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Myrtis: Her Lives

A tale that verges on the truth

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Most stories written for children are based on the curious notion that a “story” or “tale” is in essence a permissible lie, which young and old alike are free to enjoy. And so we enjoy such tales (the enjoyment is indeed of a special kind), pretending to believe things that we know full well never existed, events that never occurred, people that never walked this earth.

Myrtis: Her Lives overturns this convention on which children’s books are usually based, being an account that is rooted in a core of historically verified (and verifying) data. It is a tale that seeks to tell the truth, but to tell it enjoyably, as if it were all a fiction. For us in the twenty-first century, the eleven-year old girl who lived in the golden age of classical Athens at the time of Pericles was in fact a real archaeological discovery from a recent excavation. Three years of systematic and inspired work, as well as generous helpings of enthusiasm, were needed in order to reconstruct her face, which then made her an exhibition showpiece in museums. Substantial doses of enthusiasm and affection were also needed to reconstruct her story and turn Myrtis into a real-life story.

The hard facts that we possess about Myrtis are few. We know that she died during the great plague that struck Athens in 430-429 BC, taking with it so many other Athenian men and women, including Pericles. We know that she was buried in a mass grave with 150 other victims of the plague (in fact, typhoid fever), and that her bones and skull came to light during excavations carried out at Kerameikos in 1994 on the site of a new metro station. This much is indisputable fact. Her face, her gaze, even her name are the product of imaginative

reconstruction – though reconstruction that relies on the hard-won knowledge of archaeologists, historians and medical experts.

In a similar fashion, the author has ventured a recreation of Myrtis' personal story by focusing not on the fact of her death, but on the certainty of her life. Myrtis has truly won our hearts, not because she died prematurely at just the age of eleven, but because she lived. Because she was a girl who played in the same places where we live today. She saw the same sunlight, she spoke, she sang, and heard stories in the same language that continues to evolve among its speakers today. These comprise a series of truths that are of far more significance than her death.

It is on these truths that her story is built. And if we do not know the full story of the real little girl we have called Myrtis, we at least know much about the stories she heard, the stories she saw unfolding around her during these golden years in the history of this city – the stories she experienced from day to day in the Athens of this unique and extremely important age. Of course, the stories are so many that they cannot possibly fit into a single book.

As we said, Myrtis lived in the golden, classical age of Athens, when its name became forever associated with ideas, intellectual inquiry, the visual arts, architecture, incredible achievements on every level of human endeavour. This was the Athens of Pericles and Socrates, of Aristophanes and Euripides, of Hippocrates, Herodotus and Thucydides, Phidias, Ictinus and Alcibiades, to name just a few. It was the Athens of the sophists and philosophers, of poetry and of military triumphs against all odds. It was a city whose history and story do not belong only to modern-day Athenians or even to modern-day Greeks, but to the entire world. Indeed, Myrtis the little Athenian girl of the fifth century BC has become, in her own unique way, a friend of the UN Millennium Development Goals and joined the United Nations world campaign “We can End Poverty”***.

While her short life was lived during this brilliant moment in world history, no one would have imagined how Myrtis would one day come to life again: although she was to die prematurely in the city that was besieged at the time by the Spartans, the archaeological discovery, the exhibit, the tale of Myrtis today embark on a wonderful journey – a journey that opens up for us new roads and vistas that we could never have imagined.

[see sample pages of the book](#)