right to create a new world by overcoming adversaries. The hero's tale became the king's policy, enacted in the sight of all and sewing together the fabric of legitimacy with the threads of awe and spectacle.

An example might be contemporary Macedonian artist Elena Papadopoulos, who eloquently remarks how Heracles defines today's Balkan identity. "In our mythology and our art, Heracles is a symbol of strength and perseverance," she says. "He is the source of our Greek identity and serves as a vital reminder of our ancestry as builders and protectors. This is how we envision ourselves overcoming today's difficulties."

The royal tomb, whose precious installations generate an unbroken line of continuity back through to the past, serves a purpose beyond merely honouring Philip; it also creates a machine that compresses the past down into the present—the dead king is a perpetual reminder of legitimacy, a spring that will never run dry. In young or fragile states, ancestors act as the institutions. They give rise to continuity for the state, which is itself still in the process of being born.

Ultimately, the darker dimension of Aigai enriches one's visit - it is here that glory and vulnerability walk through the same doors. Philip's court was not all success; it was also a place of intrigue, hostage-taking, shifting loyalties, marriages as peace accords, and the dread of succession looming over everyone. In an atmosphere such as this, myth becomes stabilising as well as inspiring; it tells all those with whom one is in a relationship what the hierarchy of society "means," so that each can endure the costs of being in hierarchy. Thessaloniki has been referred to as the city of many different layers, while Aigai is depicted as the city of beginnings, where the Macedonians first started to proclaim their own power through gold and ceremonial ritual, and subsequently taught the region to listen.

Day 3: Pella — The Birthplace of Empire

On the third day of our travels, we will visit Pella, the site of the empire's foundations and the centre of everyday life. Aigai became the heart of a burgeoning empire, and Pella, which was built upon the empire's momentum after Aigai, became one of its most populated urban areas with a population of almost 20,000 by the end of the empire's expansion.

Pella was filled with activity, and its broad roads of stone, which had been worn by many, and its open square were filled with merchants, soldiers, professors, and servants. The grand villas' floors were beautifully adorned with mosaics of hunting scenes, mythological battles, and a variety of flowers that depicted the effort of humanity and the benevolence of the gods. One of the most famous mosaics of the ancient world, the one found in the House of the Abduction of Helen, illustrated a mythological story important to the culture of the ancient Greeks. Among the many tessera, you can see Menelaus' sword gleaming, symbolising the passionate ambition and nobility that helped to make and break empires. The idea that the book expresses is the complexity of human behaviour and the role that love can play in great conflict. The idea that personal goals can drive the motivation of an empire that is attempting to expand.

The people of Pella combined daily life with the spiritual. Farmers grew their crops of olives and grapes to fill the city’s storerooms with oil and wine, and those commodities served as a base for the economy and as a part of the religious practices of Pella. The markets of Pella were filled with merchants who sold fresh fish from the lakes near Pella and herbs and textiles coloured by shells or plants, with different colours representing different meanings.

The birth of Alexander the Great in Pella in 356 bce was said to have been a divine event. His mother, Olympias, was said to have been a descendant of Achilles and of the gods, and the city of Pella had also been founded by those of divine lineage. There was a legend that before the birth of Alexander, a serpent appeared to Olympias, which was a symbol of divine protection and wisdom, and that was the sign that Alexander had been chosen by the gods. This combination of myth and

monarchy was not just about a story, but a method for the use of political power to create loyalty and justification for expansion.

Pella was also the source of ideas. Aristotle, the most famous thinker of all time, taught Alexander while he lived in Pella, and Alexander learned about ethics, politics, and science. Pella's libraries and schools housed myth and logic, and both were used to provide education about the mythological past of the gods and heroes and the workings of the world. Throughout the year, religious festivals tied the various groups that made up society together.

The cult of Dionysus, the deity of wine and ecstasy, was celebrated in Athens through theatrical performances and ecstatic dances, merging the boundaries of mortals and gods. Zeus and Athena shrines also served as a constant reminder of the citizens' place in cosmic order, aiding in reinforcing the social hierarchy and civic duty.

The everyday rhythm during the life of Pella would also pace the daily existence of the empire's expansion. Soldiers in the city would practice on the training grounds, preparing for campaigns that would expand the borders of Macedon way beyond Greece. Craftspersons in Pella created weapons and artefacts that were both functional and represented their value, all within the context of symbolic meanings derived from the images created for them.

