

# Reflections on an Archaeological Ethnography of ‘Looting’ in Kozani, Greece

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The first part of this paper provides a concise overview of the ethnographies of ‘looting’, demonstrating the importance of this kind of archaeological ethnography in understanding the phenomenon; the paper also emphasizes the need to encompass reflexivity in terms of the impact and the socio-political dimensions of professional archaeology upon public perceptions and treatments of the material past. Such a reflexive archaeological ethnography of ‘looting’ is instrumental for two reasons: it allows for the recognition of the power imbalances in the production of the past; and, most importantly, it gives voice to unofficial, indigenous meanings of and engagements with material remains. In the second part of the paper, the author explores how her ethnography of ‘looting’ conducted in Kozani, Greece opened the way for reflecting on her relationship with the people she interacted with. In particular, she discusses her personal experience in wrestling with ethical dilemmas that emerged from the dual official role that she came to carry: that of the archaeologist and the ethnographer.

**KEYWORDS** Archaeological ethnography, Looting, Unofficial engagements, Ethics, Politics, Reflexivity, Greece

## Introduction

So your research is about the relationship between modern people and archaeology ... Fair enough, but didn't you say you are an archaeologist? Shouldn't you be digging, instead of being concerned with these kinds of questions? (Anon., August 2007, Kozani)

One thing that has remained consistent throughout my research in Greece is peoples' immediate surprise when they find out that I am an archaeologist conducting 'non-archaeological' fieldwork. I then feel obliged to explain (although in a casual manner) that archaeology is not solely concerned with excavations. Perhaps it would have been much less complicated for people to understand what I do and why I do

it, had I said that I am an anthropologist, or simply an ethnographer. Instead, I chose not to, principally for one reason: the chance that someone might not act surprised. I believe that such moments are a reassurance that peoples' perception of what archaeology is has surpassed stereotypical associations with excavations and dusty records of ancient finds. Nonetheless, something like this rarely happens. The norm is that people wonder 'how come' I am concerned with probing for the 'meaning' of archaeology, instead of choosing to practise it in the traditional manner. I often get the impression that people perceive my project as a strange and perhaps inappropriate thing for an archaeologist to do.

In truth, there is still a long way ahead until it becomes common sense in archaeological epistemology that the disciplinary interest in the past concerns the present and living people as much as it does long-gone societies. By saying this, however, I do not mean to overlook the important steps that have been taken in pursuit of the 'social impact' of archaeology. Such cases in point are often ethnographic studies in archaeology, investigating, provoking and changing the socio-political dimensions of archaeology's own enterprise, in pursuit of power equality amongst cultural — official and unofficial — producers (see Hollowell, 2005; Hamilakis and Anagnostopoulos, this volume).

This paper is elicited from this kind of ethnographic study, which I have conducted in the past four years. In brief, it is an ethnographic endeavour to comprehend certain unofficial engagements with the material past — commonly termed as 'looting'. The main objectives are to reveal the forms of unofficial connections with the material past and, more importantly, to shed light on the parameters that drive and influence these kinds of engagements. I based my research on the activities of eleven individuals, nine residing in the prefecture of Kozani and two from the prefectures of Kastoria and Florina, all in the west of the Greek Macedonian periphery. These people have illegally interacted with the material past through their digging and/or collecting of ancient objects. Nevertheless, selling the material past they encountered was not their primary concern. This was a defining factor to consider, as it became the reason for me to search for the deeper motives and objectives behind their actions, and thus look beyond the official status of their practices as illegal.

The background research from which this paper emerges, has been largely influenced by the developing spectrum of 'unconventional' ethnographic approaches towards the treatment and understanding of 'looting' (Matsuda, 1998; Hollowell, 2005). A first look at these approaches reveals an important advantage of ethnography for understanding the phenomenon of 'looting', namely, its emphasis on the social contexts within which 'looting' occurs (Maury, 1996; Kersel, 2007). Not all of these ethnographies, however, pursue the same objective in archaeology. I might be stating the obvious here; certainly not all archaeological ethnographies emerge from the same conceptions and definitions of archaeology. What I want to emphasize, however, is that when it comes to studying 'looting', it is crucial that we first understand how the socio-political circumstances surrounding 'looters', influence such unofficial engagements with the past. This requires that the archaeological ethnography of 'looting' emerges from an integration of archaeology and ethnography which, as Castañeda (2008: 5) put it, promotes 'archaeology as a reflexive social science through the

investigation of and engagement with the socio-political and economic dimensions of its own enterprise’.

