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Disarmed

THE STORY OF THE VENUS DE MILO

GREGORY CURTIS

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For Tracy

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PREFACE

Fractured Masterpiece

MELOS IS an Aegean island where thirty thousand people looking for a bargain vacation arrive each summer like migratory birds. When they leave, the island returns to its unlovely self. It is dull, remote, harsh—a place where the only ways to make a living are by mining, farming, fishing, and hanging on desperately until summer brings the next flock of tourists.

Unfortunately, I was not there in summer but in early spring when the weather tended toward gray skies, rain, and powerful winds. I climbed the highest hill. It is crowned by the village of Plaka, a warren of narrow streets twisting between the straight white walls of stone and stucco houses. Lost for a while, I finally began following the occasional signs that pointed toward the “ancient theater” and eventually found myself walking along a narrow dirt road. There, across from the remains of a stone wall and tower, stood a small, solitary metal sign that said in English and Greek, SITE OF THE DISCOVERY OF VENUS OF MILOS.

Behind the sign was a short but quite steep slope covered with a haphazard profusion of olive trees. Grabbing branches for balance, I made my way down the slope, about ten yards or so, to a flat area covered with grass and wildflowers.

The ruins of another wall, once the continuation of the one above, ran down the slope and there, after pulling aside a few more olive branches, I saw a white stone plaque bolted to the crumbling wall. It had inscriptions in Greek, English, German, and French. The English read: HERE HAS BEEN FOUND THE VENUS OF MILOS. This area was where the statue of the goddess once stood in an arched niche in a wall. But the exact site of the discovery is impossible to locate. Landslides long ago buried the wall with its niches. It must lie somewhere beneath the olive trees whose branches I’d grabbed on the way down. Perhaps, deep in the ground, their roots entwine the missing arms.

After several minutes of trying to imagine what this place had once been like, I found myself disappointed and perplexed by exactly how lost and how untended the purported site turned out to be. I climbed back up the slope and followed the dirt road through what had once been a Greek and then a Roman city. There were the remains of a theater situated so that the audience could look past the stage and out across a bay at the foot of the hill. There were the remnants of walls here and there. The long narrow field that had once been a stadium lined on one side by stone bleachers was still easy to identify. Occasionally, I ran across part of a marble column lying on the ground.

During the next three days I talked several times with an archaeologist at the local museum, but there had been little work done at the site where the statue was discovered. But he did give me a map of the Greek city drawn after some light excavations done decades earlier. So each day I went to the ruins with that map in hand and explored. I drew my own maps and took photographs and eventually understood the layout of the ancient settlement.

Even so I found myself trying to imagine, not so much what the town had been like

ancient times, but what the ruins had been like in the spring of 1820 when the statue was uncovered. But it was impossible. The ruins have disintegrated so badly since then that I knew my mental reconstructions were mere imaginings. One fact, however, has not changed. These ruins were a lonely, isolated farmer's pasture in 1820, and they are a lonely, isolated farmer's pasture now. During my visits of several hours each day for four days the only other visitors were a herd of goats who were fenced in a distant corner.

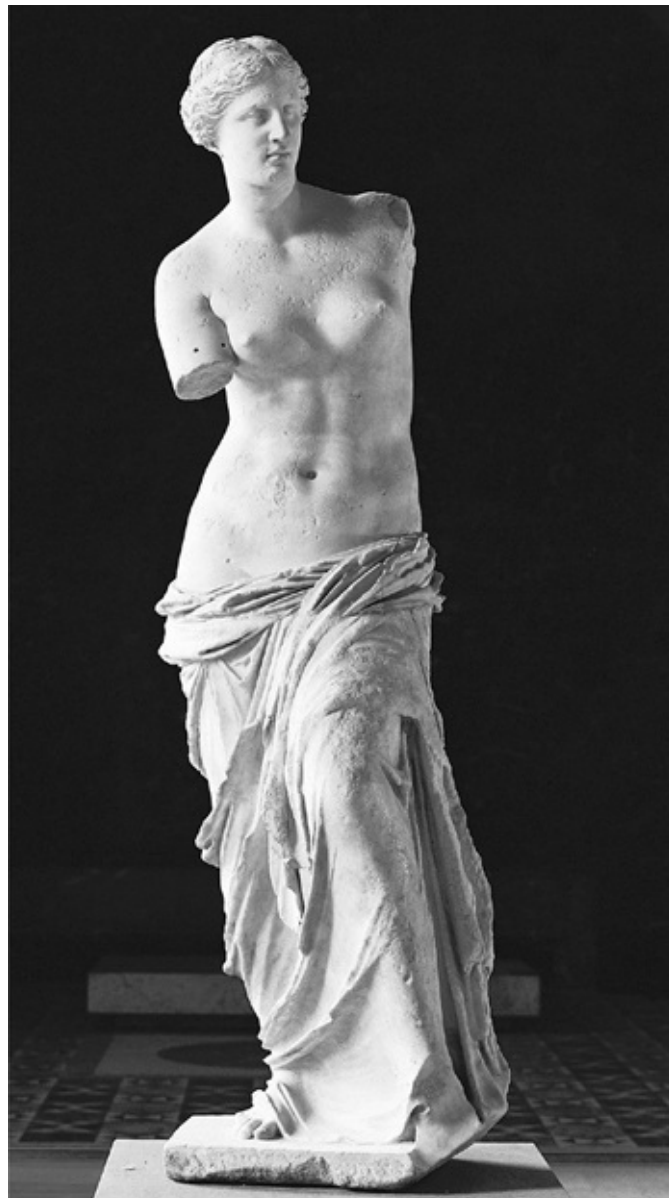
I tromped around the ruins until I was convinced that I would never find anything more than I had already seen. I had learned only this. Melos, an island as boring in the past as it is today, may have been the first home of the Venus de Milo. But like so many other provincial women who were blessed with talent, intelligence, or beauty, her life did not really begin until she arrived in Paris, the city that values both talent and intelligence but values beauty most of all.

