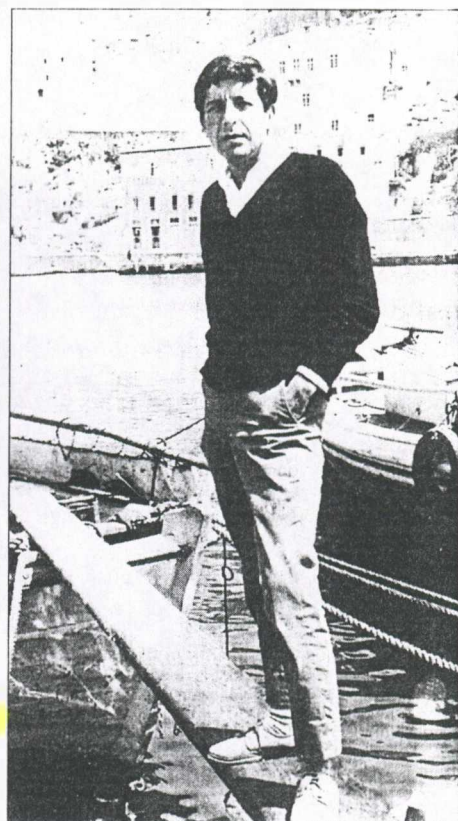


## Expatriate artists and archaeologists fight tycoon's holiday complex dream for unspoilt Greek island



Leonard Cohen, a long-time resident of Hydra, left, where donkeys are the only transport. Photographs from 'A Life of Leonard Cohen' and by Bernard Annebicque/Sygma

# Jet set rage at Branson paradise hotel plan

by Helena Smith

Athens

RICHARD BRANSON'S plans to build a luxury hotel on the unspoilt Aegean island of Hydra have enraged the colony of international jet-setters and artists who have made it their home since the Sixties.

Cars, whining mopeds, even bicycles are banned on the idyllic island, which Branson fell in love with 23 years ago. On Tuesday his love affair may come to an abrupt end when a motley group of government officials, businessmen and academics meet to decide the fate of Branson's latest pet project.

As members of Greece's powerful Central Archaeological Council, they have the final say in granting planning permission to build the £12 million complex on the outskirts of Hydra's magnificent port town. The group was forced to intervene when local environmental organisations pointed out that the hotel site bordered a priceless prehistoric acropolis.

Flying into Athens for talks with senior Socialist Ministers three weeks ago, the 46-year-old Virgin chief enthused about the 50 exquisite two-storey houses he has dreamt of creating since acquiring the slopes of an unspoilt valley in 1987. 'I want it to be one of Europe's most luxurious hotels,' he boasted to the *Observer*. 'I want it to be like our other paradise hotel on Majorca.'

But opposition to the



Richard Branson: Followed former wife to the island

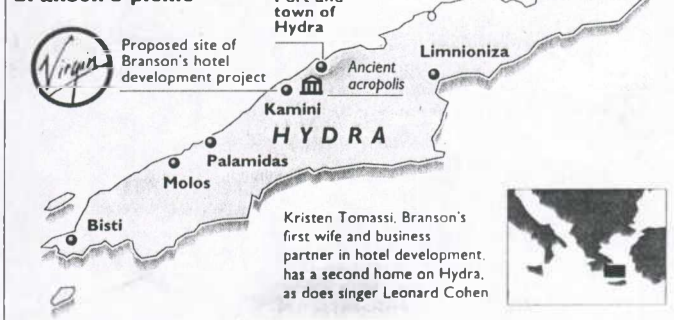
project from the likes of Leonard Cohen, the Canadian singer-songwriter, and other expatriate residents is forcing a rethink.

Branson has become one of Greece's biggest foreign investors, with two Virgin Megastores (three more to come) and direct Virgin flights to Athens from London every day.

Since the collapse of Communism, Branson has invested more in Greece than any other European country, partly because of its position at the crossroads of East and West.

For all his hard-headed business interests in Greece, Branson has romantic links as well. His business partner in the Hydra hotel development is Kristen Tomassi, his first wife. When their marriage was in trouble in 1974, a devastated Branson followed the

## Branson's pickle



tall and willowy Tomassi to Hydra.

