

Enacted multi-temporality

The archaeological site as a shared, performative space

Yannis Hamilakis and Efthimis Theou

Excavation has a unique role to play as a theatre where people may be able to produce their own pasts, pasts which are meaningful to them, not as expressions of a mythical heritage. Especially in rural areas excavation provides, much more readily than museum displays or books, possibilities for enthusing an interest in and awareness of the past among non-archaeologists. Excavations need to become, much more so than they are today, nexuses of decoding and encoding processes by which people may create meaning from the past. This is to advocate a socially engaged rather than a scientifically detached practice of excavation.

*(Tilley, *Excavation as Theatre*, 1989)*

What is an archaeological site?

Is it the heterotopic locus produced by Western, modernist archaeology, a space of a different order, where other times, norms, social conventions and rules are in operation (cf. Foucault 1986)? Is it a bounded locale, often fenced off or boarded up, a piece of land that is materially and symbolically demarcated from the space of daily life? Is it a field laboratory where new knowledge is produced about the past, new methodologies applied and tested? Is it a field school where aspiring archaeologists are socialized into the embodied crafts of excavating, retrieving and recording the material past, developing at the same time a strong sense of corporate, even professional, identity? Is it a place of public instruction, perhaps of indoctrination, where schoolchildren and adults come to admire the feats of the ancestors and rekindle their local, regional, ethnic or national pride and sense of belonging?

These are some of the clearly recognizable features of an archaeological site (especially one which is in the making, through excavation for example), certainly within the received tradition of modernist archaeology (cf. papers in Edgeworth 2006; and on fieldwork more broadly, Lucas 2000). But there is much more to it. An archaeological site is also a space of contemporary cultural production, a locale where new reconfigurations of materiality come into existence; where partial and fragmented traces of various pasts, earth, stone, mud and other materials, are sculptured into contemporary archaeological features, or often reconstituted as wholes (cf. Hamilakis 2007). It is a *contact zone* (cf. Clifford 1997; Pratt 2008) that affords and enables various encounters: between

archaeologists and other specialists of varied backgrounds who share an interest in the material past; between archaeologists and diverse publics (cf. Moshenska this volume); and between diverse and coexisting times which are given duration through materiality. As such, an archaeological site is an arena that can allow other forms of cultural production, beyond the archaeological, to unfold and to thrive (cf. Campbell and Ulin 2004). It is our conviction that by activating all of these other potential roles of an archaeological site, we can reconfigure and radically reshape modernist archaeology into an intellectually, socially and politically significant force.

Our site of experimentation is a tell in central Greece, called Koutroulou Magoula. The main phase of occupation of this site is the Middle Neolithic (5800–5300 bc), although there are traces of later prehistoric and historic activity. Today, the site is cultivated by local people for cotton and wheat production. Since 2009 (and officially since 2010), a team of archaeologists, anthropologists and artists, staff and students from the University of Southampton and elsewhere, have joined forces with the Greek Archaeological Service, which has been excavating here, on and off, since 2001 (see Hamilakis and Kyparissi-Apostolika 2011, 2012). In addition to topographic and geophysical survey, excavation and analysis of material itself, we introduced a series of other practices and activities. For a start, we reconstituted the project as an archaeology and archaeological ethnography endeavour. We were determined to make this project central to the lives of the local communities around us, and offer it up to them as an arena of bottom-up, experimental activities centred around transcultural encounter and interaction. In this hybrid article–photo essay, we will reflect on one specific instance in this effort: the site-specific event which included a theatrical performance called, *To Geuma* (“The Meal”), as well as communal feasting, music and dance. This event took place on site at the end of the 2011 season (25 September 2011), but was repeated in modified forms in other venues, in Athens, Amsterdam and Rethymno in Crete, where it was held in a restaurant, for the benefit of archaeology students. We hope that this piece will convey, at least in part, the emotive and affective energy that this event generated amongst our team and all participants. We also hope that our reflections will contribute to the decolonization of the archaeological from the dominant apparatuses, discourses and practices of Western modernity; and will inspire others to embark on similar endeavours, in our collective efforts to reclaim, reconfigure and reconstitute archaeology.

