

# Antiquity, Archaeology and National Identity in 20th Century Greece, Benaki Museum, Athens, Greece, 10–12 January 2007

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This conference was organized on the initiative and through the hard work of two dedicated archaeologists from the non-state sector, Dimitris Damaskos and Dimitris Plantzos. It was supported by the Benaki Museum, the driving force in the cultural sector in Greece for the last decade, and its director, Angelos Delivorrias. The ‘Propontis’ Foundation sponsored the conference. The fact that the Ministry of Culture wasn’t even represented in the inaugural greeting formalities is certainly noteworthy.

The conference was publicized as ‘the first comprehensive attempt in Greece to investigate and evaluate developments in the history of archaeology regarding their impact on national identity-forging in twentieth-century Greece’. The stated aim being ‘to trace the steps, premeditated or not, which defined Greek archaeology’s present state – as an academic discipline, as an educational practice, as the producer and at the same time the consumer of a multileveled cultural reality’ (Benaki Museum, 2007). Apart from the above statement, the conference produced several other interesting conclusions.

The road to self-awareness in Greek archaeology began with archival research and reviews of the administrative and legislative framework from the 1960s (Protopsaltis, 1967; Kokkou, 1977; Petrakos, 1982). Both in-depth and broader analyses have been offered since then (see Whitley, 2001, for references). Anthropology, literature, art history, architecture and political sciences have all, on occasion, contributed to the study of perceptions of the past and archaeology. Archaeologists themselves have also approached these matters critically (Kotsakis, 1998; Hamilakis, 2000). A series of Sunday supplements in ‘Kathimerini’, a major national newspaper, has provided a more popular reading of the history and practice of archaeology and of perceptions of the past from ancient to modern times. Some of these supplements were edited by one of the two organizers; therefore a conference was long overdue.

The speakers hailed from diverse disciplinary backgrounds, including archaeology, history, art history, social anthropology, museum studies, philology and law. The birth of archaeology within the ideal of ‘Hellenism’, its relation with other

disciplines and political ideology, the formation of the academic curriculum as well as the contribution of individual scholars in the above processes were all put under the spotlight. In this context, Dimitris Plantzos' introductory remarks regarding the opening ceremony of the Athens Olympics in 2004 discussed feelings of national pride successfully evoked when *tableaux vivants* of prehistoric, classical and Byzantine art were broadcast all over the world to illustrate the ideologue of continuity.

These remarks laid the foundations for Antonis Liakos' presentation on the struggle that the strong relationship between history and archaeology causes when a glorious past is contrasted with an unworthy present, as is the case in Greece. A particular example was offered by Angeliki Koufou, whose paper focused on the Greek communist party's effort to reconcile the ideas of Hellenism and national continuity with the political agenda and communist ideology from the 1930s to the 1950s. In direct relation to this political agenda, Angelos Vlachos referred to the state policies adopted in order to use the past in the service of economic recovery, and more particularly the tourist industry. In a new approach, he examined the measures to this end taken by the state, and their effectiveness, from the foundation of the Greek National Tourism Organization in 1929 to the 1950s and beyond, which saw the peak of these developments.

Two very interesting presentations emphasized the importance of inclusiveness in archaeology. The first, by Yannis Hamilakis, contrasted the imported, colonial aspect of Greek archaeology as a formal and modern conception, with the indigenous, pre-modern and alternative concepts of archaeology. The local beliefs about the supernatural powers of statues, as testified by 18th and 19th century travellers, express the power of materiality and the multisensational, diachronic and multi-temporal experience of the archaeological remains. A reappraisal of these ideas and their engagement in the archaeological discourse today was deemed necessary for the de-colonization of archaeology in Greece and the critical re-examination of the discipline. Joan Breton Connelly spoke of the danger of overemphasizing the political use of the past at the expense of other approaches attempted by social sciences, anthropology, religious and cultural history.

The narrowing of the gulf between archaeology and anthropology was attempted by a paper on collective memory and public perceptions. Esther Solomon referred to the social role and meaning that the Minoan civilization gained in Cretan collective memory through its establishment as the primary stage of the glorious Greek past and the adoption of Minoan aesthetics in modern monuments, in museum or trade exhibitions and other aspects of Cretan everyday life. Another paper that briefly referred to public opinion was presented by Niki Sakka. It was based on her doctoral thesis, one of the few that have dealt with the political dimension of archaeology in the Greek University. It focused on the excavations in the Athenian Agora by the American School of Classical Studies; the negotiations, the political and diplomatic influence and the local reaction to their forced relocation.

