

Report Caravan Walk 2010

The Caravan consisted this year of two parts: in May we walked in Greece from Krystallopigi (at the Albanian border) to Florina – this is a sidetrack of VE – and from there to Edessa. In June-July we walked (and bussed) from Thessaloniki to Istanbul. The group changed a little every week or two weeks.

In spring we had a most beautiful time in the mountains under the Prespa lake, with a group that was half Dutch, half Croatian. Miriam Krizic from Croatia, who also joined us last year in Albania and has actively promoted the project on her University, brought five of her Croatian anthropologist friends, who were a great company. Together with our Greek guides we traversed the wild nature of these mountains, accompanied by mules, by horses, and by a lot of dogs. Volunteers, equestrians and pathfinders helped us along the road and we had a lot of fun together. Underway we looked for traces of the old road(s) and found many interesting hits, like Roman bridges, small pieces of old pavement, and old people who told us about their history and that of the road. At night we camped in tents at the most beautiful places or in the middle of a village, guarded by our dogs. We danced and made music with people along the road: Greeks, Pontians, Albanians, Gypsies. One of the funny effects of all this interaction was that our excellent guide Theofilos became so enthusiastic about the project, that he started to talk and explain to all people we met. He even stopped cars on the road, so that we did not get very far some days...

We made several interesting interviews with local people. Maria from Croatia made some nice video's. They still have to be put on YouTube; and we will inform you if this has happened.

We had some manifestations in the cities underway, like Florina and Edessa, helped by the volunteers of the Cultural triangle Prespa, with interesting lectures from local people on VE and with the usual children's painting. This VE painting is now 40 meters long! We built up some very good cooperation with local authorities and active people in the region, who want to join and support the project. And we had very good publicity, in newspapers as well as on radio. Of course we also made a technical mapping of the track, its possibilities and problems. So this Walk left us very satisfied and happy (and fit).

In June we made the part from Thessaloniki to Istanbul.

We started in Thessaloniki with a small seminar on Via Egnatia, where mr. Panos Theodoridis, who has spent much of his life on investigating Via Egnatia, held an interesting talk. A friend had told us that mr. Theodoridis usually does not talk for more than ten minutes, but he talked for one and a half hour – which must be a good sign. Fotini Tsibiridou and her assistants from the University of Macedonia in Thessaloniki spent much time and effort to organise this event. We want to emphasize how important these – even small – meetings are for building up our network, for creating synergy and mutual trust. All kinds of new initiatives spring from these meetings, like organising a special research and action for Roma people along the road, making a new fact-finding expedition – together with mr. Theodoridis – on the track Edessa-Thessaloniki, and contact with the people from the Nea Egnatia organisation. The distance from Thessaloniki to Istanbul is of course very far (about 700 kilometres), and not all parts are equally interesting or walkable, so we did some parts by bus. From Amfipoli

we started walking again through the Pangeo mountains, which are very beautiful and with many archaeological finds. However it is difficult to find a usable track there, so we sometimes got stuck in the mountains. Some further small expedition will be necessary, with the help of local people, to determine a good walking path. Meanwhile it had started raining heavily – we saw Filippi in grey tones. And this bad weather came back repeatedly. So everybody who has said not to join the Walk in fear of too hot weather, proved wrong. We often got soaked wet and even cold at nights, in the midst of summer!

In Kavala we saw the beautiful pieces of VE that have been preserved there. In the local museum VE is not much of an issue and the found malaria are somewhere hidden in the cellar. Hopefully this will change when we get our travelling exhibition on VE ready.

This in contrast to Komotini, where the interest for VE is more prominent, thanks to the active research of Mrs. Polyxeni Tsatsopoulou, who guided us along the beautiful VE trail from Mesti to the archaeological site of Mesembria. This is in fact the best part of VE in Greece, well preserved, cleaned up, protected and signed, and in beautiful surroundings. It was a pity that we could not find donkeys there, as agriculture is totally mechanized in Thrace. It would be a big accomplishment for the VE hiking trail if we could succeed to get there a few donkey stations in the future.

During all this Caravanning we have got local people interested to become stakeholder of VEF, so that in the future they can be supported to start a small business along VE, like a Bed & Breakfast, a small restaurant or indeed a donkey-station with guiding facility.