Archaeological ethnographies

The links between archaeology and sociocultural anthropology have been debated extensively, not always with profitable and creative outcomes (Garrow and Yarrow 2010). The last few years have witnessed a new effort, a more hopeful rapprochement which has become known as archaeological ethnography (Hamilakis 2011a; Hamilakis and Anagnostopoulos 2009a, 2009b; Meskell 2005). Quite distinctive from ethnoarchaeology, archaeological ethnography can be defined as a transcultural space of encounters and interactions centred around materiality and temporality. While it starts from the exploration of contemporary people’s relationships with the material traces of various times and their perception of the archaeological process, its scope and potential are much broader. We have claimed elsewhere that the ultimate aims of archaeological ethnography are to overcome and transgress disciplinary boundaries, and question the ontological stability of binarisms such as person/object and past/present. Rejecting the modernist and static notion of linear temporality, archaeological ethnography produces a shared ground not only of co-presence, but also of multi-temporality, thus enabling the active coexistence of multiple times which are given substance and agency through the durational qualities of materials and their sensorial and mnemonic reception by humans (Hamilakis 2011b). This conception of archaeological ethnography is inspired by Bergsonian philosophy (Bergson 1991; Deleuze

1991), combined with anthropological conceptions of social memory and sensorial, embodied experience. Archaeological ethnography counters modernist understandings of archaeology by replacing the 'archaeo-' in archaeology with the multitemporal, avoiding at the same time the dangers of presentism (cf. Ingold 2010). A counter-modern archaeology thus becomes a politically aware, mnemonic and sensorial inquiry into and engagement with multitemporality and materiality, as opposed to a disinterested and 'objective' reconstruction of a selected past. In methodological and practical terms, archaeological ethnography involves the whole gamut of ethnographic practices (interviewing, participant-observation and so on) as well as practices developed within community and public archaeology, prioritizing however the long-term, sustained and deep, embodied engagement with a locale and its people, objects and landscapes. But it also pioneers and advances a range of novel practices that can serve its main principles: ethnographic/artistic installations of various kinds, other creative projects, performances and events on experiencing time and materiality. Our September 2011 performative event was one such venture, within our broader archaeological ethnography initiatives.

Koutroulou Magoula is situated in a culturally diverse region of central Greece (prefecture of Phthiotida). The main town, Neo Monastiri, located 2 kilometres away from the site, was founded by Greek-speaking immigrants from present-day Bulgaria who settled in the area in the 1920s as part of the exchange and movement of populations (in an effort to produce ethnically homogeneous states) in the Balkans. They still identify with their original place of origin, and they strive to preserve and project a distinctive cultural identity, expressed primarily through dance, song, cuisine, and an annual gathering and festival of immigrants from the same area currently living in different parts of northern Greece. Their re-settlement agreement provided them with parcels of fertile land in the Thessalian plain, which until recently guaranteed a prosperous living, currently in sharp decline. They are keen to emphasize their distinctiveness from other villages in the area, such as the village of Vardali (in the vicinity of which our tell is situated) inhabited by people who have been native to the area, and whose living in the past involved pastoralism as well as agriculture. Local inter-village feasts and celebrations are often agonistic occasions where these different identities are projected through the respective dances and song. In all these villages, the archaeological past is encountered primarily as landscape features such as prehistoric tells, and as objects such as clay figurines or more rarely coins, which are found while working the land. People often collect such artefacts in a clandestine manner, practices that have been restricted significantly in recent years as the state archaeological service discourages such illegal activity, and encourages instead the handing over of artefacts to local museums in exchange for a small amount of financial compensation.