This city, where stone and mythology coexisted, will provide the backdrop for dreams of the future, developing the identity that would form through the expression of the myths and rhythms of the lives that were part of that vast empire.

In Pella, Greek mythology adapts to Macedonian state building—using those stories not only as inherited but as grammar for the Macedonian Empire. Without a doubt, the abduction of Helen is not simply a decoration on the floor of the wealthy; it serves as a reminder of the inception of the world's great wars, all stemming from desire and honour, that become catastrophic storms that consume cities. To walk over Helen in a mosaic is to say: we can bear the weight of the ancient Greek tragedies and grow beyond them.

The serpent tale cannot contain its biological truth; its meaning is a much older Mediterranean language of power. Serpents serve as thresholds, house guardians, the messengers of the underworld, and represent renewal and fear, as creatures that shed and renew their skin and embody transformation. A child who bears the mark of a serpent will grow to metamorphose; politically, it suggests that this ruler cannot be contained by previous boundaries.

Visualise Pella during the morning hours, before fate has become established as its identity. Children playfully dash down the streets; their joyous laughter cascades over the yapping of the dogs, while families gather at the fountain for the day's market; their voices merge with one another's. As the air is filled with the smell of bread, warm, active, and the aromas of olive oil and the earthy smell of horses, somewhere a knife is being sharpened, the sound representing an unspoken promise of what is to come. As incense surrounds the palace, a tutor recites Homer's Words throughout the day; if you listen very carefully, you may be able to hear an undetectable beat that is reverberating within, a heartbeat of something stirring—a melody that one day will become the beat of an empire. Greatness does not come with a ceremony of accolades; rather, it is nurtured in the rituals, hopes, and anticipation of a typical morning.

If Aigai is the embodiment of divine kingship, then Pella is the embodiment of divine expansion; at the moment when the myth of Macedon began to transfer from a kingdom of defence to a kingdom of world justification.

Day 4 of the Journey: Meteoros – Natural Structures with Religious Significance and Connection between Heaven and Earth

The dramatic rock formations of Meteoros arise from the flatlands of Thessaly as though they were not created by nature, but rather placed there by God to form natural columns holding up the dome of heaven. As they rise into the heavens, they have been the site of man's devotion and myth for many generations.

The Ancient Greeks viewed these enormous stone formations as being created by the Titans or Giants through their battles, and that they shaped the surface of the earth. Greek mythology includes stories of Zeus throwing his thunderbolts and splitting the mountains to create these rock formations reaching to the heavens. The name Meteoros translates to "suspended in the air," which expresses the extraordinary nature of the rocks and indicates where heaven and earth meet.

In the 14th century CE, monks, in search of quiet places to devote their lives to God, built monasteries on the height of these cliffs so that it seemed they were suspended in the air, and these monasteries became a refuge for their occupants for both time and gravity. Many of the paintings in these monasteries illustrate biblical stories, as well as stories from mythology that speak of bringing heaven and earth together, also indicating the ties between the two religious practices.

Long before the monks found their way to this area of Greece, mythology and agriculture were interwoven into every aspect of life. Farmers occupied the plains and demanded respect from the land they cultivated by calling on the sacredness of Mother Nature. The farmers were able to cultivate grain and grapes, and the farmers' harvests were dedicated to Demeter and Dionysus, the god and goddess of agriculture and wine, respectively.

The farmers experienced many of life's events in accordance with the rhythms of Mother Nature and their mythology. The agricultural cycle was celebrated with community festivals (of music and dance) to connect with god(s) and create strong community ties. Stories of nymphs placed in the forest and stream were passed along through oral traditions, describing nature's protection of the land and its people.

The ascent to the monasteries used to be made exclusively via rope ladders or nets, but today it is symbolic of one's inner spiritual journey (for example, from concerns of earth to communion with the divine). This upward motion, both as a physical and mental journey, embodies arete, the Greek ideal of pursuit of excellence through body, mind, and spirit. As you navigate the winding path up the rocks, take a moment at the fourth switchback and pause. What burden are you carrying from your daily life? Name it, even just to yourself, and imagine laying it down here on the mountainside. Let the next steps of your climb rise a little lighter, making this ascent not only about reaching a physical summit but also about creating your own ritual of letting go and renewal.