TODAY the Venus de Milo stands, as it has for decades, in an alcove at the end of a long hallway on the ground floor of the Louvre. Entering that hallway, you can see the statue at the distance, almost eighty yards away, looming over the crowd around it. Since the crowd obscures the base and legs, the nude torso appears to be an apparition. The deep whiteness of the marble is luminescent against the browns, blacks, and grays of the hallway. Distant, pale, and shimmering, unconcerned by the hubbub around her even though she is nude, the goddess seems to float above the admiring throng. She looks fresh, forceful, and completely original, the way she must have looked to the people who saw her when she was rediscovered almost two hundred years ago.

Moving closer brings more of the statue into view, and the unexpected power of seeing her at a distance diminishes. Now she becomes familiar. Though most people in the crowd are seeing the actual statue for the first time, they all have seen her image time and again. I first saw it on the cover of a box of Classicos matches from Mexico when I was six. I remember her naked breasts and her impassive face staring into the distance. Once I saw that image, I never forgot it. How could I? The Venus de Milo permeates our culture, where her image is shorthand for lofty ideals: truth, purity, and timeless beauty. She is in advertisements and cartoons, on the covers of record albums, and part of company logos. She is reproduced on saltshakers, vases, table lamps, and rubber toys that squeak. In serious art the Venus de Milo has inspired both homages and parodies by artists such as Rodin, Salvador Dalí, Magritte, Max Ernst, and, in more recent years, Clive Barker and Jim Dine. Her image is so powerful that it easily rises over cultural boundaries. In 1964 France sent the statue on loan to Japan. When the ship carrying her arrived in Yokohama, more than 100,000 people came just to watch it dock. By the time she left Japan, one and a half million people had come to see her borne past her display on a moving sidewalk.

Seeing the Venus de Milo in the morning, when the tour groups are the thickest, is worth all the effort and exasperation. It can be exciting just to see the spectacle of the crowd and to hear guides speaking in any number of languages. But the best time to see the statue is late in the afternoon, in the hour or two before the museum closes. Then, with the crowds long gone and enough time to observe in solitude and without interruption, it is possible to let the familiar image from advertisements, matchboxes, and saltshakers fade away and to see the Venus de Milo for herself.

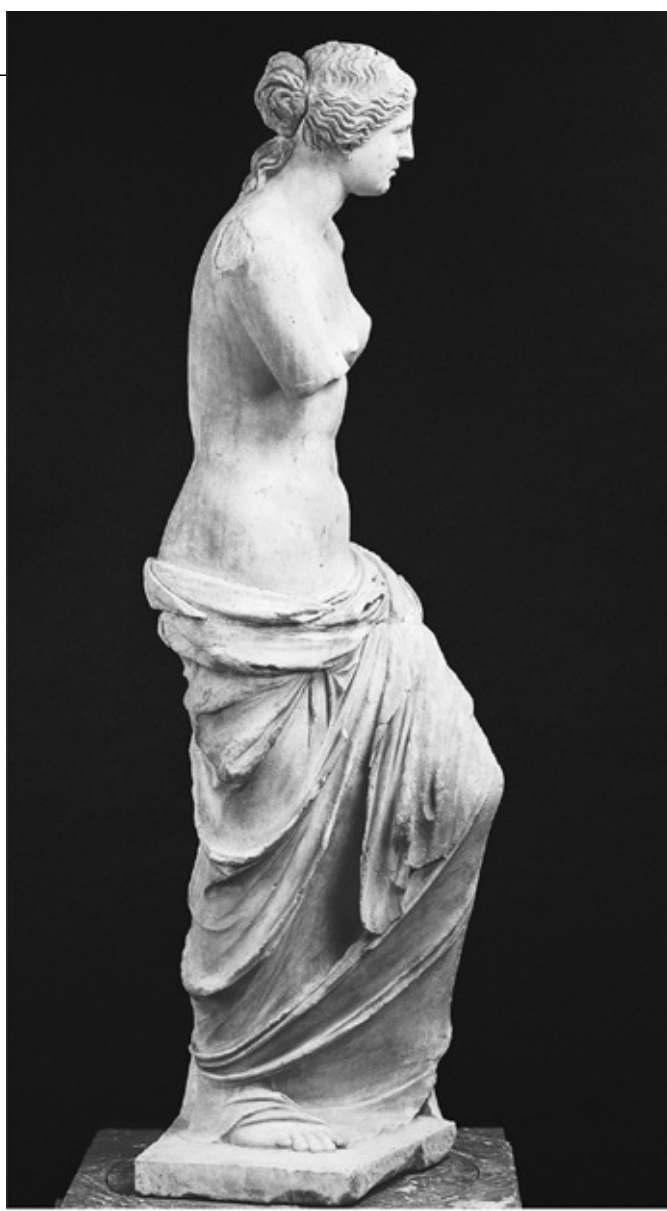
Her serenity, assurance, and great comfort with her own beauty produce a tranquillity powerful enough to be a physical pleasure. This can last for several moments, but as you begin to look closely at the statue you see something that nothing in the thousands of popular images prepares you for: The statue is fragile and lined with fractures. It was carved from two large blocks of marble, one set on top of the other. The line where the two blocks meet is visible even though somewhat hidden by the roll of drapery around her pelvis. Four large pieces, two on each side, have broken away from her hips. The lines where they fractured are easy to see from the sides and the back. Even the knot of hair on the back of her head has been broken off and been reattached. The arms, of course, are missing, and so is the left foot. There are nicks and scrapes everywhere. The most damaging one aesthetically is a large gouge where the left nipple once was. Her earlobes are gone. Presumably they were broken when robbers ripped away the earrings she once wore.



