

Aegean Prehistory in the wake of Venizelos: Crete and Macedonia

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Prof. Stelios Andreou began his paper “The Landscapes of Modern Greek Aegean Prehistory” with the following observation: “Implicitly at the start and more explicitly later, Aegean prehistory came to be regarded in Greece as the prehistory of the Greek nation” (Andreou 2005, 73). Although he recognised “the overpowering hold of classical archaeology over Aegean prehistory” he highlighted the importance of the work of Christos Tsountas in establishing Aegean prehistory as a separate discipline (Andreou 2005, 73). Nevertheless he recognised the political dimension of Christos Tsountas’ work in tracing back the prehistory of Greece through the Mycenaeans and into the Neolithic period (Tsountas 1893, 1908). As Andreou notes, “Cultural unity was documented by long-lasting traits such as the ‘megaron’ and was clearly defined in space, with boundaries that more or less coincided with the political boundaries of the Greek state at the time” (Andreou 2005, 77).

Two areas of Greece were outside these political boundaries at the time Tsountas was writing about Mycenae, Dimini and Sesklo, namely Crete and Macedonia. These are also the areas that Stelios Andreou has devoted his academic career to, and in tribute to him we would like to focus on the way in which Aegean prehistory developed in these areas compared with the original territory of the Greek state. It is beyond our scope to offer a historical overview of Aegean prehistory in Crete and Macedonia, for which there is already a large literature (Fitton 1995; Andreou, Fotiadis and Kotsakis 1996, 560-562; Fotiadis 2001; Hamilakis and Momigliano 2006; Shapland and Stefani 2017). Instead we will focus particularly on the geopolitical dimensions of prehistoric archaeology beyond Greece’s borders in the early 20th century, and the importance of potsherds. We would like to suggest that prehistoric objects, particularly potsherds, became unlikely diplomatic gifts in this period because they were of particular interest to British archaeologists and numerous enough to be given away as ‘άρρηστα’ under the terms of the laws of the period (Panagiotaki 2004; Galanakis 2017). We would further like to suggest that the gift of sherds, particularly to British institutions, mirrored the foreign policy of Eleutherios Venizelos as he sought to gain the support of foreign powers (Figure 1).

As Andreou argues in his paper, the discoveries of Arthur Evans at Knossos posed a challenge to Tsountas’s view of Greek prehistory. Arthur Evans’s Minoans interrupted the continuity between Neolithic Thessaly and Mycenaean Greece since Crete became the origin of Mycenaean culture, and indeed Classical and thus European civilisation in general. As he suggests, “it seems that, as a result of Evans’s reconstructions, the Minoan

civilization, in its ability to address the international community, acquired values similar to those of classical civilization for the issue of national identity” (Andreou 2005, 79). This new wave of philhellenism was the result of Cretan independence in 1898, under the supervision of the Great Powers (Dakin 1984, 228-236).

The 1899 Cretan antiquities law, passed when Venizelos was minister for justice, allowed foreigners to start excavations although their finds remained the property of the Cretan state (MacGillivray 2000, 162-165; Varouhakis 2015: 96-98). The excavations were to be supervised by the two newly-created Ephors of Crete, Iosif Hazzidakis and Stephanos Xanthoudides. They were Ephors of Heraklion and Chania, where, in the following year, new museums were founded by law (Panagiotaki 2004: 565-566). And then in 1903, following pressure from foreign excavators, the law was changed to allow objects which were ‘άχρηστα δια τα Κρητικά Μουσεία’ to be exported following inspection by an archaeological committee, of which Hazzidakis and Xanthoudides were also members (Panagiotaki 2004: 566). Thus in 1904, Evans and other excavators including the Italian Federico Halbherr, were able to submit lists of objects from their excavations which they considered duplicates, and then export them. In this way, Evans legally exported hundreds of objects, a few complete, but mostly pottery sherds, which now form the basis of the Aegean collection of the Ashmolean Museum, and which were also passed on to other museums including the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge and the British Museum. Marina Panagiotaki (2004) has published the lists of requests Evans made in 1904 and 1905 and it is interesting to note that some of his requests were refused, particularly Linear B tablets, although he was later allowed to export a number of them. Had the authorities known that these tablets were written in an early form of Greek they might have been even more determined to retain them, but even undeciphered inscriptions were regarded as more important than potsherds. There are various pieces of evidence that both Hazzidakis and Xanthoudides were supportive of Evans and generally agreed with his reconstruction of Minoan Crete as the first European civilisation (McEnroe 2002, 64-66; Carabott 2006; Hamilakis 2006, 146; Varouhakis 2014, 190-192). In return, they allowed Evans, the Keeper of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, to acquire objects for the collection (Figure 2).