The first objective of this paper is to argue, through a critical overview of ethnographies of ‘looting’, that an archaeological ethnography becomes instrumental in the investigation of this phenomenon when it promotes reflexivity in terms of archaeology’s socio-political nature, because it is only then that it reveals the extent to which this phenomenon links to the social impact of official archaeology and to the power imbalances regarding the control of the material past. More importantly, it is only then that unofficial, indigenous perceptions and treatments of the past are given a voice within the archaeological discourse, even when they involve ‘destruction’ of archaeological material.

Furthermore, in an archaeological ethnography that promotes reflexivity in archaeology, it becomes inevitable that this reflexivity will extend to the role of ethnography as well. This forms the second objective of this paper, where I discuss certain ethical dilemmas that emerged from being reflexive not in terms of merely my identity as an archaeologist, nor in terms of the nature of archaeology in general, but in terms of *my role* as an ethnographer and *my relationship* with the people I encountered during my research.

### ‘Looting’ and ethnography

Through an archaeological lens, the practice of ‘looting’ and (im)morality appear interdependent. In particular, what is defined as an illegitimate and illegal action towards archaeological remains ultimately coincides with an immoral action. Thus, even when ‘looting’ appears defined by the widely shared idea that it is ‘the illicit, unrecorded and unpublished excavation of ancient sites to provide antiquities for commercial profit’ (Renfrew, 2000: 15), on a closer look it corresponds to any form of unofficial engagement with the material past — since practices that do not necessarily involve excavation or monetary profit are still referred to as ‘looting’ within the archaeological literature (see Lekakis, 2006: 1). Such a discourse, however, creates a blanket conception of ‘looting’ — despite the particularities of each individual case — and it automatically denotes destruction of archaeology, financial profit from decontextualized antiquities, and thus conflict with fundamental archaeological ethics. As a result, most archaeological discussion concerned with this topic treats any illegal or unofficial interaction with the past as an unethical engagement on the basis of its association with the destruction of the archaeological context and commodification of antiquities.

If we were to conjure up an appropriate metaphor, it would probably appear as a ‘holy crusade’ of archaeologists, fighting to rescue the remains of history from the evil forces of ‘looting’. In this way, however, inherent contradictions and inconsistencies inevitably arise, because this perceived ‘threat’ is in fact comprised of various types of activities, driven by variable motives that are created in incredibly diverse circumstances. Needless to say, things are not at all as black and white as that image wants to portray.

All ‘looting’ acts are in fact embedded within particular historical and socio-political contexts that cannot simply be ignored (see Politis, 2002; Hollowell, 2006a).

Furthermore, they are often instigated by motives that are considered justified by the perpetrators (see Maury, 1996; Thoden van Velzen, 1996). Although it is difficult for most professional archaeologists to accept these facts, strong scholarly arguments in their support have been put forward — primarily by anthropologists from Central and North America — based on the grounds that these acts are rational and set within conditions that pursue ethical priorities different from the ones that traditional archaeology adheres to.<sup>1</sup>

While the production of quantitative analyses of scales of destruction is rapidly developing (see Brodie, 1999; Chippindale et al., 2001; Elia, 2001; Gilgan, 2001; Bell, 2002; Norskov, 2002; Petkova, 2004), ethnographic studies of 'looting' go beyond that. They take away the emphasis from 'high-end' products (i.e. auctioned illicit antiquities) and instead concentrate upon the contexts in which 'looting' activities occur. In this way, ethnographers of 'looting' interact with diverse environments and witness various ways of understanding and treating the past and its remains. Consequently, they show that archaeological concepts are contingent and that the notion of 'looting' is not a universal conception (Layton and Thomas 2001; Holtorf, 2006). Furthermore, such ethnographic accounts offer moral arguments supportive of the idea that the 'production' and 'consumption' of the past should not be restricted to official constructions (Labelle, 2003; Colwell-Chanthaphonh, 2004). Finally, they demonstrate that diverse social actors play their own distinctive role within a phenomenon, the blame for which has been placed primarily (if not exclusively) on the art trade (Udvardy et al. 2003).

All such advances in the understanding of 'looting' would not have been accomplished, if it were not for the insights that ethnography has provided us with. Matsuda (1998), Maury (1996), Hollowell (2006a, 2006b), and Smith (2005) are key figures within a growing spectrum of anthropological approaches to the question of 'looting'. These authors have shown that it is certainly not greed that solely fuels 'looting'.<sup>2</sup> In some places 'looting' coincides with the support of corrupt governments (see Stark and Griffin, 2004), or with economic disintegration and struggle for survival (Maury, 1996; Matsuda, 1998; Politis, 2002; Hollowell, 2006a). To my understanding, only ethnography can enable such a contextual approach to the question of 'looting', which is the most appropriate direction to take in any endeavour to understand this phenomenon.