The Venus de Milo (illustration credit prf.1)



The Venus de Milo from the back (illustration credit prf.2)



The Venus de Milo from the right (illustration credit prf.3)



The Venus de Milo from the left (illustration credit prf.4)

This Venus is clearly a big woman, but how big? In fact, from head to toe, she is six feet seven inches tall. Her right foot—twelve and a half inches long—is enormous. Her hips are so wide she looks as if she has had several children. Rodin described her stomach as “immense, like the sea! It is the rhythmic beauty of the sea without end.” Yet she seems almost weightless, as if this ton of marble could move effortlessly through the air. As you look at her, six-seven doesn’t seem any more likely than either five-nine or eight feet.

And how old is she? She is not an adolescent, she is not a virgin, and she is not a crone. She could be twenty-five or thirty or fifty. Her children could be infants, or they could be old enough to have children of their own. So while most people would describe the statue as “realistic,” the most obvious characteristics of a real person—height, weight, age—turn out to be elusive.

As you walk about viewing the Venus de Milo from one side and the other, she changes. Since we are accustomed to seeing her in reproductions viewed straight from the front, the changes are quite striking. From her right side she seems almost like a pillar. Her huge foot is flat on the ground, and a line goes straight up from it to her right hip and then to her right shoulder. Her leg, barely suggested beneath the folds of the drapery, is straight and bears most of her weight. Her thick hip is locked. Her stomach and her waist are also thick. She

seems planted in the ground, and since she is looking away toward her left, her big hips, stomach, and waist are what defines her. They all speak of her fecundity and of her sexuality. From this perspective she is as human as a goddess can be. You can see in stone a profound truth of Greek art and religion: We share our sexuality with the gods.

Her drapery is falling down around her hip, but that doesn't concern her, because her concentration is elsewhere. Even her hair, gathered in the back, has begun to unravel. It is almost a shock to realize that, hanging free, her hair would be long enough to reach most of the way down her back. It's easy to think that she must always be exactly the way she is at the moment captured in the statue. But it's not true—that's the shock. What mood would she be in when she let her hair fall down her back? The gathered hair beginning to unravel reveals a tantalizing glimpse into her interior life, just as her partially fallen drapery does. Among with many masterpieces, the statue that appears so open, even blatant, is instead filled with suggestion and withheld knowledge.

From the left side she seems not tied to the earth but ready to ascend from it. Her raised left foot makes her appear able to spring effortlessly into space. But even from this side we are excluded from her. All her concentration is on something, now invisible, that is just in front of her. What is it? Who is she, after all? How did she come to be here on a pedestal in an alcove at the end of a long corridor in the Louvre? And what is it about her that attracts and holds the attention of the world?

From Melos to Paris

OLIVIER VOUTIER was twenty-three and an ensign in the French navy when he first set foot on Greek soil. He had a high forehead, black hair, and a carefully trimmed mustache that shot straight up in a waxed point at each end. His slender, athletic build was close to being slight, but he was possessed by a romantic fervor that made him prideful and gave him a forceful appearance. He wore a well-tailored uniform that completed the picture he presented of precise military sheen. In fact, he loved wearing uniforms. Later in his life Voutier had a weakness for the gold braids, ribbons, and medals he would win during his years of combat. He would pose for portraits wearing all his medals and with a brace of pistols tucked into his broad belt.

It was spring in the year 1820. Voutier was assigned to the *Estafette*, a two-masted warship which for more than a month had been at anchor in the magnificent harbor on the island of Melos, a piece of rock halfway between Crete and mainland Greece. Unfortunately, to most tastes, the harbor was the only thing about Melos that was magnificent. The Greek islands of the Aegean are often idyllic, but Melos was not. Long stays in the harbor there were bleak exercises in boredom, and the *Estafette* had nothing to do but wait for orders.

Fortunately, Voutier had an escape from the boredom. He was interested in what was then a completely new and unformed science: archeology. On April 8 he left the *Estafette* with two sailors carrying shovels and picks. They were going to dig into the hillsides of Melos for whatever remnants of the glories of Greece and Rome they could find.



Olivier Voutier (illustration credit 1.1)

In fact, Voutier was looking for more than that. He was a young man in search of a cause and Greece was where he found it. He saw the Greeks, heirs of classical civilization, demoralized and humiliated under the rule of the Ottoman Turks. Just a year after the long anchor at Melos he abruptly resigned his commission in the French navy and joined the Greek war for independence. He became a hero of the struggle.

That morning on Melos it wasn't difficult to find the most promising place to dig. The ruins of an ancient theater, as well as stone walls and pieces of broken columns, were still clearly visible on an escarpment on the side of the island's tallest hill. Voutier and the sailors began to dig there near the remains of a wall and circular tower that had once defended the gate of the ancient town. They found a seemingly endless number of marble fragments, as well as a bust, a carved foot, and two nicely chiseled statues missing their heads, hands, and feet.