These monasteries preserve many Byzantine art treasures and manuscripts, connecting believers to the centuries of faith and history they hold sacred. The smell of incense, mixed with the essences of pine and stone, serves as a reminder of sacredness in this breathtaking landscape.

Meteora is an example of the strength and continuity of myth and faith that shape our existence through the interaction between man's daily life (work, worship, and community) and the monumental power of nature.

Meteora is a place where stone becomes spirit; where earth reaches upward asking the sky questions. The rocks do not merely stand; they command your attention and ask you to look up and ponder. Therefore, it is no surprise that people have sought out this place throughout time to find something larger than themselves and to experience life on the edge of possibility. As you imagine the monks' journey step by step, consider what you may be leaving behind with each step, what

burden are you willing to lay down? Your journey can also be one of spiritual discovery. Invite your friends to share their personal reflections in the small village at the foot of the mountain after lunch: memories from their time here; questions about the community; how they have been moved through connection, by climbing these rocks and being in the heights, to connect with their innermost feelings.

Sharing our stories woven together, we'll create our small tapestry, joined with each of our voices to add to the long narrative of Meteora.

There are many functions for monasticism, but one is that the solitude of the monk is a result of being at a height relative to others (when life is filled with chaos and uncertainty due to an unstable world filled with raids, wars, and a constant reconfiguration of borders, height represents safety). However, as much as a monk tries to escape the chaos of the world, a monk climbs to see the world as a whole; the world is small, short-lived, and lacking something. The rocks and the thousands of hours spent sculpting these rocks speak in silence.

As with other significant ancient milestones, ancient churches may be located here, as ancient and Christian symbols both exist. Ancient Greeks have recognised the meaning of climbing mountains: heroes ascended to meet the gods; prophets went to the mountains to receive truth; and therefore, the mountains are places to meet something larger than yourself. The only difference between what was going on in ancient times compared to today relates to God's name from ancient times (Zeus) to modern times (Christ); nymphs = Saints; thunder (the sound of god) = Hymn (the sound of god).

There is also a "social history" to consider when looking at Meteora, so that you may appreciate it more: the monasteries were used as "social" fortresses and archives. During the many centuries that empires changed and borders changed, monasteries provided the preservation of manuscripts, local history, liturgy, families, land and the persistence of language. Meteora is a symbol of beauty and hope for all those who continue to copy history. Step into a silent chapel and you may see a present-day monk bent over parchment, carefully copying ancient hymns by hand, his movements echoing the patient efforts of countless generations. Whether by candlelight or beneath a window’s shifting sun, this living custodian sustains the fragile thread that ties the past to the present. To watch him work, absorbed and unhurried, is to witness not only endurance, but quiet devotion enacting the very idea of Meteora as a living archive.
when the world around us is falling apart.

Day 5 - Mount Olympus ~ The Cosmic Axis. Where Gods Ruled, and Mortal Men Lived.

Mount Olympus is more than just an enormous mountain; instead, it is the sacred spine of the Ancient Greek Cosmos, a space that is liminal — the space where the Divine and Humanity intersect, interact and overlap.

To the Ancients of Macedon and Ancient Greece, Olympus is not only a mountain, but it is also a living entity, the throne of all the gods who hold sway over all that live underneath its shadow.

The peaks of Olympus were jagged and constantly hidden from view due to the swirling clouds and the covering of snow; the peaks seemed to reach towards the heavens.

Many ancient stories tell of the location of Zeus’ mighty palace, which is hidden in the clouds, where thunder can be heard rumbling and lightning, as his will is invoked in a very loud manner.

To the villagers located in the foothills of Mount Olympus, both thunder and lightning are not so much random; rather, they are direct messages from the gods, which can be interpreted as warnings, blessings, or punishment. When a storm rolls across the fields, a farmer might pause mid-task and look skyward, murmuring, "Demeter, spare this field," letting the words rise with the growl of thunder above. In moments like this, the game between human hope and the will of the divine becomes immediate, a living dialogue felt in each heartbeat and every echo from the sky.