At the time the island was the favourite summer playground of rock musicians such as David Bowie, as well as Leonard Cohen, who lived there with his then wife Marianne and two children. Cohen maintained he only produced poetry in the basement study of his big stone mansion when he was high on the island's hashish and wrote that opiates could be easily obtained at the local pharmacy.

Having tired of Branson's workaholic ways, Tomassi fled to the island with her then rock-musician boyfriend.

'By chasing my love I fell in love with Hydra,' Branson told the *Observer*. 'This woman was a very, very big love. Hydra is very mixed up with it.'

Twenty-two years later Branson continues to refer to

Tomassi either by default or intention, as 'my wife'.

She has spent nearly every summer on Hydra in the home she now shares with her German architect husband and five children. The couple spend the rest of the year managing Branson's other hotel on Majorca, which the super-rich, including members of the Royal Family, regularly patronise.

'Kristen got Richard the land here and it's quite obvious to those of us who know the story first-hand that he wants to do this because of her,' said one expatriate. 'He's not interested in Hydra, he's just the guy with the big bucks who wants to prove himself to the only person who ever got out of his grip.'

Most residents of Hydra support Branson and when he recently visited the island jubilant construction workers

carried him on their shoulders like a returning hero.

'It's a very big investment, not only for us, but for Greece,' enthuses Constantinos Anastopoulos, Hydra's Conservative mayor. 'It's going to provide lots of jobs and bring in lots of big spenders. Water desalination and solar energy will ensure that the environment is not destroyed.'

The critics, who also in-

clude many of Greece's most influential figures in the arts and business worlds, say the complex — which has access to the island's sole beach — will quickly set a dangerous precedent.

'Before we know it we'll have more hotels and then roads and cars and discotheques,' bemoaned Joseph Efrimides, an architect who has lived there for the past 20 years.

'For centuries the houses built on this island have been very sensible. Sadly the same cannot be said of the ones that Mr Branson wants to construct, which neither speak to nor are in harmony with the land.'

Passions are running so high on Hydra that many opponents dare not voice their grievances aloud. In recent weeks graffiti has begun to appear on the walls of opponents of the hotel but they show no sign of backing down. Whatever the decision of the Archaeological Council both camps have already vowed they will contest it in the High Court.



# The Agamemnon family snapshots

Using evidence from Mycenae's ruins, scientists have staged an identity parade of Greek heroes, writes **Robin McKie**

RESEARCHERS have reconstructed the faces of the founders of Mycenae, Europe's first great city state and capital of Agamemnon's legendary empire.

Using technologies developed by forensic scientists, they have given features to skulls buried since the days of Homer's *Iliad*.

The breakthrough is the first phase of a remarkable project aimed at uncovering the origins of the ancient Greek city. Now researchers plan to compare DNA, extracted from bones found in Mycenae's 3,600-year-old royal graves, to confirm patterns of kinship.

The aim is to identify the city's first rulers. These were the predecessors of Agamemnon, the king whose armies were said by Homer to have sacked Troy and who was eventually murdered by his own wife, Clytemnestra.

'Around 1600 BC, when Mycenae was founded, rival families were struggling for ascendancy,' said Dr John Prag, of the Manchester Museum. 'To find out who won, we

will use techniques previously confined to the study of migration patterns. This time we will learn about individual humans.'

The discovery of royal tombs at Mycenae — 'a tumbledown insignificant village', as Dr Prag termed it — was one of the greatest achievements of Heinrich Schliemann. Armed with the *Iliad*, Schliemann had already discovered the remains of Troy when, in 1876, he began to dig at Mycenae, finding tombs containing crumbling bones draped with jewels and gold face masks. 'I have discovered the graves of Agamemnon, Cassandra, Eurymedon, and their companions, all slain at a banquet by Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthos,' he told the King of Greece.