As Voutier and the two sailors were digging, another man, a local farmer as it turned out, was also working just twenty paces away trying to remove the stones from an ancient wall to use in a structure he was building on his farm. Voutier, glancing over that way, noticed that the man had stopped digging for the moment and was staring at something in a niche he had uncovered in the wall. His posture was curious enough that Voutier went to look himself.

As Voutier drew near, he could see that the farmer was busy again, covering something

with dirt. Peering into the darkness of the chamber where the farmer was working, Voutier saw a statue, or at least the upper half of one, lying on its side and still partly buried. Its odd shape made it useless as a building block, so the farmer had decided to cover it over. Voutier gave him a small bribe to dig up the statue instead. It didn't take long to push aside the accumulated dirt and stones and prop the object up. It was the nude upper body of a woman. The tip of her nose and the small bun of hair gathered at the back of her head were both broken off. There was an ugly hole in her right side that Voutier assumed was the result of some crude restoration from long ago. Stains, nicks, and scrapes, evidently from the time when it had first fallen over, covered the surface of the statue. But despite these imperfections, Voutier sensed from the first glance that he was seeing something extraordinary. This torso was more glorious than anything he could have hoped to find when he set out that morning with the two sailors and a few picks and shovels.

Voutier insisted that the farmer search for the lower half of the statue, but his insistence revealed his excitement. Now the farmer wanted more money to continue digging. Voutier paid. He joined the farmer inside the niche, an oval enclosure about five yards wide. The walls were cut stone and had once been painted in a pattern that was still faintly visible. Overhead was an arched roof.

After a little digging here and there amid the rubble on the floor, the farmer found the lower half of the statue and brought it up out of the dirt. But the two parts couldn't be reassembled because a large section missing from the right side made it impossible to balance the top half on the lower. Yet another bribe persuaded the farmer to continue digging, but this time, since the missing piece was considerably smaller than the other two, the search took more work and time. When the farmer wanted to quit, Voutier calmly prodded him until he finally discovered the missing middle section.

At last Voutier and the farmer, perhaps with help from the two sailors, were able to place the top half of the statue on the lower. When they slid the middle section between the two larger pieces, the statue balanced, and they were able to see it as it was intended: a woman, nude from the waist up, her legs covered in wet drapery that was falling from her hips. This was of course the statue that would become known to the world as the Venus de Milo.

The farmer's only interest in the statue was what money he could get for it. But Voutier, though he had to contain himself as best he could, knew that this was an experience granted to very few. He was in the presence of a masterpiece that no one had seen for almost two thousand years. Here, in a buried niche on a minor island, was a work of art that was the culminating expression of the Greek genius. It had been reborn before his eyes, and now it stood there in full glory for him to contemplate. Voutier later wrote a single sentence to describe these first few moments: "Those who have seen the Venus de Milo are able to understand my stupefaction."

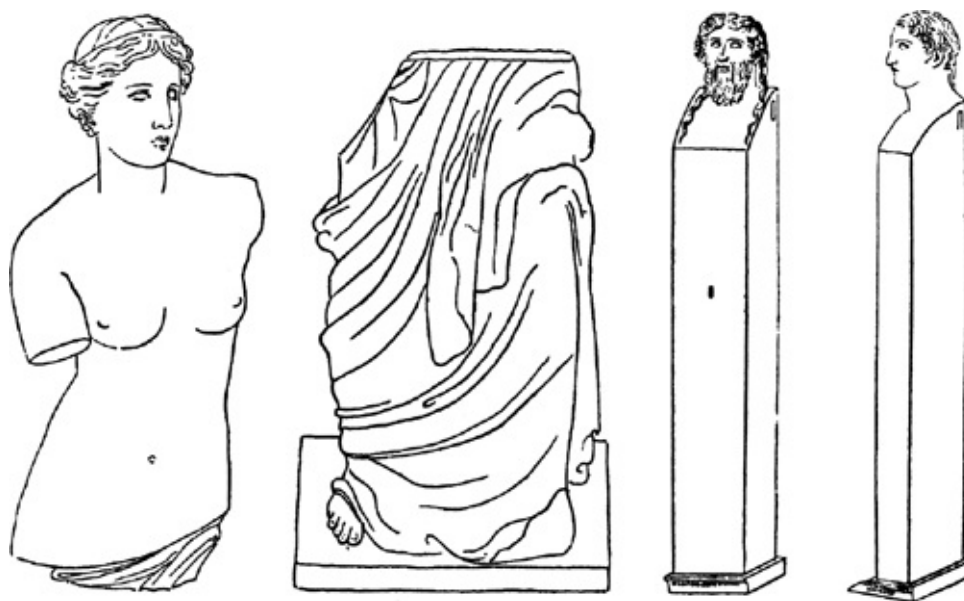
As soon as he had recovered from his astonishment, Voutier turned his attention to practical matters. To prevent a fall, the top half was removed and placed on the ground beside the lower half. Now it was time to try to claim the statue before anyone else was able to, preferably even before anyone else knew about it. Voutier hurried to the small town on the top of the hill about fifteen minutes from the ruins. There he found the only representative of the French government on the island, a viceconsul named Louis Brest.

After about thirty minutes Voutier arrived back at the niche with Vice-consul Brest in tow.