Having said that, however, I do not mean to suggest that all ethnographic studies of 'looting' follow this agenda of understanding the contexts of 'looting'. The fact is that ethnographies of 'looting' are not congruent in terms of the types of information they decipher; nor do they converge on any common sets of objectives. Furthermore, conducting an ethnography of 'looting' does not automatically make the ethnographer's epistemological and ethical standpoints any more obvious. Therefore, the question that I raise here is: considering the diversity of ideals and objectives amongst ethnographies of 'looting', are they all equally insightful towards our understanding of the phenomenon of 'looting' or equally contributing towards archaeology?

### **Categories and implications of ethnographies of 'looting'**

The fact that 'looting' is largely associated with the workings of the art market has often led ethnographers to explore the networks of people who are involved in the

antiquities' illicit passage to that market (see Early, 1989; Maury, 1996; Kersel, 2006). The implicit objective in those cases is to propose practical solutions in order to deter 'looting' and the development of the antiquities market (*ibid.*). In the context of this paper I group these cases in the category that investigates 'how' 'looting' occurs. Equally, I propose that there is another category of ethnographies of 'looting' that explores 'why' it occurs, as it investigates the reasons for which diverse agents are involved in illegal digging (see Smith, 2005; Hollowell, 2006a; Kersel, 2007).

Inconsistencies, of course, still remain, even amongst studies included in either broad categories suggested here. Therefore, the point that I am trying to make is that it is not the question asked (i.e. how or why 'looting' occurs) that defines the categories of ethnographies of 'looting', but it is the broader political and ethical agenda within which the research is embedded. In other words, it is the political and ethical standpoints from which the ethnographic questions are viewed (i.e. politics and ethics of archaeology) that really define the kind of ethnography that is conducted and by extension the kind of archaeology that is promoted.

However, there is a further implicit, yet more important, distinction than which question is asked. On the one hand there are those ethnographies whose underlying concern regards the moral justification of this kind of 'looting' on the *condition* that 'looting' helps people survive (see Heath, 1973; Politis, 2002). On the other hand, there are those ethnographies conducted within subsistence-digging communities, whose primary concern is to shed light on alternative moral arguments that favour unofficial peoples' interests towards the past, even when these involve illicit digging (see Matsuda, 1998; Colwell-Chanthaphonh, 2004; Hollowell, 2006a). The distinction, therefore, is this: in the first category, researchers (primarily archaeologists writing about the 'looting' they witness during conventional fieldwork) ethically justify unofficial interaction with the material past only because and when the subsistence argument is concerned. Ultimately, they prioritize professionalized archaeological ethics, unless they clash with other peoples' need for survival (Brodie, 2006). In the second category, researchers illustrate alternative moral arguments — beyond the subsistence argument — that favour unofficial claims and interests in the past (primarily anthropologists studying illicit digging).

Characteristic of the latter category is Julie Hollowell's study (2005), which flags up further reasons — alongside the subsistence argument — for which the indigenous communities in the Native villages of Alaska's Bering Strait dig up 'old things'. In particular, she reveals that digging is entangled with long-term processes such as tradition, recreation and family bonding. Ultimately, she sheds light on the diverse spectrum of agents who assert and rationalize their so-called 'looting' behaviours in light of their rights, values, and traditions regarding 'old things' (see Hollowell, 2005). Thoden van Velzen (1996) and Colwell-Chanthaphonh (2004) have also provided crucial insights into the ways in which collecting antiquities or digging up artefacts in Tuscany and Arizona respectively, form local identity and create a connection to a place. The strength of these ethnographies of 'looting', therefore, lies in their ability to reveal the diverse claims over the past and to decipher the conflicting power dynamics claiming control over its material traces.

To sum up the argument so far, I contend that in an ethnography of 'looting' it is crucial to examine the socio-political conditions that surround the people who 'loot'

and, furthermore, explore and expose *their* ethical priorities towards the past, even when the subsistence argument is not applicable. This in turn allows for the critical exploration of the power dynamics amongst the people who claim an interest in or control over the past, and rejects the (often blind) prioritization of one category of ethics alone (Hamilakis, 2007b).<sup>3</sup> Needless to say, such an attitude only emerges when professionalized archaeological ethics are examined reflexively and critically, especially when it comes to alternative priorities. This kind of ethnography of 'looting', which requires awareness of the socio-political dimensions of professional archaeology — or of any other agent controlling the past — is to my understanding the most appropriate way to examine the contexts of 'looting'. Effectively, it reflects on the power imbalances surrounding the control of the past, and most importantly it mirrors a wide spectrum of meanings that the past can carry for people in a variety of socio-cultural contexts.