The British School at Athens was instrumental in facilitating the export of sherds and other objects of minor importance to British museums, under the terms of the 1899 Greek Antiquities law, which did allow the export of surplus material from Greek museums (Voudouri 2008, 127; Galanakis 2017, 186-187). These included large exports of material from British excavations at Phylakopi in 1903, East Crete in 1907 (under the 1903 Cretan law), and Thessaly in 1913 (Forsdyke 1925, 22, 61, 70). In 1923 the Greek Government allowed the British School at Athens to export a large number of Archaic artefacts, mostly

votives, from their excavations at the Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia and Menelaion at Sparta (GR Reports, 8 February 1923; Macmillan 1923, 452; Dawkins 1929). The British Museum appears to have received these exports, retaining representative collections of sherds and then distributing them to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. Some material was subsequently given to other museums including Liverpool (Muskett 2014). These gifts of archaeological material provided one way of acknowledging subscriptions or donations paid to the British School by various British universities or individuals associated with them.

Of particular interest here are donations of material which did not come from the British School's excavations, and so were outside of these informal obligations to British excavators. One such was discussed at the Standing Committee of the British Museum Trustees in March 1912. The minutes record "a proposal by the Archaeological Council of Greece, that the facsimile of the Elgin Caryatid on the Erectheion should be replaced by a fresh cast, in return for which they offered to present fragments of pottery of prehistoric and Greek periods" (BM Trustees, 9 March 1912). This was to replace the decaying Caryatid given by the philhellene Frederick North in 1826 to replace the one removed by Lord Elgin. As Arthur Smith noted in his report, he was of the "opinion that if the exchange is worked with reasonable liberality, it should give to the British Museum a useful selection of characteristic objects, from authentically known sites, such as could not be obtained in the market. He also thinks that it is to the interest of the British Museum that the eyesore on the Acropolis caused by the loss of the Caryatid should be made as inconspicuous as possible" (GR Reports, 4 March 1912). The cast of the Caryatid was made in Portland cement at the British Museum's expense and the exchange was completed in May 1913. The Trustees' Minutes mention a report by Mr Arthur Smith "with reference to the exchange effected with the Greek Government, stating that the cast of the Erechtheum Caryatid had been received at Athens and submitting the thanks of the Greek Government; also enclosing a summary list of the groups of pottery, chiefly of the prehistoric period, and terracotta statuettes received in exchange" (BM Trustees, 24 May 1913). The pottery listed includes Neolithic material from Sesklo and Dimini in Thessaly, Early Cycladic pottery from Chalandriani on Syros, and Mycenaean pottery from Argos, Mycenae and Tiryns and Archaic material from Tanagra in Boeotia (Forsdyke 1925, 22, 54,128). Much of it was excavated by Christos Tsountas and then stored in the National Archaeological Museum. Ironically the material that helped him to push the history of the Greek people back into prehistory was being given away to a foreign institution.

The idea of an exchange of a cast in return for pottery goes back to at least 1911, when Alan Wace, a student of the British School at Athens, discussed it with Valerios Stais, Director of

the National Archaeological Museum at Athens (GR Letters Wace, 21 May 1911, 8 December 1911). But it is worth considering the political context in which it took place. Venizelos had become prime minister of Greece in 1910 after having successfully negotiated with the Great Powers for the de facto union of Crete with Greece (Dakin 1984, 277-278). Perhaps the exchange would have happened anyway, and in a letter to Evans, Wace describes Stais as an anti-Venizelist (AE Letters 308, undated). But the exchange certainly gained in significance because one of the British Museum Trustees, who was present at both meetings at which the exchange was discussed was Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary. He attended the meeting of 24 May 1913 while he was also chairing the London Peace Conference: on 30 May 1913 the Treaty of London was signed, bringing the First Balkan War to an end, and creating the conditions for the incorporation of Macedonia and Crete to the Greek state. At the head of the Greek delegation was Eleutherios Venizelos.

Clearer evidence that prehistoric sherds could be part of Greek foreign policy comes in 1919 when the government led by Venizelos made a gift of material to Britain and France following the First World War. As we have discussed in greater detail elsewhere, finds made by the British Salonika Force were gathered together during the War at the White Tower in Thessaloniki, before being moved to a building in the grounds of the Papapheion orphanage (Shapland 2017). The idea was that the Ephor would be able to keep track of the finds being made by British and French soldiers, initially as a result of a request made by the Greek Government in Athens in 1915 that Byzantine artefacts should be protected following the Allied landing in Thessaloniki. At that time, as Kostas Kotsakis (1998, 2017) has argued, the prehistory of Macedonia was largely unknown and often characterised in opposition to the Mycenaean south. The first Ephor, Georgios Oikonomos, was replaced in 1917 by Stratis Pelekidis when Venizelos declared a provisional government in Thessaloniki and purged royalist officials (Dakin 1984, 319-325). Pelekidis had taken a more active role in monitoring the British Salonika Force Museum and wrote a catalogue of the finds, paying particular attention to the prehistoric sherds (Kanatselou and Shapland 2014). Although the first curator of the museum, Ernest Gardner, had been keen that the collection stayed in Thessaloniki, his successor, Alexander Wade arranged for it to be requested by the War Office Trophies Committee when the war came to an end. Just as in Crete, a committee was formed, most likely by Pelekidis, and the finds listed: all of the objects were allowed to be exported with the exception of two inscriptions. Clearly, 3000 sherds, mainly prehistoric, were seen as being expendable whereas two Greek inscriptions were not. It was described by the British Museum Director Frederic Kenyon as “a courteous and liberal act of international comity” (Shapland 2017). This time the process coincided with the Paris Peace Conference, at which Venizelos was leading the Greek delegation. As Richard Clogg (2017)

had argued, it is no accident that this gift was made at the time when Venizelos was looking for support to pursue the Megali Idea.