Life below Olympus was a matter of "playing the game" between human input and divine default. Farmers who planted barley and olives whispered prayers to Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, for the earth to yield its bounty. Herdsmen who guided their flocks of sheep through the rocky terrain made sacrifices to Pan, the wild god of the forest and music, and sought protection from wolves and the elements. Festivals marked the seasonal rhythms of sowing, growing, and harvesting, providing support to myth and ritual in creating the cosmic order.

Mythology, as a living and breathing language, provided the explanation for all the mysteries found in nature and people's experiences. Gods personified the forces of nature and human characteristics. For example, Athena represents the qualities of wisdom and strategy in warfare, Artemis protects the wild and the vulnerable, and Dionysus, the god of ecstasy in wildness, fertility and change.

The stories of the gods, told and retold by fire in homes, the agora and at festivals, provided guidance for moral development and spirituality, as well as entertainment.

The Olympic Games are the greatest expression of this worldview, held every four years at Olympia, in honour of Zeus. Athletes came from all parts of Greece to compete; their bodies represented their physical excellence and were a reflection of the perfection inherently possessed by the gods. Winning an Olympic medal was a victory for the entire community, as well as an offering to the gods. Winning reinforced the social structure of communities and pride in the cities. The games were an annual ritual of the same divine-human harmony, with the competing athletes representing the divine by using the human body.

In addition to the grandiose mythological stories told of the gods, people believed that the forests and caves were filled with nymphs, spirits, and goddesses. These are the beings who could bless and curse those who travelled through these areas. Many of the stories (folktales) told by the residents of these communities served to remind them that they are not permanent and were in contact with the divine, which created a thin barrier between the worlds of nature and the supernatural.

For the Rulers of Macedon, Mount Olympus represented the ultimate legitimisation of their culture and authority. The assertion that you are a descendant of either Zeus or the other Gods of Olympus is a form of political power; it provides an essential rationale for your ability to rule and serves as a bridge between your earthly authority and the seas of reality that surround us. Just as people see the mountain every day, they were continually reminded, both as kings and as subjects, of the spiritual force behind their daily acts of success, justice and fate.
In addition to the fact that Olympus represents a social model viewed from above, it acts as a metaphor for the processes of cross-cultural political interaction; Zeus is considered to be a sovereign deity who controls a portion of the universe and has the authority to create and maintain order. Similar to the manner in which Roman emperors also claimed to be the sons of Jupiter, Zeus serves as a means to obtain legitimacy (i.e., power) and extend that power across cultures; his likeness and story have become political tools of diplomacy.

Athena represents strategic intelligence; she serves as a military general who is responsible for planning engagements and preparing the required tactics for success during war. Apollo represents order, measure, prophecy, and the discipline of form, and is often considered an arbiter of culture;

he serves as the ambassador of culture by directing the arts and sciences. The function of Ares resembles that of a military commander during times of warfare; Ares is the premier of unmoderated violence within the material world of mankind, and possesses the characteristics of a military commander, but without the moderating effect of diplomacy.

Hermes serves as a minister of commerce; he represents the exchange of goods and services, the trade that occurs between nations, and the communication that takes place between nations. Therefore, when an individual gazes upward, they are not merely "believing," they are being taught how power functions. This is why Olympus is so critically important to Macedonia. To turn a kingdom into an empire requires establishing a valid story that has the ability to travel beyond local deities. The local deity cannot be big enough to meet the needs of an empire; it must have an established identity that can be found across the entire Greek-speaking world. A Macedonian King who can be tied into the mythology of Zeus can communicate with all Greeks through the mythology and thus build legitimacy both to the people of Greece and himself.

This process also turns the concept of myth into diplomacy and establishes a future for the conquered people that appears to them as the only choice. As you think about your experience, about what myths and creation stories exist in your society to give power legitimacy, what do you have as present-day mountains that, as an individual, you consider to be so dominant that all things are inevitable because of them? How much do these stories establish how we define and practice authority? You can better understand the function of these myths through the comparison with our current world.

The idea of Olympus also has an emotional intimacy that at times gets lost in the grandness of the mythologies (myths also continue to create emotions). A city that exists at the foot of Olympus, like Dion, had a city where the divine and mortal realms co-existed within the walls of the town in the stone and rituals of the city, and the strength of the lived experience.
Dion's status was more than just a political centre; it was the "spiritual heart" of Macedon, where all people (both royalty and commoners) sought connection with the gods they believed were influencing their world.