### My archaeological ethnography of 'looting'

In Greece 'looting' is inextricably associated with treasure-hunting. The borderline between the two is nebulous, since many of the treasure-hunters in their search for the legendary golden coins come across relics of a much earlier age, which they eventually keep and later sell. If we believe a recent newspaper article, half of the country is addicted to it (Tsigganas, 2007: 34). This association between digging and selling artefacts, however, is no justification for the exclusion of other drives behind illegal digging. The reality is that 'looters' (*archaeokapiloi*) do not dig only for money, nor lead an Indiana Jones lifestyle. Instead, multiple meanings are attached to their actions, just as multiple meanings are attached to the material past itself. In pursuit of exploring those meanings, I embarked on ethnographic research in Kozani in north-western Greece, a place where I've met people who do not collect artefacts for monetary gain.

According to my personal observations and understanding, I came to realize that such acts indicate diverse human interactions with the material past, driven by various motivations. Nevertheless, their drives and motives seem unfamiliar to the state Archaeological Service, and this is largely due to the lack of communication between archaeologists and local people. Usually, the only form of contact that takes place is limited to educational apparatuses that promote official narratives of the past, and neglect the questions that the locals would actually like to be educated upon.

Given the immense possibilities that archaeology can offer as a way of thinking and perceiving the world that surrounds us, the current situation seemed too claustrophobic. What appeared to prevail were regimes of conduct (i.e. accessing the material past in official contexts, such as museums) driven by ideological agendas that I was unhappy with (i.e. promotion of nationalist ideologies, see Kokkinidou, 2005; Hamilakis, 2007a). I was desperately seeking for attitudes that challenged such official regimes. Was I looking perhaps for more immediacy? Were there people who brought themselves 'closer' to the material past and established unconventional engagements?

Indeed there were. They were people who sought more intimate and personal meanings from the 'distant' past. It seemed as if they defied that distance, by reaching

out to its material substance in a variety of distinct ways. Why would they regularly visit abandoned sites and seek an understanding of what it all meant? Why were they intrigued by ancient finds at a time when official authorities were not at all interested in them? Why did they ignore the dominant, symbolic capital of antiquity as projected in Greece, by the state Archaeological Service, and recognize symbolic significance in locations *they* selected instead? Put simply, why did they choose to approach the material past outside official preferences and agendas? Needless to say, their ‘unofficial’ interaction with the material past was the reason for which they were rendered ‘looters’.<sup>4</sup> Yet, selling the material they engaged with was not their primary concern.

In light of such behaviours, the reasons for dealing with these people seemed very obvious. I soon came to realize that looking outside the legal and ethically accepted forms of engagement with the past, I was able to explore the different kinds of everyday connections people make to the archaeological landscape; people who, despite all risks, pursue their urge to ‘hunt’, ‘discover’ and ‘feel’ the material past and create a form of personal archaeological experience and knowledge. That way, they challenge official archaeological authority, produce a past through a practice that carries a personal stigma, and consume it in a way perhaps illegitimate, yet unique and genuine. In the end, as mentioned earlier, I selected a number of individuals to focus upon and conduct an in-depth study. The aim was to draw these people’s ‘life stories’ with regard to their engagement with the material past.<sup>5</sup>

During this process I attempted to expose the categories of agents that claim interest in or control of the material past and to decipher the kind of authority (or lack of authority) that enables each category of those agents to pursue their claim (or alternatively deprives them from pursuing any claim). It was only through this process that I was able to witness a very complex situation, whereby ‘looting’ is tightly associated with the implications of official state archaeological practice that bear the imbalances of power in the ‘production’ and control of the past. In light of this, I came to wonder: when people resort to unofficial and even illegal uses of the material past, with the objective of advancing their own interests, which by no means are limited to money-making but instead concern the control of the physical and symbolic space of the past, to what degree is the language of morality useful? The way a person values or engages with the material past is not necessarily dictated by official and legitimate guidelines. A person disobeying those guidelines does not always imply lack of appreciation towards the past. Instead, when I looked closer, it signified a conflict regarding the notions and practices that official archaeology is implicated with. Such insights became apparent only when I reflected on the social impact of state archaeology upon peoples’ treatment of and attitudes towards the past.