There is one last donation of prehistoric sherds to the British Museum which helps to establish a pattern. A Trustees' meeting of 1923 notes a "Presentation by the National Museum of Athens" recording an exchange, in return for books, of six plaster casts and "a box of pottery fragments from Mycenae" (BM Trustees, 10 November 1923; Forsdyke 1925, 128). This time the Trustees included both the former foreign secretary, Sir Edward Grey and the current one, Viscount Curzon. He was also the head of the Allied delegation to the Treaty of Lausanne from 1922-1923, where he would have encountered Venizelos as head of the Greek delegation.

As Andreou (2005, 80) notes, the frameworks for studying prehistoric Greece were largely put in place in the first quarter of the 20th century and, with the exception of Tsountas' work, created by foreign archaeologists. Perhaps the most important of these frameworks is the pottery typology established by Arthur Evans and Duncan Mackenzie at Knossos. Evans first published this scheme in 1906 but expanded it in his masterwork, *The Palace of Minos* (Evans 1906, 1921-35). Partly because they were readily available, many of the illustrations in this work, which provided a grand survey of Early, Middle and Late Minoan civilisation, were of pottery that he had been allowed to export by the Cretan authorities. The scheme was later extended to the Mainland by Alan Wace and Carl Blegen, and then the Cyclades (Wace and Blegen 1918). John Forsdyke's (1925) catalogue of prehistoric Aegean pottery in the British Museum largely consisted of sherds donated by the Greek Government, whether from British School or Greek excavations, or exported from the Cretan State. This work was the first comprehensive volume on prehistoric Aegean pottery, including Neolithic and Bronze Age Minoan, Helladic and Cycladic pottery, categorised according to Evans's tripartite scheme, but also including contemporary pottery from Macedonia. Heurtley (1939) was later to extend the same scheme to Macedonia, incorporating some of the British Museum material. In the hands of these scholars, these sherds became an important part of the history of the discipline of Aegean Prehistory.

At the same time, these sherds were an important part of the history of the modern Greek nation. At a time when Classical sculpture was being distributed to the museums of Europe in the form of plaster casts, Greece was allowing these real pieces of its past to be given away, following the correct procedure under the law as 'useless', 'άχρηστα'. But as we have hoped to show, if they are connected with the foreign policy of Eleutherios Venizelos, first as a minister in the Cretan Government, and then as prime minister of Greece, they were far from useless. While Cretan and Greek museum directors saw that these sherds could satisfy the needs of Aegean prehistorians based in foreign museums, they could also act as

diplomatic gifts as Venizelos pursued his foreign policy objectives in the negotiation of the various treaties of the early twentieth century. As a minister in Crete, waiting for the right moment to seek union with Greece, Venizelos had a hand in allowing foreign excavators from the Great Powers to uncover the island's prehistory. Although the discovery of Cretan prehistory complicated the picture established by Tsountas, Arthur Evans was an influential advocate of the Europeanness of the Minoans, helping to align Crete with Classical Greece (Andreou 2005, 77). He was also an influential figure in British society, helping to fuel a new wave of philhellenism. Perhaps Venizelos' experience on Crete, seeing foreign excavators satisfied by the export of relatively minor antiquities, showed him that sherds were a useful currency. The British Museum Trustees were even more influential figures in British politics and it doesn't seem to be a coincidence that three major gifts of Greek antiquities made by the Greek Government to the British Museum occurred when Venizelos was negotiating with some of the British Museum Trustees at peace conferences which helped to define the modern day borders of Greece.

Can echoes be felt today? Clearly on Crete the sites opened up to foreign excavators in the early years of the twentieth century are still being excavated by archaeologists from the same countries a hundred years on in the case of Knossos and Phaistos. The objects excavated by Evans have been on display at the Ashmolean for over a hundred years and both the Oxford and British Museum collections have been important training grounds for generations of pottery specialists. Indeed, foreign scholars have continued to play a leading role in developing prehistoric pottery typologies, although this is more apparent in the southern Aegean and Greek mainland. By contrast, the Greek school of prehistory that Stelios Andreou recognised in his 2005 paper is particularly strong in Macedonia, with the Department of History and Archaeology at the Aristotle University and the excavations at Toumba, Mandalo and Archontiko, Pella training generations of students, as this volume demonstrates.

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Primary sources

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