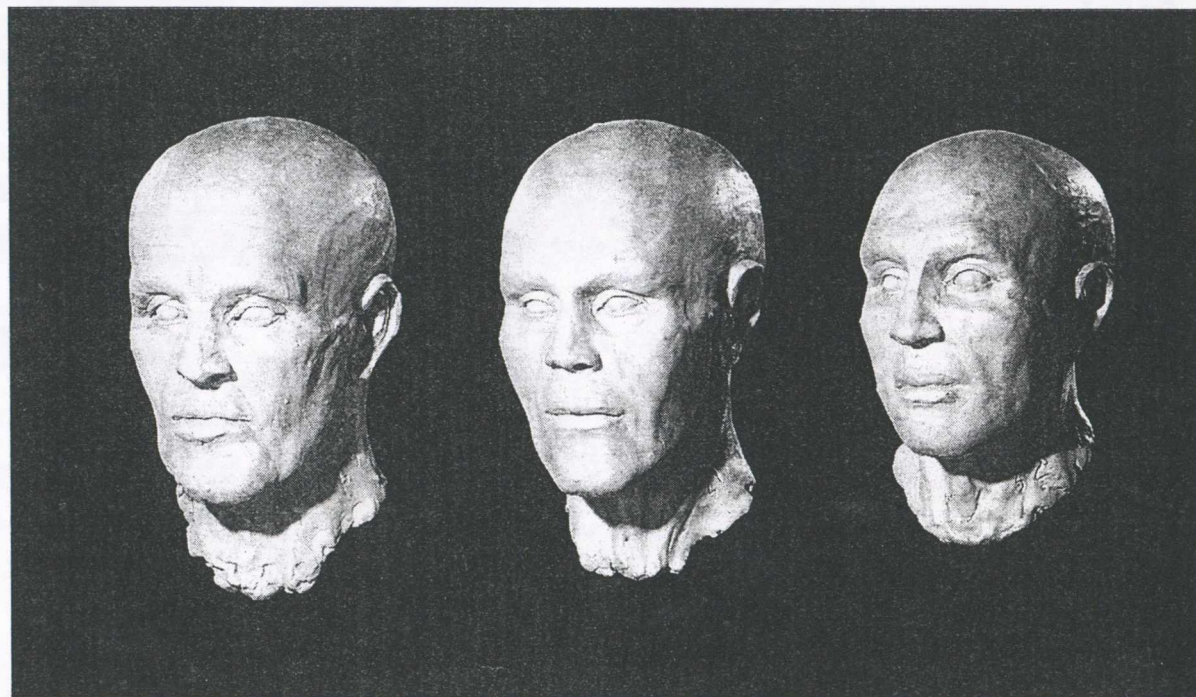
In fact, the graves' dates — around 1600 BC — are too early for Agamemnon, whose bones remain undiscovered. Nevertheless, Schliemann had uncovered a civilisation a thousand years older than any previously known in Greece, and had demonstrated the 'real-

life' basis of the *Iliad*. Subsequent excavations revealed other, slightly earlier graves of rich noblemen, just outside Mycenae's walls. Their bones and skulls are better preserved, and have been used by medical artist Richard Neave to build up facial features, muscle by muscle, with modelling clay.

The results revealed two distinct lines of family resemblance, suggesting that at least two dynasties vied for power. 'We want to know which family succeeded, took over Mycenae and ended up being buried in its great royal tombs,' added Dr Prag.

To provide this data, biochemists Drs Terry and Keri Brown, at the University of Manchester Institute of Science and Technology (UMIST), have begun to extract DNA from the skeletons.

Only a few scraps have survived the millennia. But by using a technology known as PCR, they expect to create millionfold copies of each nobleman's DNA, each with a dis-



Medical artist Richard Neave has reconstructed the faces of three Greek nobles from their skulls. The two on the left may be related.

tinctive family pattern. By comparing these patterns, it will be possible to show if the skulls, fleshed out by Mr Neave, belonged to relatives. In other words, DNA will be used, not as the focus of medical research, but as emissaries from the past.

'It sounds simple,' said Dr Terry Brown, 'but if any cells — say from a laboratory worker — get in-

cluded, it ruins our results. We have to be extremely careful, only taking DNA from dust drilled from the middle of bones.'

Having established which families were buried in outlying graves, the team will then show if they are related to the skeletons from Mycenae's royal tombs.

It should also be possible to find the origins of the Mycenaean and

whether they are genetically similar to the rest of Greece, or to prove that the city was actually founded by invaders from Crete.

'This place was enshrined in myth and was the first great city state of Western Europe, built on blossoming trade,' said Dr Prag. 'Mycenae guarded land and sea routes and became stuffed with ivory and jewel workshops and

massive stores for oils and scents. As to its attack on Troy, that was a simple trade war with a rival.'

Mycenae eventually fell, and the Manchester team may also explain why. Its analysis of bones might find evidence of malaria and tuberculosis which could have evolved into new, deadly strains in the crowded environments of one of the world's first great cities.