During this process, whereby I became a proponent of reflexivity in terms of an ‘out-there’ official archaeology, it became inevitable that I began to reflect critically on my role as an ethnographer as well. I soon came to realize that I also needed to consider the ‘official’ roles I came to carry and the impact that I potentially had upon the people I interacted with. In the following paragraphs, I therefore analyse some of the problems, anxieties and dilemmas I faced throughout this investigative journey.

This introspection follows the intellectual trajectory that was demarcated by the very field conditions I put myself into. In fact, it concerns the chance to adopt a kind of self-reflexivity, without which the pursuit of my research objectives and aspirations would never have been possible. The course of discussion follows a number of self-reflections generated both before and during the time I conducted my fieldwork: questions that concerned me as a person and as an academic; as an observer and as one being observed; as an outsider and insider; and finally, as an anti-hegemonic and hegemonic person at the same time.

## How was I to be the same person in two roles? Facing the ethical burdens<sup>6</sup>

As an archaeologist, I knew that turning the spotlight towards 'us' as professionals was the right thing to do, in order to build an archaeology that was conscious of its actions, as well as aware and respectful towards the diversity of connections with the past. I wanted to stand critically against (a) the notion of 'looting' as a monolithic and simplistic category; (b) the institutionalized and compartmentalized ethics and codes of practice that sustained injustice with regard to the professionals' 'authority'; and (c) the exploitative tendency on the part of professional scholars in the pursuit of scientific purposes. Nonetheless, that level of self-reflexivity was not enough to compensate for the extra role I was about to take up. Thus later on, as an ethnographer I found myself in an unfamiliar place, because I was not entirely the archaeologist that I set out to be; I played roles that somehow conflicted with the above-mentioned personal aspirations and ethics.

### 1. *Clash of roles / selves*

Speaking to an archaeologist, who is a close friend of a participant I was trying to approach, July 2008:

Y: Look ... he [the participant] does not want to speak to you. He is afraid he might get in trouble. He never minded talking about his collection ... but he is being very hesitant with you. I think it is because he heard that your research is about 'looting' and he certainly does *not* consider himself a 'looter' [*archaeokapilos*].

Ioanna: But that is a misunderstanding. My intention is in fact to scrutinize this notion! I do *not* consider him a 'looter' either!

Y: Yes, but that is what *he* thinks. I don't know how and if you can change his mind now ...

Calling a participant for the first time, 6 August 2006:

*Participant*: Yes?

Ioanna: Hello. My name is Ioanna Antoniadou and I am from the village of Ksirolimni. I am an archaeologist, studying abroad. I am conducting research on the social aspect of archaeology and I am interested in people who engage with the material past; their stories ...

*Participant* (speaking nervously): You are putting me in a very difficult position. It's been many years since I was associated with collecting antiquities. I don't have anything to say really ... Mrs B. [local archaeologist] knows ... I had given everything to her [referring to the finds he had collected in the past].

*Ioanna:* I am interested though in *your* story, not some archaeologist's impression of you.

*Participant:* What do *you* do again?

*Ioanna:* I am interested in the social aspect of archaeology. I am a student and I am writing this lengthy paper that deals with . . . something like folklore, where I collect stories about peoples' interaction with the past.

*Participant:* My sons are away and I cannot see you now. Maybe if you call again . . . in 10 days?

*Ioanna:* I apologize if I've placed you in a difficult position. I did not mean to cause you any distress. I will meet up with you only if you agree upon it. And if that is the case, then I can give you a better explanation as to what I am doing.

*Participant:* Hmmm . . . Maybe . . . Some other time.

Being a 'local' enabled me to get my foot in the door. However, that level of 'insider' was not enough for paving the way for future acceptance by the people I wanted to approach. To them I was an archaeologist; a status that to some could breed resentment, for it implied a social trajectory to which they did not have much sympathy. Hence, such a preconception immediately formed grounds of distrust in my relationship with some participants, which I had to eliminate as soon as possible if I wanted to approach them. Until that was achieved, I remained an 'outsider'.

What further complicated things from the start was the issue of exposing the real purpose of my research. The stigma associated with the notion and practice officially known as 'looting' (*archaeokapilia*) but which I defined as 'unofficial' and/or 'illegitimate' engagement with the material past, made it impossible for me to be open about what my research was concerned with. I was reluctant to be forthright about my intentions to understand their 'unofficial' acts, because I was afraid people would then hesitate to talk to me. As illustrated in the first extract above, one reason behind such hesitation was the fact that some participants did not actually consider themselves 'looters' in the first place. Although they were aware that collecting antiquities without authorization was indeed illegal, that did not imply that they considered themselves 'looters', principally because they did not sell the material they collected. Of course that was the viewpoint that I adhered to as well. Still though, that did not make it any easier for me to be open about the broader context of my research.