As all but two tell sites in the area are unexcavated, and none is developed as an organized archaeological site, the archaeological monument and site par excellence in the area is the Hellenistic Acropolis of Proerna which dominates part of the landscape and is used for concerts and other events during the summer. It is well known that classical antiquity, broadly defined, constitutes the 'golden age' in the modern and contemporary Greek national imagination (cf. Hamilakis 2007). As such, it is very common for local people to ask us about the ethnic identity of the inhabitants of our site in Neolithic times, often citing ethnic labels and groupings from classical antiquity. Thus, for most local people, Neolithic tells may hold some interest and arouse some curiosity but are still primarily agricultural spaces, countryside to be engaged with through the routines of farming and the agricultural calendar. Our work at Koutroulou Magoula, our presence in the broader area, and the site visits and tours which we organized are changing this perception. But in many cases, these visits still followed the usual pattern: people standing at the edge of the trenches listening to the archaeologists explaining the nature and importance of features and finds. The boundaries between archaeologists and the public,

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between past and present, and between 'serious' archaeological scientific work and other, more mundane practices were maintained and reproduced. New forms of experimentation were needed. Hence our performative event, 'The Meal', partly inspired by the pioneering work of Pearson and Shanks (2001) on the creative connections between theatre and archaeology.

Performance: an arena for spect-actors

There is nothing special nor particularly innovative about staging a theatrical or musical performance at an archaeological site. In Greece and other Mediterranean countries it is common to stage ancient plays in reconstructed classical theatres, and there is also a long, troubling and largely unexplored tradition of performative events at archaeological sites, staged as rituals of nationhood and ancestral worship (Hamilakis 2007). Concerts all over the world are frequently staged with a monument as a background. Site-specific theatre is something else, however. Here is how Pavis defines it:

The term refers to a staging and performance conceived on the basis of a place in the real world (ergo, outside the established theatre). A large part of the work has to do with researching a place, often an usual one that is imbued with history or permeated with atmosphere: an airplane hangar, unused factory, city neighbourhood, house or apartment. The insertion of a classical or modern text in this 'found place' throws new light on it, gives it an unsuspected power.

(Pavis 1998: 337)

The centrality of the concept of 'found place' here acquires further resonances when that found space is a working archaeological site. Pearson and McLucas, pioneers of site-specific theatre (Pearson 2010; Pearson and Shanks 2001), talk of 'the host and the ghost', whereby the found place is the host, and the props and the other added elements for a performance are the ghost that haunts, at least temporarily, that found place (Kaye 2000: 53).

Yet in our case, despite the connections with these by now well-known concepts, we did something different. The performance was staged in a space which was not the result of long and sustained search but one that we were already producing and constituting, through excavation and other work, as an archaeological site; it was the space of our own work, the laboratory and the workshop of our own cultural production process. As for the text, it too developed organically through archaeology and archaeological ethnography; it was not a script that had been produced independently. While this event was in preparation for nearly a year, most of the work for the text and the other elements was carried out during the month of the excavation. One of us (ET), who is both an archaeologist and a professional actor, worked throughout the season at the dig as excavator and photographer, but also in the evenings as one of the ethnographers, talking to people in the area and conducting interviews. It was this daily, embodied immersion in the locale which informed the writing of the text, the scenography, the direction of the play, the whole production. During the day, excavation work was combined with observation and recording of social interactions in the trenches, of the excitement of spectacular finds, the boredom of the tedious routines of meticulous form filling, the joy of the mid-morning snack break, the tiredness and exhaustion after a long day under the unforgiving sun. The textual, photographic and directly embodied mnemonic record of all these experiences added to the growing body of work that informed the final result. This was a truly collaborative and collective effort. For example, all student participants were asked to keep a daily journal (in the form of a single notebook which was circulating daily amongst them) and were encouraged to

record their thoughts and experiences, placing special emphasis on food and eating, given the topic of the performance: the initial shock of discovering the strange cuisine of the Greek countryside, so different from the tourist clichés and the national culinary homogenization achieved by recipe books and media stereotyping; the nostalgia for ‘home’ food, which could have been a Big Mac or the Sunday roast (cf. Sutton 2001); the gradual acceptance of certain dishes, their acculturation into their own culinary world, and the generation of prospective memories to be recalled on future occasions. That food journal became another source for inspiration and textual fragments to be used in the play. Here are extracts from the final script.

4th of September 2011
5th day of the excavation

A traditional Greek festival was held in the town, which could only mean one thing: dance, and I wasn’t disappointed. I soon found myself squashed between two lovely old ladies that didn’t speak a word of English. The food at this festival was lovely. I enjoyed 2 sausages on a stick that I can’t remember the Greek for. I know the word began with an L (I think). However the best was yet to come: the dessert. It was an orangey lump that can only be described as the middle of a jaffa cake. It was a lump of pure jaffa. Brilliant!

