

CONFERENCE REPORT

Conservation and reconstruction at the Palace of Minos at Knossos

Seminar at the University of York, 1996

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A one-day seminar on 'Conservation and Reconstruction at the Palace of Minos at Knossos' was held at the King's Manor in the heart of York on 6 December 1996. The King's Manor, itself a listed historic building, accommodates the University of York's Department of Archaeology and Centre for Conservation Studies (part of the Institute of Advanced Architectural Studies). This seminar, jointly organized by the two departments, was an attempt to overcome the traditional segregation of the disciplines of archaeology and architecture, and encourage a wider, interdisciplinary approach. Further joint seminars and workshops in this field are planned and both departments are working towards the establishment of a permanent interdisciplinary unit in the area of architectural conservation in archaeology.

The seminar aimed to examine the complex relationship between archaeology, conservation and presentation at the well-known site of Knossos, Crete. One million visitors see Knossos every year, making it the second most visited site in Greece after the Acropolis in Athens. Comparatively few studies have been undertaken to examine the historiography of the excavation, conservation and presentation of the site, despite the fact that much of the material is easily accessible in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford.

Excavation work at Knossos started on 23 May 1900, so the celebration of 'One hundred years of excavation work at Knossos' is rapidly approaching. Furthermore, the Palace of Minos has been

proposed as a World Heritage Site and an assessment to determine whether it should become part of our World Heritage is due this year. Consequently a number of young researchers, based at British universities, have begun to examine this subject from different approaches, depending on their various backgrounds. Their aims are not to investigate the Minoan past but to provide a basic understanding of the recent past and the present, thereby facilitating decisions for the future development of the site.

ARTHUR EVANS AND 'PROTECTIVE RECONSTRUCTION'

Six papers were presented at the seminar, each followed by a short discussion, and a lively general discussion concluded the day. In the first paper, 'Conservation and reconstruction at Knossos', Peter Kienzle examined the reconstruction work executed on site over a period of 30 years by using the Throne Room area in the West Wing of the Palace as an example. In particular, he pointed out the role of the three architects involved in conservation work and reconstruction on site. Each of the architects, Theodore Fyfe (working at Knossos 1900–4), Christian Doll (1905–10) and Piet de Jong (1921–30) brought with him certain knowledge, building techniques and philosophies of construction and reconstruction. The reconstructions on site are the result of a dialogue between the owner/excavator Sir Arthur Evans and these architects.

The different phases of reconstruction work, reflecting the change of architects, can still be traced on the site. Kienzle argued that most of the reconstruction work has fulfilled a protective function for the sensitive features excavated on site and continues to do so. He has therefore coined the term 'protective reconstruction'.

In his paper 'Arthur Evans and the Palace of Minos at Knossos' [1], Andreas Lapourtas highlighted the role of Arthur Evans as a private collector and as the Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. As he had a background in museology, presentation of the excavated archaeology was important for Arthur Evans not only in written form and in a museum context, but also on the excavation site itself. Evans not only catered for travellers and groups on the site during the excavation period, he also provided personal financial resources for the site's permanent presentation. Lapourtas argued that Arthur Evans extended the presentation of the finds beyond the museum context and displayed the site as an 'Open Air Museum', describing how the scholarly world originally received these reconstructions and how this reception changed through time. While there was only minor criticism at the beginning of his reconstruction work, the number of critics grew as Evans proceeded further in his 'reconstitutions', as he liked to call them.

Keith Emerick spoke on 'Arthur Evans: a continuing tradition?', exploring the theoretical background of conservation ethics in Britain at Evans's time. He noted that Evans, deeply rooted in British society, took part in the ongoing discussion on the correct approach to conservation. Two main streams of philosophical thought were dominant in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in Britain. The restoration movement, headed by George Gilbert Scott, supported the reconstruction of ruins to a pleasing entity, thus presenting their former glory. This was opposed by the Society for Protection of Ancient Buildings and Sir Charles Peers at the Ministry of Works, advocating minimal intervention and the 'freezing' of monuments respectively. Finally, Emerick pointed to the influence of patronage on the decision-making process on site, using the example of Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia, USA.

CONSERVATION ISSUES AND VISITOR INFORMATION

Conn Murphy discussed 'Minoan architecture: aspects of consolidation and conservation', examining a number of Minoan excavation sites in central Crete to establish the complex network of factors influencing conservation work. These included building techniques and materials, the size and the location of the site, amount and length of excavation work, the understanding and importance of the excavated structure, etc. He described how these factors are related to each other and how they influence decisions on protection and presentation of the sites. Murphy provided numerous examples from a comparatively small area in central Crete, including the sites of Myrto Pyrgos, Amnissos, Tyllisos, Vathypetro and Nirou Khani, exploring how different solutions were found at each site.