While Voutier was gone, the farmer, whose name was Yorgos, had had enough time to make a thorough search of the small enclosure. He found a marble hand holding an apple, a piece of a badly mutilated arm, and two herms. Herms are quadrangular pillars about three feet high with a carved head at the top. Their purpose is no longer clear, but apparently they were usually used as some sort of boundary marker. One herm had the head of a bearded man, and the other the head of a young man. Each one was standing in an inscribed base.

Voutier had brought a sketch pad and a pencil with him on his digging expedition, and now he set to work on what would turn out to be four drawings: one of the upper half of the statue, one of the lower half, and one of each herm in its inscribed base. He copied the two inscriptions clearly enough to be read. His plan was to use the drawings to convince the captain of the *Estafette* to take the statue on board.

While he was drawing Voutier prodded Brest to buy the statue. Yorgos had decided he wanted four hundred piasters for it, about the price of a good donkey. Brest was a rotund, methodical person, thirty-one years old, who tried to maintain the dignity of his office by wearing a blue uniform with gold braid. The sudden exertion of getting to the site, the close atmosphere inside the small niche, the ancient dust that had just been disturbed and was still floating in the air, the play of light and shadows on the statue and the oddly painted brick walls—all that was too much for Vice-consul Brest. Besides, he had no official budget. If he were to buy the statue, he would have to do so with his own money and then hope to be reimbursed by the French government. While that might happen, it also might not. “Are you sure,” he whispered to Voutier, “that it’s worth that much? Please don’t make me risk losing my money.”



Voutier's drawings of the Venus de Milo done on Melos ([illustration credit 1.2](#))

With that Voutier left the vice-consul behind and returned with his drawings to the *Estafette*. (Voutier ordered the two sailors to bury the artifacts they had found before he approached Yorgos. He was never able to return for them. It's possible they remain buried on Melos to this day.) On board he showed the drawings to his captain, a certain Robert, an intense, demanding officer known to his crew, more out of respect than fear, as Robert the Devil. Voutier tried to persuade him to sail immediately for Constantinople to get authorization from the French ambassador there to buy the statue. The drawings impressed

Robert, but he had orders to wait at Melos. He couldn't ignore them because of the sudden enthusiasm of an ensign for a statue.

Voutier now gave up in frustration. That was how the navy was these days; perhaps under the emperor it would have been different. (Voutier was a passionate Bonapartist.) Now, his initial enthusiasm thwarted, he seems to have lost all interest in the statue and remained silently in the background during the events that followed. He put his drawings away with his personal effects, and though he guarded them through his long and adventurous life, it would be fifty years before he revealed them publicly.

Sulfur and vampires

MELOS appeared during some distant epoch when a volcano erupted underneath the sea and left a thin strip of land about twelve miles long with a wide opening in its northwest corner. The sea flows from there into a round bay that was once the crater of the volcano. The water is deep, and the bay, almost four miles across, is protected on all sides, making Melos the best natural harbor in the eastern Mediterranean.

As inviting as the harbor is, the land itself is unwelcoming. Melos is a large, hollow rock riddled with caverns, crevices, and catacombs. The seawater flows in and out, leaving behind salts and other minerals that combine with iron ore left from the volcanic explosion to produce smoldering fires. In former times these fires in turn ignited the sulfur, which was once abundant and had a beautiful greenish tint. The hot sulfur formed noxious clouds that fouled the water in the few springs and gave the air in the low areas a horrible stench.

For generations the principal town was in the lowlands, but by the late eighteenth century the air and water there had become so pernicious that the inhabitants were prone to contract painful or even fatal diseases. At Castro, on the side of the tallest hill on the island, the air was better and the water didn't taste of sulfur. Most of the population moved there, but it was a long climb up from the harbor that could take more than an hour. The road, such as it was, had been covered with volcanic soil that was principally tiny pieces of black glass. The footing was unsure, and each step caused a long, annoying crunch.

Melos has been continuously occupied for about six thousand years. Even before the classical age of Greece it was home to certain cult religions that seem to have been imported from Crete. There was silver there once, and high-quality alum, which had myriad medicinal uses in the ancient world. The weak and infirm made pilgrimages to the hot sulfur springs, and even healthy Greeks would come and drink deeply of the water to purge themselves.

During all those six thousand years only two events have turned the attention of the world to Melos. The first occurred in the winter of 416–415 B.C., during the Peloponnesian War, when an Athenian invasion force landed on the island. Melos had allied itself with Sparta against Athens. After a brief siege, the invaders conquered the island, put all the men to death, and sold the women and children into slavery. The Athenians then sent a colony of their own citizens to settle on the island.

Even this bloody episode would be forgotten if Thucydides in his *History* had not dramatized a council between the Athenian leaders and the leading citizens of Melos. The Athenians demanded complete surrender and a yearly tribute; in return, they pledged not to

murder the men or enslave the women and children. The islanders refused in the vain hope that they could hold out long enough to be rescued by the Spartans and thus preserve their independence. The dramatization, known as the Melian Dialogue, is a staple in college introductory political science classes. It subtly shows that even those who are doomed militarily still have political power, since the Athenians really had no interest in murdering and enslaving the entire population. All they wanted was allegiance in the form of a tribute. That left room for negotiation about the terms and amount of the tribute and any other aspects of the surrender. The Melians' failure to understand what power they had despite their military weakness led to disaster.

The second notable event in the history of Melos was the discovery of the Venus de Milo in the spring of 1820.

