Story **Wolf Reiser** Photographs **Simon Norfolk**

STONY SILENCE

Nemrut Dagi is as reluctant to give up its secrets now as it was in 1881, when a German engineer stumbled across the site. Whether it is a monument to megalomania or a celebration of multiculturalism in antiquity, the 2,000-year-old tomb is as enigmatic as ever

IT WAS LIKE NOTHING HE HAD EVER SEEN… AS THOUGH A PAIR OF GREAT PRIMEVAL GODS HAD SUDDENLY ABANDONED THEIR GAME OF CHESS

The real reason the German highway engineer Karl Sester was in southern Anatolia in the sweltering heat of summer 1881 was to explore the possibility of building a new road. A new connection between Persepolis and the Aegean was needed to replace the ancient, cobblestone route. However, what most captured his interest was the view from his camp that greeted him each day – the massive, cone-shaped Mount Nemrut which rose to a height of 7,000 feet. Local peasants and goatherds often spoke of the huge, strangely shaped figures to be found up there. One morning, Sester set off on his mule, following a long and winding path that first took him along the Euphrates and then past fragrant pinewoods, fig trees, oleander bushes, olive groves, and vineyards. Soon the track began to climb ever more perilously, and the hours dragged by, ticking away to the unsteady beat of the animal's hooves.

When Sester finally came upon the great tumulus formed by millions of stones, each the size of a human fist, he nearly fell off his mount in amazement. The funerary mound, with terraces built on the east, west, and north sides, was like nothing he'd ever seen. It was as though a pair of great primeval gods had suddenly abandoned their game of chess. Before him stood statues fashioned from pale tufa and greenish sandstone. Some of the torsos were still seated on thrones built of stone. Their decapitated heads with their full lips and pointed Hittite headdresses were scattered higgledy-piggledy across the terraces, the result of erosion, earthquakes, or vandalism. In the late afternoon sun, these strangely beautiful faces stared stoically into the distance. Close by, Sester discovered an imposing relief of a lion surrounded by astrological signs and wearing a crescent moon around its neck. Stern-looking eagle heads seemed to spring from the dust and gravel. More stone tablets with Greek inscriptions reminded Sester of Moses and the Ten Commandments. Still sitting speechless in the saddle, he recognized Zeus, Apollo, and Heracles among the figures of the gods on each terrace. On the way back to camp he had a sudden realization. This mausoleum, this place where ancient rituals were performed, would cause a sensation. Indeed, Nemrut Dagi very soon came to be regarded as the eighth wonder of the world.

A year later, the Prussian Royal Academy of Science sent Karl Sester back to Asia Minor. Traveling with him was the archaeologist Otto Puchstein. They and their Turkish colleagues began meticulously salvaging and sorting, restoring and reconstructing, classifying and categorizing, investigating and interpreting. Quickly they ascertained who had masterminded this spectacular open-air display. King Antiochus I left behind details of the Nemrut project carved in stone, in Greek lettering two inches high. It was, in effect, classical antiquity's version of a PowerPoint presentation.

Between 70 and 38 B.C., the King of Commagene reigned over a kind of Hellenic Switzerland, a small, peaceful, and prosperous buffer state on the always insecure border between the Persian and Roman empires. It wasn't only in his ability to hold the balance of power or in his political and diplomatic skills that Antiochus seemed to be favored by the planets. His capital, Samosata, now submerged beneath the reservoir of the Ataturk Dam, stood at a junction between the most important trade and military routes. Caravans and cargo ships from Damascus, Armenia, the Black Sea, and Palmyra ensured that the kingdom received a constant flow of money, goods, and customs dues. In the Euphrates, gold and silver "swam" alongside sturgeon and trout. Fertile volcanic soil guaranteed bumper harvests. Everything in Commagene blossomed and glittered. And during Antiochus's 32-year reign, there were no bloodbaths, no man-made disasters or natural catastrophes. In terms of education, only Ephesus could compete with the Commagenians.