Around and in Alexandroupoli we had a wonderful time, with a group consisting of different anthropologists and musicians, and – with all these middle aged people – our enduring young friends from Slovenia Mateja and Klemen, who were walking the fastest of all. You can hear Mateja's beautiful singing on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3JR_wbQqb1o). More material will be put on YouTube soon.

Near to Alexandroupolis are the rests of the former big city and VE resting place Traianoupolis, with its natural baths and the ruin of the old Han. Many elderly people are staying here for the healing influences of the baths, and we made a nice concert for them, while they were sitting on chairs and waving the mosquitoes away from them with branches. On this occasion the local Karaghiozisplayer, Mr. Boltzidis, made a special performance about Karaghiozis on Via Egnatia: "on the look for Harmony". Film material on this will be publicized when we find the time.

Crossing the border to Turkey we found Paula and Hugo waiting for us at the other side, who – speaking Turkish well - had prepared the Turkish part of the trail. We also had a car with us, brought by our Italian driver Claudio, who proved to be a magnificent organizer and pathfinder, with an almost unending patience for lost articles or roads. On the central place of Ipsala we got a friendly welcome by the mayor, did our music and painting, joined by some spontaneous Turkish musicians. A young shoe polisher drummed enthusiastically with us on his shoeshine box, while an ever growing circle of spectators came standing around us. All the explanation on the project done by Paula and Hugo. Pictures of this are on the site.

And like this we continued, walking, riding, getting soaked on mountains, saved by far away shepherds who offered us shelter and cheese. We had two fantastic guides in Turkey, who were both called Attila, which was quite practical. With Attila I we walked as far as Ucmakdere, and even had one day with donkeys again. We followed more or less the trail of

VE. Through hills and valleys, fields of wheat and sunflowers, through small villages with kind people, geese and storks. We were passed by local farmers on donkeys and horse carts, which we sometimes eagerly used for a lift. When the weather became too wet we sheltered under our big plastic and passed the time by singing rain songs (see video's of Klemen Bratusa on Facebook).

One of the problems in Turkey is that there is nothing left of the VE road, as it was probably not paved. So we were more free to choose our own road and a usable path. With Attila II we pursued this freedom so far as to follow the trail along the Anastasian Wall to the Black Sea. This had nothing to do with VE, but was very interesting and beautiful. Underway in the woods we suddenly stood before the impressive remains of the Roman aquaduct to Istanbul. (see pictures on the site). Along VE there are however some interesting buildings and city sites saved, which had a function on VE, like the city of Marmara Ereğlisi, where archaeologist Mustapha Sayar guided us one beautiful day through his archaeological site. Another example is the big caravan serial of Buyuk Cekmece, where is also the beautiful long bridge of Sinan. As it was raining again when we arrived here along the bridge, we were happy to be offered shelter and podium inside the caravanserai, where we did painting and music again. The local authorities proved very interested in the project and maybe we can do there one of our planned concerts, next year.

So we partly were in the wilderness, often far from Via Egnatia, and then again on the track, visiting cities and buildings. In the cities, during spells of sunshine, we did our painting and promotion activities. This painting proved a big success! Everywhere children of different ages enjoyed making a painting of their surroundings. They work concentrated, the music is accompanying them, and meanwhile we have time to talk with their parents about the project. Our guide Attila II proved a very enthusiastic explicateur. In fact this painting is one of the few things in life that always succeeds, as we told to Nur Mardin in Istanbul, who gave us the idea.

Arriving in Istanbul at the last and preserved Golden Gate of Via Egnatia at Yedikule, we were warmly received by a gypsy orchestra and a group of dancing and singing children. Local journalists and television teams were there to cover the event. The same happened on the following day – Sunday 12 July- when we had our final symposium in the archaeological museum of Istanbul. Two Turkish archaeologists did a presentation on Via Egnatia, and Marietta talked about the project. The audience here was big and interested, and even people above eighty expressed their wish to participate in the (next?) Caravan Walk. Except that we also had a photo exhibition about Via Egnatia in the archaeological museum. The whole event was incorporated in the campaign around “ Istanbul Cultural Capital of the Year”. Lots of effort and organisation here was done by our counterparts, the group of Nur Mardin and her colleagues, who are engaged in peace-education. Together with their group of children and youngsters we had a fantastic final fiesta in the park just beside the museum, on a fine sunny day. There is good film material on all this, and when we have some help with the editing we will put it on the internet for you to see.