In her paper, 'Deterioration problems of gypsum in Minoan architecture and aspects of its conservation and protection', Steffie Chlouveraki analysed a material that was readily available and easy to work with; further, because it resulted in a fine surface that was appreciated in Minoan times, it was frequently used. Since gypsum is easily soluble in water, it causes a major conservation problem at excavation sites of the Minoan period. This was realized by Arthur Evans but is still one of the urgent but unsolved problems. Chlouveraki thoroughly analysed the chemical deterioration processes of the material and, from this, proceeded to elucidate the adverse factors that support or initiate these chemical processes. These can be either natural (weather, environment, etc.) or human (excavation, tourism, etc.). From this foundation she examined ideas for the protection of gypsum in Minoan sites. Chlouveraki concluded that chemical treatment of exposed gypsum is not relevant to the main deterioration problems (tourism and weather) and therefore suggested preventive and not active conservation.

Evi Petropoulou has undertaken a painstaking visitor survey at Knossos, of which she presented the first results in her paper 'A visitor's perspective of the Palace of Minos'. She designed a

questionnaire which falls into two parts: first establishing a visitor profile asking who they are, where they are from and what their agenda is in visiting the site, and, second, inquiring about their perception of the site itself and the interpretative material available to them. Even if visitors had read the guide book or participated in a guided tour, many could not recall the information they had received a short time before. The result of her study showed that many of them still tended to come up with their own interpretations of the site. This was true for all groups, whatever their background, examined by the visitor profile. Thus, the visitors seemed not to receive or assimilate the information available to them. She concluded that it is difficult not only to gather information about the site, but also to present it in the optimum way so that visitors benefit from it.

THE CONCLUDING DEBATE

The final debate was very lively and, in some parts, controversial. The knowledge of Sinclair Hood and the architect William Taylor, both experienced scholars in Minoan archaeology and familiar with the sites, contributed much to the discussion.

The site of Knossos has been widely condemned in the scholarly world for its reconstructions, more in the conservation world than among archaeologists. The participants in this seminar agreed that there is an urgent need to investigate the history of excavation, reconstruction and conservation work. The investigation should not only focus on the work itself but should also include an analysis of the philosophical and theoretical background and contemporary architectural or conservation knowledge at the time. Only then can a well-founded discussion of the executed work take place.

The participants debated the cultural value of the Knossos reconstructions themselves, which represent 30 years of reconstruction history and echo both the debate on conservation and reconstruction ethics and the changes in materials and techniques in the early twentieth century. The reconstructions were carefully designed after

thorough research, and they answer protective, educational and aesthetic concerns. Sinclair Hood pointed out that the reconstructions formed an aesthetically pleasing ruined landscape but are now, unfortunately, obstructed by the – certainly necessary – iron and translucent plastic shelters. It was concluded that the reconstructions at Knossos form an important part of the history of the site and thus must be maintained and conserved, as currently planned and partially already begun by the Greek authorities. The reconstructions must be studied and presented as part of the site in their own right and as part of the history of the site. They must also be seen as a general achievement in the area of archaeology, reconstruction and conservation work in their period.

At Knossos, Arthur Evans understood the need for interdisciplinary work as well as the need for the conservation and presentation of the site. This is now reflected by the verdicts of researchers from archaeology, architecture, conservation, stone conservation and museum studies on his work. One participant pointed out that Evans continued his interest beyond the architectural remains and employed landscape design at Knossos, which is once again an important issue for the development of archaeological sites. His immediate response to the necessity of conservation and his strong involvement in publication and presentation of the site makes Arthur Evans an outstanding figure in archaeological history. At the beginning of this century Knossos was certainly one of the few sites where the integrated approach of excavation, conservation and presentation was executed to such a high degree and, in general, this approach should be a marker below which archaeological management should not sink. It was agreed that, in most situations, activities at excavation sites necessarily have to be of an interdisciplinary nature.

The participants admitted that Arthur Evans and his architects made mistakes in their conservation efforts, especially in the latter half of the work. It seems that Evans was carried away by the possibilities offered by the new material concrete, which led him to a number of erroneous and unnecessary reconstructions. Certain characteristics of concrete had not been researched

thoroughly at that time and, therefore, created specific conservation problems. But these mistakes should be studied and evaluated in depth and not simply condemned, in order to improve future proposals for Knossos as well as for other sites.

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Conservation Studies at the University of York in 1995. He has worked for the German Archaeological Institute at Pergamon, Turkey, and at Gadara/Um Qais, Jordan.

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1. Published in *The Museum Archaeologist* **22** (1997) 71–82.