Other papers critically discussed the ways in which eminent figures of 20th century Greece supported the ideal of 'Hellenism' through their work. Ioannis Gennadios (1844–1932), diplomat, scholar and donor of the Gennadius Library

hosted by the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, Marinus Kalligas (1906–1985), art historian and critic, director of the National Gallery of Art and Dimitris Theocharis (1919–1977), a pioneer of prehistoric archaeology were mentioned among others. However, extensive research on the agency of specific individuals remains to be seen in Greek archaeological bibliography as the eminent archaeologists of the century have been canonized by the whole nation.

Dora Markatou used illuminating visual material to discuss the use of archaeology in the celebration of the Greek state's centenary in 1930 and the consultative role specific archaeologists played for the occasion. The visual highlight of the conference, however, was offered by Dimitris Damaskos in his analysis of the work of Nelly's, one of the most eminent Greek photographers of the last century, and most interestingly, of the parallel courses taken by Nelly's and Leni Riefenstahl, the German Nazi Party film maker.

Finally, the paper presented by Daphni Voudouri was of particular contemporary relevance after the outbreak of illicit trade cases, such as the police investigation into Robert Shimes' Greek associate's villa, the prosecution of Marion True and the recent return of Greek antiquities from the J Paul Getty Museum. She offered a critical review of Greek legislation regarding import, export, sale, exchange and loans of antiquities and highlighted the policy of sales or exchanges of redundant artefacts by the state itself, an interesting option once offered by law.

General interest and the attendance of a more diverse audience were generated by the special presentations arranged for the end of each day. The organizers had secured the presence of Mark Mazower, Michael Herzfeld and Dimitris Tziiovas, established scholars in the fields of history, anthropology and literature at Columbia, Harvard and Birmingham Universities, respectively. Mark Mazower reviewed the changes in the role of archaeology from an international discipline dependant on issues of land, state and politics, towards a more professional and national field from the aftermath of World War II and into a more inclusive discipline after the more recent emergence of fields such as museology and area surveys. Michael Herzfeld argued for the distinction between the monumentality of the classical past, as it was projected by the state, and the intimate character of the present, more closely related to the period of the Ottoman Empire, as it is now experienced in domestic architecture and popular culture. On the final day, Dimitris Tziiovas introduced four consecutive, schematic models to present the development in the approach of the past by the Greek intelligentsia from the formation of the Modern Greek State up to the present day. He has titled them symbolic/archaeological, organic/romantic, aesthetic/modernistic, ironic/critical or post-modernistic.

Overall, the most important contribution of this conference was the unprecedented interdisciplinary approach to the issues. Similar agendas have been discussed before among archaeologists in Greece (Étienne, 2000) or among a variety of researchers abroad (*The Making of Modern Greece: Nationalism, Romanticism and the Uses of the Past, 1797–1896*, King's College, London, 7–9 September 2006). Even though a few of the major contributors to the field were absent, a fair and balanced representation of all relevant disciplines was achieved. The conference mapped the research hitherto conducted, a strategic and necessary beginning for

initiating a public discourse. It was a very well organized conference, as was generally noted, and it seems that the decision not to call for papers served both its purpose and its size.

However, to some extent this choice created the impression of an exclusive meeting of experts and the perception of an overall consent, one that guarantees an easy and effortless outcome. Professor Liakos' comment was indicative: 'in this conference we don't need to prove the self-evident'. However, it didn't seem to get much further than the self-evident. The discussions that followed each session, for instance, tended to be more informative than challenging. Some papers seemed to be parts of old research, still unpublished and on the whole inaccessible, and there appeared to be an unwillingness to bring the discourse outside of the room.

In the presentation of the latest publication by the Association of Greek Archaeologists 'The present and the future of our monuments', the President of the Association and the Director of the Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens referred to the new role of the archaeologist in 'transforming archaeology from state to public' (Ethnos, 29 January 2007). It may be unfair to expect or even assume that this conference will automatically ensure a continuation of the discourse and I believe that a follow up would contribute to the presentation of up-to-date research and would encourage a more critical approach towards the past, its study and its uses. So far the organizers have committed to providing us with a publication of the papers in English. This important step is vital for the ongoing presentation of the Greek case in discussions of archaeology and the state.

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### **Notes on Contributor**

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