About four thousand people lived on Melos then. They were constantly in the grip of fear, both real and imagined. The real fear was of the brutal whims of the despotic Turks who ruled them. The imagined fear was of ghosts, goblins, vampires, and other spooks. Every aspect of ordinary life was riddled with superstition. Before childbirth every door, chest, and window that could be locked with a key had to be opened in order to prevent a difficult delivery. Once labor began, no one present could leave and no one could come in. After childbirth a woman had immediately to step on something iron to make her and the infant strong. Also she couldn't let a star shine on her, or both she and the infant would die. Similar superstitions ruled courtship, marriage, the wedding night, child rearing, medical prevention, and cures, and of course death and burial.

In particular, the people of the Aegean islands believed in vampires. When anyone died without apparent cause, the assumption was that a vampire was roaming the island by night and returning to the grave only by day. Recently buried bodies were disinterred to identify the vampire, because supposedly, a vampire's corpse didn't decompose. As it happened, corpses buried on the islands were often slow to decompose because of the salts in the volcanic soil. A preserved corpse became proof that the vampire really existed. After prayer by everyone as they gathered around the body, followed by incantations from the priest, the body was burned to extinguish the vampire.

Many of these superstitions, like so much else in life on Melos, had survived from classical times. In both eras, the inhabitants lived with their superstitious fears and their fears of distant powers and marauding pirates. Their droning folk music with its exotic timbre and signatures—8/5, for example—was apparently little changed from ancient times. The same was true of wine making, cheese making, cotton spinning, and other domestic arts. And like their distant ancestors, the people of Melos still kept weasels as pets. The old theater masks have been in ruins, but otherwise the sights and sounds of ancient Greece and 1820 Melos were surprisingly similar.

The hand with an apple

ON MELOS, as in every remote community, people were compulsively absorbed in the lives of their neighbors. News of the discovery of the extraordinary statue spread instantaneously throughout the island. Local opportunities offered Yorgos money for the sculpture in the hope

of selling it again for profit. Even more bothersome, the local government, which was a group of three men known as primates, shouldered its way into the affair. In small towns the most powerful citizens are the ones with the most money or land, and the minister of the leading church. It was no different in the Greek islands. The rich, the landowners, and the Greek Orthodox priest, who was often wealthy himself, became the primates. They seem to have been an extralegal institution. Apparently, they chose their members at their own discretion and then shuffled themselves in and out of the official governing council of three men that enforced the local laws.

The primates told Yorgos that they had the authority to choose the buyer he must sell to. That was a terrible development for Vice-consul Brest. What if the primates insisted that Yorgos sell to someone who wasn't French? Brest's position as the representative of France gave him a certain amount of respect on the island and, at his request, the primates promised not to sell the statue to anyone until he had received instructions from his superiors.

Despite this promise, Brest feared that if he didn't act quickly, the statue would surely slip out of French hands. The obvious solution was for him to buy it himself. But if he did and it turned out to be worthless, he would have wasted his money. On the other hand, if it was a masterpiece and he allowed it to fall into the clutches of another nation, he would receive all the blame. At the very least he would never become full consul, a promotion and recognition he deeply coveted and believed he deserved. Why hadn't he bought the thing from Yorgos when he'd had the chance!

Brest was a French citizen and patriot who had never seen France. His grandfather and father had been vice-consul on Melos for decades before him. In 1780 Charles-Sigisbert Sonnini, a young Frenchman traveling in Greece and Turkey at the behest of Louis XV, encountered Brest's grandfather, whom he described as an excellent man who had the esteem of the French navy, the European merchants in the region, and the Turks. The Greeks on Melos, Sonnini said, venerated him: "The flag of France, which flies above his house, however isolated and without any protection, was nowhere more respected." And how had France repaid his service and fine character in the twilight years of his life? "He has the misfortune of seeing himself reduced to nothing more than an agent of the consul in Smyrna."

Forty years later his grandson was still under the authority of the French consul in Smyrna, a city far across the Aegean at the end of a bay on the coast of Turkey. Brest's isolation on the island and the neglect of both him and his grandfather by the nation he loved had left him, like a spurned suitor, cautious at best and bitter at worst. And his life was often one of misery. Just a few years earlier, when he was in his late twenties, he had brought a young bride from Constantinople to live with him. When a pirate named Franco Poulo and his fifty men landed on Melos to loot and kidnap young girls, the newlyweds had to run for their lives, and Brest's bride came close to being captured. The comte de Forbin, who had just become director of the Louvre, happened to visit Brest and his wife at their home in 1811 while on a voyage in search of antiquities for the museum. Forbin was touched by their eager hospitality, but he recorded how people from the "miserable" town stared at him through the open doorway while he consumed "bad bread, fruit, and passable wine."

In his present dilemma about the statue, Brest could turn only to the few other Frenchmen in positions of authority on Melos. These were the captains and officers of the vessels in the harbor. On April 9, the day after Voutier made his discovery, Brest asked Robert the Dev

from the *Estafette* and Captain Duval d'Ailly of the *Lionne*, a ship that sailed with the *Estafette* to come see the statue.

To protect his treasure, Yorgos had carted the upper, more valuable half of the statue to his cowshed, along with the two herms and their inscribed bases, the arm fragments, and the hand with the apple. Brest and the two captains went to Yorgos's farm and tramped past the animals and through the straw and thick manure in his cowshed to see the new discovery. The captains advised Brest to buy it, although that was probably not what he was hoping to hear. A negative opinion would have helped him justify not risking his money.