Therefore, when initial meetings with participants took place, I explained in a casual way my role as a researcher and their role as 'participants'. I simply said that in my project I had to produce a lengthy paper on a subject that was concerned with peoples' 'perceptions of archaeology' or 'engagements with the material past'.<sup>7</sup> This was an easy way to break the ice. At the same time however, this *partial* honesty created an ethical concern, which haunts me to this day. The fact that I was not entirely explicit about the actual archaeological discourse with which the participants' stories are invested in official accounts, concerned me for a number of reasons. Firstly, there was the inconsistency whereby I disputed a notion so openly (considering that I am disseminating my critique on the archaeological discussion on 'looting' in the form of a thesis) and yet at the same time I was so hesitant to discuss it with my participants.

Secondly, it was the difficulty of having to play different roles, depending on the 'audience'. As far as my participants were concerned, I had to ensure that the 'relativist' outlook I embraced regarding the 'morality' of unofficial interaction with the material past, was made manifest. On the other hand, such a viewpoint was never openly revealed to the local archaeologists I communicated with. Considering that I depended on them for the provision of important information regarding my participants, it was crucial that I did not 'spoil' the chances for a constructive dialogue. This often required that I could not express explicitly any viewpoints that clashed with theirs.

The route to avoid such a distressing situation was readily laid out for me: I did not need to be too explicit. Dealing with a topic linked, as it was, to so many negative preconceptions, especially amongst academic or professional circles, often did not leave any room for elaboration as to what exactly my purpose was. Conveying to archaeologists that my research was concerned with understanding the phenomenon of 'looting' was a satisfactory explanation. Yet, despite the open-endedness of interpretation, I always sensed a tacit assumption on their behalf, that my objective was to find solutions to this 'problem'. As a result, I never admitted nor denied that such an assumption was untrue, because I never actually needed to. Once more, however, the same ethical burden lingered, grounded upon the same inconsistency. How could I, in an academic context, be so openly critical of a notion ('looting') and of archaeology (especially its narrowly perceived professionalized ethics), and in the field be so reserved about my stance towards them? What are the ethical implications for an academic, when the very field conditions establish inevitable moral compromises? Does the 'good' cause justify double standards? Or do moral double standards defy the very commitment to one's ethics?

## **2. Authority**

Being self-reflexive in archaeology enabled me to face some of the harsh realities concerning the practice of official, professional archaeology and the implications it imposes upon peoples' interaction with the past. Consequently, emotions in favour of an 'ethical' archaeology became very strong. This self-reflexivity, however, entailed a danger that I realised only later on. I naively believed that by promoting a 'good' cause, i.e. the empowerment of non-professional agents in the production / consumption of archaeological experience / interpretation, I would not be restrained by any ethical limitations as to why and how I would conduct my fieldwork. This was a misconception, however, and it was particularly echoed in the 'tension' between their perception of me as the 'detached observer' and of themselves as the 'observed' ones. The issue that concerned me the most, was how was I to pursue equality in power distribution (regarding archaeological interpretation), while being situated within 'ethnographic' conditions whereby power inequality was inevitable? Furthermore, how was I to hold a critical ethnographer's standpoint and elicit intellectual insights without carrying a mission and a gaze that were selfish and hegemonic?

To a number of respondents I was yet another archaeologist coming to probe their lives, ask questions and then leave. How was I to discredit such a perception in regard to both my roles (as an archaeologist and as an ethnographer)? I did not like the idea that I was manipulating my position, authority and privilege derived from my status

as the researcher. I was sensitive to the idea of using these people for my own ends. In light of this, seeking to establish a non-hierarchical relationship with the participants became one of my most crucial concerns.

### 3. *Exploitation*

Conducting ethnography on local people's connection to the material past did not make sense to many people. Even today, I am still uncertain whether my participants understood what my research was really about. But I soon realized that this is not so much of a problem. The real problem was the fact that this lack of understanding about what I do, entailed a misunderstanding of what my gain was out of this – what my research bargain was.