Day 6 of your journey into "Dion — The Sacred Centre of Macedonian Faith and Daily Life”
We will spend exploring Dion's sanctuary complex, an enormous collection of temples dedicated to the major gods of the time, including Zeus, Demeter, and Aphrodite, but especially (and predominantly) the god Dionysus, whose cult was central to the Macedonian identity. The architecture of the temples was a tribute to the gods, featuring massive marble columns reaching high into the air, friezes carved with scenes of mythical events, and several altars for burning incense with the smoke rising like prayers to the gods.

Religious festivals celebrated at Dion were full of involvement and participation in the events, including the reenactment of myths, as well as being immersed in them as partakers. For example, the Dionysia festival was filled with vibrancy, celebrating with dramatic performances, processions, and ecstatic rituals as you engaged with your fellow participants. Interpersonal contact was encouraged during the festivals to eliminate class divisions so that slaves, noblemen, priests and farmers could unite in the same ritual and ceremonially merge from man to god.

As wine flowed, music soared, and everyone danced to the beat as they found their way to inspire new life as well as create new beginnings to build on the gods’ characteristics.

The lifestyle of the people of Dion involved a rhythm of merging sacred and secular throughout the daily activities of their lives—farmers would bring their first fruits of the year to present at the

temples, while potters would produce bowls and other items which included figures of the gods and/or heroes, and children would learn of the mythical characters which formed the basis for their moral and cultural identity.

Furthermore, Dion was a busy city with its marketplace not only filled with people engaged in trading goods but also in exchanging ideas, stories and religious beliefs. The results of archaeological digs demonstrate Dion's spirituality as profoundly embodied by votives of animals and people; inscriptions calling out for divine assistance; pottery decorated with images of stories told by Homer and local legends, which all reveal that myth is not static, but a creative force of choice, social ties, and political might.

In addition to artifacts, Dion's frescoes and mosaics act as the visual equivalent of sermons. They depict the heroic journey, the revelry of the gods, and the bounty of the harvest. Daily, these images served to remind the inhabitants of the universe that they were co-authors in the larger mythological world.

The earthly equivalent to the throne upon Olympus, the audience chamber that provides mortals with space to negotiate publicly and in broad daylight with the gods, is Dion. With this capacity for civic economies to intertwine with religious economies, Dion becomes both religious and socio-political. Imagine the city thrumming with anticipation as festival day dawns: at the temple steps, braziers flicker and musicians tune their lyres, while children weave flower garlands for the approaching procession. Suddenly, a masked reveller leaps over a ritual fire, his silhouette captured for a moment in the smoke and cheers—this single act carrying centuries of the sacred into the laughter and faces of the living crowd. It is here, within such vibrant spectacles, that the kings of Macedon utilise divine worship as a means of legitimising the state and where the civic economy utilises the authority that the divine represents.

An important piece of this civic ritual is the ceremonious procession that takes place from the sacred altar. As individuals progress along this path, the sacred and secular are metaphysically and literally bound together by the imprint of their footsteps. The ceremonial procession begins at a magnificent altar and continues through the city to the theatre's central area. Each footprint taken along this holy journey serves as a thread weaving the many unique tapestries of worship and daily life together, providing evidence of the meaning created at Dion.

Dion is the site for the blessing of armies before they march and for the conversion of fear into meaningful purpose through sacrifice. The ritual itself cannot create victories; instead, they unify individuals into one group or one bodily existence and also results in the creation of a common timeframe (in the form of a calendar). Additionally, the performance of violence (what is essentially) is not regarded as an individual act of ambition but is seen as an act performed with heavenly sanction. In this way, Dionysus represents a 'factory' of meaning.

In fact, Dionysus plays an important part here because he is the deity responsible for the breaking down of boundaries. He takes the ordinary rules or limitations (of class, self-restraint, and so on) and breaks down these boundaries for a period of time; after breaking them down he will return people back to their normal state of being (their normal existence), but at times their normal state of being (existence) may be different from before they lost their sense of being; they may be renewed, shattered or both. To honour or respect Dionysus means to also recognise that a society must have controlled chaos and/or excessive joyful release (ecstasy; in this case, it is ritualised through following religious rituals). Additionally, this recognition of an element of controlled chaos acts as a pressure relief valve and reminds people that beneath civilisation or civilised behaviour exists a primal order/wildness.