The next day, April 10, two other French vessels, the *Bonite* and the *Emulation*, arrived at Melos. Brest took their commanders to the cowshed immediately. On April 11, Captain Dauriac of the *Bonite* wrote a letter to Pierre David in Smyrna, the French consul general in the Levant who was Brest's superior. This letter is the first written description of the Venus de Milo after its discovery:

Three days ago a peasant who was digging in his field found a white marble statue representing Venus receiving the apple of Paris. She is larger than life-size. At the moment we have only the bust down to the waist. I have been to see her. The head appears well conserved to me as well as the hair. The end of one of the breasts is broken. The peasant was told that the discovery that he made was of great value and he believes it now because there are people who have already offered him one thousand piasters. M. Brest ... asked me for advice about the statue, but I am not able to give him any, not knowing anything about the subject.

The next day, April 12, Brest himself wrote a letter to David to alert him to the discovery. He said that the statue was "a little mutilated; the arms are broken off and she is separated into two pieces at the waist." He describes the work as "Venus holding the apple of discord in her hand."

Both men seem to be referring to the hand holding an apple that was among the bits and pieces Yorgos found in the niche with the statue and put with the rest of the fragments in the cowshed. Its marble and dimensions were consistent with the statue's. And, as both Dauriac and Brest seem to have known, Greek statues of Venus often showed her holding an apple. The apple is the central symbol in the myth of how the Trojan War began. When the mortal Peleus and the goddess Thetis were married, the only goddess who wasn't invited was Discord. For revenge she threw a golden apple with the inscription "For the fairest" among the guests. Juno, Venus, and Minerva each claimed that the apple was meant for her. Jupiter saw nothing but trouble for himself if he chose any one of the three above the others, so he sent the goddesses to Mount Ida, where Paris, the most beautiful mortal man, was tending flocks of sheep. Each goddess appeared before him and tried to bribe him to choose her. Juno promised power and wealth. Minerva promised triumph in war. But Venus promised the most beautiful woman on earth for his wife. That decided Paris. He chose Venus and gave her the apple. The most beautiful woman on earth turned out to be Helen, the wife of Menelaus, king of Sparta. Venus helped Paris persuade Helen to leave with him for Troy. The Greeks united to bring Helen back, and the Trojan War began.

The ambitious ensign

ALONG with Voutier's sketches, Dauriac's letter, and Brest's letter, there is a fourth description of the statue from the days that followed its discovery. Its author, an ensign in the French navy who was just a month shy of his thirtieth birthday, had arrived on April 16 aboard a ship named the *Chevrette*. During the next ten years he would emerge from obscurity to become one of the most famous men in Europe. His rise began in Melos when he appropriated for himself the credit for discovering the Venus de Milo.

This ensign was the driven, indomitable, and peculiar Jules Sébastien-César Dumont d'Urville. Although he languished through his twenties as a junior officer without connections, he eventually became a rear admiral. He led three voyages around the world during which he explored the coasts of Australia, New Zealand, and New Guinea as well as many islands in Polynesia. He established the first French presence in Antarctica. His accounts of these voyages became publishing sensations and were translated into a number of languages (although not English), thus spreading his fame throughout Europe. His work in botany earned him membership in learned societies, as did his philological studies on the languages of Oceania.

Tall and muscular, he flaunted his robustness and endured the most demanding physical hardships almost with relish. Although his crews were loyal to him because he was scrupulously fair, he was too awkward socially to be friendly with them. He usually spent evenings at sea in his cabin poring over botanical specimens and writing in his journal. By the time he became an admiral, he would wear his uniform only when in port; otherwise he was unconcerned with his physical appearance. An officer who sailed with him wrote later that he was "a tall untidy man, without stockings or cravat, wearing torn duck trousers, an unbuttoned twill coat, the whole outfit crowned by an old straw hat full of holes." When he spoke, he made a whistling sound through his teeth.



Jules Sébastien-César Dumont d'Urville, by Jerome Cartellier (illustration credit 1.3)

D'Urville's unconcern for appearances concealed the driving motivation of his life: a desire for fame. Born in Normandy in 1790, he lost his father seven years later. His formidable mother made the fragile boy spend hours outside in the coastal chill without a coat. She thought that would toughen him up, and evidently it did. She was repelled by affection and insisted that her son address her only in the most formal and polite language. When he was ten, d'Urville asked an uncle if any famous men came from the little town in Normandy where he was born. The answer was no. "I promised myself," d'Urville wrote, "to work twice as hard to place my name on the wings of fame. Habitually plunged in such thoughts, I had acquired an aloof and serious manner, unusual at my age."

He had joined the crew of the *Chevrette* in 1819. Although d'Urville was married with a son who was going on three, he chafed at the shore duty that had been his lot since the Bourbon restoration to the French throne. The *Chevrette* had a mission to study the islands of the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. D'Urville was to be one of the scientists on board, his subjects being botany, entomology, and archeology. As always he performed these duties with immense energy and enthusiasm. His immediate superior officer, Lieutenant Amable Matterer, later wrote that "whenever the ship was at anchor, M. Dumont d'Urville left very early almost every day and did not return till after sunset, laden with all sorts of plants that he carefully classified and pressed. He would come aboard tired out but elated to have found some rare plants that had escaped the notice [of previous explorers]."

While the *Chevrette* was anchored at Melos, d'Urville and Matterer made excursions across the island. On April 19, after the ship had been in harbor for three days, they made the hour-long climb of the large, steep hill overlooking the harbor to Castro, the main village on the island.

When they arrived at the village itself, it hardly seemed worth the effort of the climb. The houses, two stories tall with whitewashed sides and flat roofs, all looked alike. A set of bare stairs without any rail led up one wall from the street to the second story, where there was a flat terrace. During the day women sat on the terrace spinning cotton thread and often, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travelers are to be believed, looking provocatively at passersby.