The times that I was asked to give something in return, made me seriously consider my reason for being there and, more importantly, it made me consider the peoples' perception of my research. On many occasions, I discussed the participants' experience with the local archaeologists in order to instigate discussion, which inevitably led to the unfolding of the participants' feelings about the workings of state archaeology. This of course was very beneficial for my research, as it provided me with heaps of information regarding the participants' relationship with archaeology and the conditions that shaped that relationship. Nevertheless, such discussions implicitly associated, in local people's views, my role with the responsibility for finding immediate solutions to issues that were problematic to the locals; issues which were of an economic (e.g. claiming injustice in expropriations, when private land becomes national property due to its designation as an archaeological zone), political (e.g. complaining about the exclusive 'authority' of archaeologists in terms of heritage-related issues), or even personal (e.g. blaming particular archaeologists for not being communicative and close enough to the public) nature. Consider, for example, the following conversation on a Sunday afternoon at a cafe with a participant whom I had met a few times:

*Participant:* I persuaded this friend of mine to give this sword he found to the archaeologists, but now I'm in trouble . . .

*Ioanna:* Why?

*Participant:* Because I told him that it was the right thing to do. I also told him that his contribution will be appreciated, and that he will receive money for it as well . . . something like one-tenth of the find's value. I thought that it was going to be a substantial amount, given that it was a Mycenaean sword, in a very good condition.

*Ioanna:* And what happened?

*Participant:* Well, when he brought it to them, they hassled him with interrogations, concerning where and how he found it and why he did not bring it any earlier . . . which means that in the end they did not look that grateful for what he had done . . . Moreover, they told him that it would take a very long time for him to receive any money.

*Ioanna:* Yes it does take a long time . . .

*Participant:* So you see? I am in trouble now . . . I tried to convince someone to do the right thing but nothing positive came out in the end.

*Ioanna:* His name is going to appear in their records though . . . Isn't that an indication of appreciation?

*Participant:* What about the money that he deserves? Will you talk to the archaeologists about it? This situation has to change. People need to have incentives to bring finds to the archaeologists . . . But instead they receive suspicion . . . and no signs of gratitude . . . Will you do something to change this?

Nevertheless, that was not my purpose for being there. Perhaps in the long run, the process of understanding peoples' connection to the past and challenging archaeological authority can point to directions for conducting a 'better' archaeology, but still, that was not the solution that the local people were expecting of me. Such a lack of correspondence between what I was willing to give and what they expected to receive from me, made me think about the concept of 'exploitation'. So how was I to counter exploitation and achieve some balance in this give and take? More importantly, was there anything that I could give to these people that was indeed of value to them?

#### **4. Countering the imbalances**

In light of all these ethical concerns, seeking to establish a non-hierarchical relationship with the participants became one of the most crucial things for me. I felt that one way to counterbalance the power dynamics between myself and the participants was to allow the latter to openly challenge the boundaries between the observer and the observed. In other words, I decided to let the participants guide the discussions on equal terms between us, and thus render the boundaries of 'authority' fluid. The answer lay in the process of revealing parts of me and my background before asking them questions about their own experiences. It became the only way to strengthen my relationship with others and to encourage them to share information that they would otherwise have been reluctant to reveal. The following conversation at a first meeting with two participants in a cafe in their village, on 27 January 2007, illuminates this:

*Ioanna:* I am interested in people like you, who engage so intimately with the material past. My research is concerned with peoples' interaction with the past, official archaeology, the local archaeologists, and so on.

*Participant:* How did you find out about me?

*Ioanna:* I searched in the *Archaeological Deltion*, which includes a list with every person that has brought finds to the Archaeological Eforeia. And your name was on that list.

*Participant:* Hm . . . So from what you are saying, you are the researcher and we are going to be your guinea pigs?

*Ioanna* (laughing nervously): Maybe . . . But look, in some ways I am a guinea pig too . . .

*Participant:* And what are you going to achieve by conducting this research? What is your tutor and the English people going to do with the information you will obtain from us? Why did *they* ask you to do such a thing?

*Ioanna:* Nobody has asked me anything. It was my idea because I am intrigued by peoples' interactions with the past. I find everyday engagements very interesting. And *nobody* is going to use the data I have produced. It is only for me to use. *They* will simply read it and hear your voices too.

*Participant:* That is a strange subject you chose there . . . How did you come up with that?

As is clear in the extract above, such an attitude opened the way for the participants to interrogate me, concerning what my research was about and why I was conducting it. I had decided that this was perhaps the only practical means by which I could approach people; to allow them to approach me first, even if that constituted interrogation on their part. The process of me opening up was not merely a tactical advantage. It was an ethical imperative since it opened the way to counterbalance the issues of exploitation that had been expressed earlier.

Moreover, on many occasions, I would describe my own feelings, concerns and anxieties towards archaeology. This way I could establish a reciprocal conversation, rather than a one-way interview, during which asking questions unfailingly rendered me as the person to 'solve' the participants' concerns. I felt that by sharing experiences and concerns, to some extent discharged me from bargains that I did not adhere to. In the end, I was just another person worrying about the same issues that these people faced, with regard to the past and the role of official archaeology.

