

92 and Not Dead Yet: Civilizations Sleep, Ibex Leap, Nurses Weep



Ibex, Franz Marc, 1913

As with every normal kid in the first year or two of high school, poetry was a pain the neck for me: language no one had ever heard spoken, comparisons impossible to believe, words in the wrong order, self-absorption, extravagance, moodiness, willful obscurity. Still, there was always an exception or two and one of them was “Ozymandias,” Shelley’s haunting tale of the traveler in “an antique land” coming across the wreck of colossal statues of what had been a thriving civilization but where now only “boundless and bare the lone and level sands stretch far away.”

So, when an invitation to speak at a medical conference in Turkey arrived, I determined to see one of the sites that

might have inspired the poem and not to be deterred by any inconvenience I caused anyone else. And a lot of inconvenience it did cause as half a dozen busy doctors rearranged their calendars to fit in with this Yankee whim (though before we went, I achieved the main objective of the trip, which was to make as many nurses as possible cry so they would sign their organ donor cards.



The next day a carload of us headed for the mountains a few hours away and this is what we found: these huge relics of an inscrutable culture in a land now devoid of all human life but still defying the elements two hundred harsh years after Shelley died.



And for good measure, a couple of hours later, we saw the terrain where the very first trickles that would go on to become the legendary Euphrates start, a lesson in history, geography and the seeds of civilization in one view.



On the way home we spotted a pair of ibex and stopped to watch them defy gravity on a near-vertical wall of rock several hundred feet above us. They moved along sure-footedly until, unexpectedly, they came to a wide gully. The female hesitated for a moment and jumped, just making the ledge on the other side. The male, seeing she was safely across, leapt too but being much heavier only got his front half on the far side, his back legs flailing in space. The female, immobile, watched his frantic efforts, knowing I suppose that without him she too was probably doomed. He continued scramble, though less vigorously and was clearly tiring. But in one last desperate lunge he got enough of his body on the ledge to push his way inch by inch to safety. He stood up and without a pause they both trotted on as if nothing had happened—though I can't help

thinking that over dinner that night they opened a bottle of fine wine.

Not bad for one day, eh?

The moral: never be reluctant to make a nuisance of yourself.