So, consequently, Day 6 becomes an exploration of sacred infrastructure (the temples and theatres are not merely decorative structures); rather, temples and theatres help to provide a kingdom (nation) with structure and unity.

Day 7: Thessaloniki

(For as the return to Thessaloniki represents a 'whole' city where centuries are present in every stone/street/structure of its existence, through myth and culture form the cornerstones of the history of the city: Thessaloniki, as the site of many significant/important historic events in regard to the history of the city).

*As such the Church of Saint Demetrius demonstrates the existence of the spiritual endurance of Thessaloniki, as the legend of the saint in relation to how the saint acted against the Roman Empire, is still a source of spiritual inspiration to the people of Thessaloniki and his tomb, which is located below the basilica, represents a pilgrimage location (site of devotion). It connects believers today with the ancient history of the city of Thessaloniki. The mosaics that line the ceiling depict the heavenly battles between angels and humans, showing how faith eventually overcame all in this one place. The stones of the ancient city were walked on by soldiers and sailors alike, hearing the clanging of armour while standing guard with the sound of prayer echoing in the distance. The ramparts have been built upon and rebuilt time after time throughout Byzantine and Ottoman history; they are solid reminders of the struggle for identity within Thessaloniki. You can smell both pine and the sea when you step on the historical stones.

The Jewish area of Ladadika is full of stories about being exiled from those who were forced to leave - the Sephardic Jews who fled Spain during the Inquisition found asylum in Thessaloniki. Their traditions have become part of the history of the city and the city's fabric. You can enter a Synagogue and hear the prayers that have been passed down through many generations, and the markets that hum with the sounds of spices, baked goods, and all forms of trading have been existing together since.

The mosques from the Ottoman period and the churches from the Byzantine period stand together as a reminder of centuries of living together, as well as fighting against each other. The variety of architecture in this city tells the many stories of power changes, adaptation to new environments, and resilience.

The Arch of Galerius has relief sculptures that tell stories of imperial victories and divine favour. They tell the story of Thessaloniki being at the crossroads of myth, history, empire and faith. Many of the carvings were intended to be political propaganda as much as they were works of art, showing both citizens and visitors of Thessaloniki that, through the power of God, there is a divine right to rule according to Roman law.

Finally, the myths of Thessaloniki are not only present in the relics or text, but they are also alive in the people, the festivals, the streets and through memory. The experience of the past is woven together in the heart of a city. A shared framework of identity and community intersects through time with the power of stories to build connections to our towns, our peoples, the places around us, and ultimately, to ourselves.

Thessaloniki is one such place where memory is not merely an echo from our distant past but is also a living expression that informs how we see ourselves and how we view our community with respect to our contribution and connection with the world we are part of. From a place where time and place, life and divine existence, authority and faith are interwoven in an unending cycle, Day 1 shows Thessaloniki to us as a crossroads, while Day 7 illustrates how the crossroads shape the soul

of a city into being multiple. Thessaloniki tells us stories of many and not just one story (in this city, the arguments between stories will resound like a choir that will not be confined to one voice). Therefore, the metaphor of the palimpsest captures this essence accurately. The many layers of memory do not simply sit atop one another but rather flow between and through each other. A vivid illustration of this idea might include an excerpt from a diary of the 20th century: 'In 1941, as soldiers marched past my home and I saw the smoke and destruction in the streets, I was overwhelmed by the smell of bread as I heard the distant sound of a traditional song. My home felt like a fabric woven from many threads, each from a different century, but together creating the fabric of our lives today.'

Even now, if you listen, you may catch the faint notes of a distant song carried on the sea wind, weaving through ancient stones and new avenues alike. In this chorus, the city's layered stories linger, each voice rising and fading, never quite leaving, as Thessaloniki continues to sing its many-layered past into the present.

The tour may use this moment in time as an opportunity to provide insight into Greece's long fight to move into modernity while struggling under the inheritance of antiquity (Byzantine to Ottoman; nation building; European pressure).