In fact, the only bargain that I adhered to was to recognize that conducting ethnography in pursuit of a 'better' archaeology is not as complex-free, ethical or even good enough as I had expected. With regard to my informants, this realization sometimes entailed being overt and thus vulnerable, because sometimes personal concerns and emotions needed to be intimately mingled with my academic stance and aspirations in pursuit of a 'good' ethnography. Furthermore, to those participants whose understanding remains vague in terms of what my work is all about or what I will get out of this, I intend to give the parts of my thesis regarding their life stories before completion. More importantly, I intend to take into account and reflect on their reaction to my rendering of their life stories, and include that in the final thesis.

## Conclusion

This paper developed in two parts. The first part included a critical overview of ethnographies of 'looting', and considered how certain studies on such a topic can contribute to the theorizing of archaeology by allowing the development of archaeology's reflexivity and the promotion of a contextual and political approach towards matters and social environments surrounding archaeological ethnographers. In the second part, my role as an ethnographer became the focus of reflexivity, where I discussed the ethical dilemmas arising from the fact that I was both an archaeologist and an ethnographer.

My journey has revealed that merging distinct concerns derived from archaeology and ethnography, and by implication two 'roles', can have an immense impact upon a researcher's performance and ethics. For that reason, this paper has been speculative and has raised more questions than answers. Nonetheless it is hoped that it can stimulate discussion regarding ethical matters and anxieties that researchers face within unfamiliar and unexpected field conditions. Certainly, there are no easy answers, but the exercise of thinking critically about the motives and the performance of research suggests a broader inquiry into the moral complexities of archaeological ethnographies. Being self-reflexive is by no means an amnesty for error. It is, however, the gateway to an ethical and conscious practice. In an archaeological

ethnography it is vital not only to present the results of research, but also to bring, in Hoskins' (1998: 1) words, the *context of the story* and the *hidden relationships* to the fore; not in order to satisfy some sort of confessional and self-indulgent need but in order to engage with the epistemology of knowledge in the ethnographic encounter. In her own words,

An ethnographic interview, whether conducted at one time or over many years, is a complex dialogue, a co-creation of a narrative that is part structured by the listener's questions and expectations. The context of the story told has come back to centre stage, as well as the hidden relationship between the storyteller and the person to whom the story is told. (Hoskins 1998: 1)

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Yannis Hamilakis for inviting me to the Archaeological Ethnographies Workshop upon which this volume is based; and most importantly for being the inspiration behind my project and my perception of archaeology. I also thank him and Aris Anagnostopoulos for all the feedback on the revisions of this paper. Thank you to all the participants of the workshop for their constructive comments; some of the ideas expressed in this paper were stimulated after you shared your thoughts with me. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the people that I met during the fieldwork that this paper was elicited from; Ilia, and all of you who came before and after, thank you for all the invaluable encounters.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Seminal in this is Julie Hollowell's study of subsistence-digging in Alaska, where she argues for the ethical prioritization of the indigenous peoples' subsistence argument versus the archaeologists' interest in the preservation of the 'archaeological record' (see Hollowell, 2006b).
- <sup>2</sup> After all, how can we blame greed and desire for financial profit without condemning first the very conditions that promote the commodification of heritage within Western capitalist society, in which all of us are implicated?
- <sup>3</sup> Such is often the case when it comes to professionalized archaeological ethics, which, in the name of their taken-for-granted universality, are prioritized in the archaeological discussion on 'looting'.
- <sup>4</sup> In Greek law, all antiquities constitute state property. Their practices, therefore, are considered illegal, because they have involved illegal digging or undeclared collecting of antiquities. Local archaeologists believe that the driving force behind these cases is financial profit.
- <sup>5</sup> I use the term 'life story' instead of 'life history' because I do not wish to produce narratives that encapsulate entire biographies (for reviews on this distinction see: Watson and Watson-Franke, 1985; Angrosino, 1989; Peacock and Holland, 1993). Instead, the narratives that I am constructing involve certain aspects and parts of the informants' lives, which directly or indirectly relate to their unofficial engagements with the material past. Needless to say, although these life stories may be of specific time-duration, the narratives constructed and presented around them go deeper in time. So through a person's story, matters relevant to broader issues of identity, culture and politics are then revealed.
- <sup>6</sup> The extracts from the conversations that are provided in the following paragraphs had not been digitally recorded.
- <sup>7</sup> Still, such introductions did not always yield promising results; the second extract illustrates the difficulty in approaching a participant.

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