Antiochus sought advice from the Lion Horoscope, which encouraged him to engage sensitively with volatile Rome and enabled his kingdom to embrace the spiritual values of the Persian-influenced Zoroastrian religion – personal virtue, truth, and wisdom. The king, who numbered Darius of Persia and Alexander the Great among his forebears, had every reason to build on Mount Nemrut, during his own lifetime, a pantheon dedicated to his favorite gods. And, with three surviving reliefs showing Antiochus exchanging handshakes with various deities, he bequeathed to humankind a tangible sign of eternal friendship between mortals and Mount Olympus. On line 36 of the 237-line

The tomb of Antiochus I celebrates the great king of Commagene (who ruled from 70 to 38 B.C.) with a semi-legendary ancestry that reflects the religious and political influences of the day. Colossal statues of Greek gods sit between stone eagles and lions; the king's Macedonian and Persian forebears appear in relief. In an extraordinary undertaking, the top of the mountain was reduced to gravel to build the mausoleum's terraces. In 1987, Nemrut Dagi was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO

royal edict inscribed on the stone back of the thrones on the east and west terraces, Antiochos states that he has "taken forethought to lay the foundation of this sacred tomb…wherein the fortunately preserved outer form of my person, preserved to ripe old age, shall, after the soul beloved by God has been sent to the heavenly thrones of Zeus, rest through immeasurable time."

In 1951, the German archaeologist Friedrich Karl Dörner began researching further aspects of the necropolis. He discovered that the king's architects had begun by reducing the highest point of Mount Nemrut to gravel, which they then used to create three carefully constructed terraces surrounding the central core of the mountain some 65 feet below the summit. Despite the regal hope for eternal rest, scholarly curiosity continues to drive research. Where exactly is the king now? What grave goods did he wish to be laid around him? And what was the great secret he kept to himself? He left written evidence that such a secret existed. "The Great King, the God, the Righteous One…has recorded for all time, a law under which he entrusts an immortal message to a sacred monument." Could there have been a god-given formula for peace, prosperity, and even immortality hidden under a pile of rubble?

In their search for treasure in the 1950s and '60s, Dörner and his American colleagues dug and secured a number of tunnels but were soon obliged to give up. "We didn't get far because the bedrock prevented us advancing." Even the most recently licensed expeditions, which moved in with hydraulic cranes, 3-D scanners, magnetometers, and state-of-the-art laser equipment, failed to produce anything new. The rocks remain silent. The sun continues to scorch, the wind to howl. No tomb, or even a cavity, has been found. Proud, majestic Nemrut safeguards its secrets, but in no way does this make it any less magical.

These days, the few tourists who come here drive up in the early morning from the town of Kahta, passing luminous green minarets reflected in the water of the Ataturk Reservoir. Soon they come to a twisting road spiraling as steeply as an alpine ski run. After about 30 miles, they arrive at the gates of the Nemrut Dagi National Park. Here, a few Kurdish food stalls sell fruit, flatbread, sheep's milk cheese, hot tea, yogurt, and raki. It takes another 25 minutes or so on foot to reach the three terraces. More than 2,000 years ago, Antiochus commanded his underlings to follow exactly the same path twice a month in sacred procession. As a reward for reaching the top, peasants and patricians alike were offered food and wine by the priests. Then came sacrifices, thanksgiving, worship, gossip, prayers, and celebrations. It must have been a sumptuous blend of Woodstock and *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*.

Today, things are much more peaceful. But a simple awareness of the affinity between distant past and present makes it incredibly uplifting to stand among the mighty heads of Apollo, Zeus, and Heracles and their thrones and look beyond the ancient sacrificial altar, flanked by stone lions and eagles, to see the sun rise in the east. Up here, you are almost alone, free to surrender to the magic and let your imagination run free. At the same time, these silent sculptures encourage us to meditate upon this monument to tolerance and harmony. Whether it was inspired by the megalomania of a king or the humility of a modest man, Nemrut Dagi is permeated with the spirit of intercultural reconciliation.✥

Translated by Isabel Varea

Right: the conical tumulus of Nemrut Dagi sits at the summit of a grueling, 25-minute walk along a dusty, winding pathway