Inside the houses the first floor was a combination stable, chicken roost, and pigsty. Garbage and muck from both humans and animals were thrown into the street, making it impossible to walk through town without fouling one's boots. The smell was nauseating. And fleas were everywhere. "The quantity of the insects is truly extraordinary," one traveler wrote. "One is covered and devoured. They spread over the head and slide into the hair."

In Castro, d'Urville and Matterer called on the French viceconsul. With two French officers in front of him, Louis Brest had only one thing on his mind. He began to tell them about the new discovery.

D'Urville and Matterer, excited by this news, asked Brest to take them to see the statue. He led them down the hill from Castro to the niche where the statue had been found. Matterer simply looked, but d'Urville assumed his role as a scientist and began to measure the niche and the bottom half of the statue, which Yorgos had not bothered to carry to his cowshed. D'Urville copied as best he could the Greek inscription on the wall of the niche, before asking what had become of the upper half. Brest gestured toward Yorgos's cowshed in a far corner of the field. The farmer's mother now sat spinning as she guarded the door. In a few moments they had walked across the field, and Yorgos let them in. Like the ships' captains before them, they waded through the manure on the floor to the place where the upper half stood. They were, according to Matterer, who used the same word as Voutier, "stupefied." The two sailors stared at the statue in silence. They also examined the herms, the arm fragments, and the hand with the apple. D'Urville was familiar with the myth of the three goddesses and the golden apple. He thought that meant the statue must have originally been part of a group with Juno, Minerva, and Paris. At last he began measuring again and taking notes.

Eventually, d'Urville asked his friend for his opinion. Matterer said he thought it was beautiful, but he mistrusted his own judgment in art. Yorgos, who from the first was eager to get the thing off his hands in exchange for some cash, offered to sell the statue to the two officers. They refused. They didn't have enough money with them. More important, though, their ship had a long and difficult mission in the Black Sea and was already crowded with crew, supplies, and scientific equipment of every description. There was no room for a heavy and unwieldy statue.

Daylight was waning now. After profuse thanks to Brest, the two men returned to the *Chevette*. That was the end of it for Matterer but not for d'Urville. He spent the evening in his cabin and wrote, as he did each night, in his journal. He could not have known how famous the Venus de Milo would become. But along with Olivier Voutier, Captain Dauriau, Louis Brest, and even Yorgos, he sensed that the statue was not just one of thousands of antique statues but something special and powerful, something less like a thing than an event.

So, on this night of April 19, 1820, he began to create the legend that would first make him famous. From that moment everything he did or wrote was a mixture of truth, errors, and lies of omission designed to make d'Urville himself, and only him, the discoverer of the

Venus de Milo. He tried and almost succeeded in sweeping everyone else, including the faithful Matterer, off the stage and out of history.

The kaptan pasha's dragoman

ON APRIL 22, three days after d'Urville and Matterer had seen the statue, their ship, the *Chevrette*, weighed anchor at Melos and sailed for Constantinople. By then the four other French ships that had been at Melos during the time of the discovery had departed as well. The *Emulation* and the *Bonite* were returning to France. The *Lionne* and the *Estafette*, with Olivier Voutier aboard, were bound for Smyrna. Now Louis Brest was left alone on the island to handle the primates as best he could.

The primates were the legal authority on the island, but exactly what the law was in 1820 is no longer clear and may not have been clear even then. Melos was part of the Ottoman Empire, but no Turk or Turkish official lived there. The Turks imposed heavy taxes that a tax official came around regularly to collect. And a magistrate appeared from time to time to serve as a judge in criminal cases, which he would decide according to the bribes he received. Other than this corrupt magistrate, the islanders received no governmental services of any kind in return for the burdensome taxes they paid to the Ottomans. There were no police or civil courts. There was no protection from pirates and no public works. There was not even a postal service. The whole Ottoman Empire, which at this time stretched from Persia to the Balkans, was administered by communications sent via personal messengers.

The possessions of the empire were divided into provinces, each ruled by its own pasha. The Greek islands in the Aegean formed one of the provinces. Their ruler was the kaptan pasha, who was also supreme admiral of the Turkish navy. The kaptan pasha, like most of the other pashas, used an intermediary known as a dragoman to administer the island province entrusted to him.

This peculiar position rose to importance as the Turks expanded far into Europe in the sixteenth century. The Turks did not know Western languages or customs, nor did the European powers know the Turkish language or Turkish ways. Since each side regarded the other as ignorant barbarians who were infidels besides, neither side was particularly inclined to learn the intricacies of living with the other. Dragomans bridged the gap. Typically, they were from European families who lived in Constantinople. Some of these families had been there for generations. They were hired by the European states to represent them to the Sublime Porte, as the sultan's government was known, but dragomans as a class were notoriously corrupt and devious. In the eighteenth century, England and France began sending young men to Turkey to train as dragomans in order to avoid this corruption. It was considered a lonely and onerous duty. Its single attraction was that after ten or twelve years among the despicable but wealthy Turks, the young men could return home to England or France with a fortune.

In 1820 the dragoman for the kaptan pasha was a Greek prince named Nicolas Morousi, the third son of the prince of Moldavia. Like most of the other dragomans for the Greek possessions, Morousi was a Christian who came from Constantinople. Although he was technically a servant of the kaptan pasha, Morousi was in fact the real ruler of the island.

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