(From the student food journal)

The total quantity of animal bone fragments counted to date is 16,387 of which 5,527 (34%) were considered to be identifiable to species. Of the sub-sample of the assemblage in which a count of the different species was made, sheep/goat represented 76% of the sample, cattle 13%, pig 10%, dog 0.8%. It is also worth noting that amongst the animal bones, a number of scattered and fragmented human bones were found.

(From the preliminary report on animal bones)

Indiana last meal
Matthew Eric Wrinkles
December 11, 2009

Last Meal: Wrinkles had a final meal request of a prime rib with a ‘loaded’ baked potato, pork chops with steak fries, two salads with ranch dressing and rolls.

Texas last meal
Bobby Wayne Woods
December 3, 2009

Last Meal: Woods had a final meal request of two chicken-fried steaks, two fried chicken breasts, three fried pork chops, two hamburgers with lettuce, tomato, onion and salad dressing, four slices of bread, half a pound of fried potatoes with onion, half a pound of onion rings with ketchup, half a pan of chocolate cake with icing and two pitchers of milk.

Virginia last meal
Larry Bill Elliott
November 17, 2009

Last Meal: Elliott requested that his final meal not be revealed to the public.

(last meals of death row convicts in the USA; from <http://deadmaneating.blogspot.co.uk/>; last accessed 10 June 2012)

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There was no stage as such, no additional elaborate props. The carefully lit, open trenches and the newly unearthed Neolithic buildings, together with the now empty burial pit which contained the skeleton of a young woman, buried here some time between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries ad, acted as our scenic apparatus. Next to the open trenches, a wooden table, two chairs, two microphones. Initially, there were two main performers, Efthimis Theou and Thanasis Deligiannis. Their performance aimed not at representing Neolithic or other pasts, nor at instilling and disseminating, through theatre, archaeological information. This was about presence, not representation. Through voice, gesture and posture, dramatized monologues and dialogues, antiphony, singing solo or in duet, rhyming prose, they recalled, evoked and enacted various times and instances. The time of the Neolithic was made present through the materiality and duration of stone-built houses, and was given flesh and voice through their storytelling, evoking scenes of daily life such as food preparation and consumption. But this was not an exercise in time travelling, a call to empathize with Neolithic people. The passages that evoked Neolithic life were interspersed with the ones referring to other phases present on site, but also, and more importantly, with textual fragments conjuring up archaeological time, be it in the shape of a performative citation of the animal bone report or the attempt of an archaeology student to deal with the estrangement felt when confronted with a foreign food item, and his or her effort to deal with such anxiety through mnemonic recall of a familiar and comforting food from 'home'.

Several other times were also at play. The time of the daily eating practices in the area, and its punctuation by feasts and celebrations was enacted through the iteration of recipes from well-known local dishes, being careful to respect the local linguistic idiom and pronunciation, an attempt met with immediate positive response from the audience (through laughter and applause) which recognized the validation and celebration of local life and culture. Finally, the contemporary social and political time of late capitalist Western modernity acquired immediacy and presence through the recollection of one of its most poignant expressions: the last meals of convicts on death row in US prisons. This last component acquired, at the time of the performance, a particularly emotive resonance and topicality; it was only a few days before (21 September 2011) that the convict Troy Davis had been executed by the State of Georgia.

The conscious attempt to avoid assumed empathy with a selected and selective past may point to an affinity with Brechtian theatrical philosophy and especially with the theatre of Augusto Boal (cf. Baggage 2004). It is from this tradition that we borrowed the concept in the title of this sub-section. In this initiative we did not want to perform in front of passive spectators, we wanted to engage with spect-actors. The people from the local area who walked up to the Koutroulou Magoula tell to experience this performance had already contributed to its making, through their active participation in our ethnographic activities, through the supplying of much of the information upon which the script was based, but more importantly through their participation during the event itself. Below, we wish particularly to highlight one of the components which was central in its affective import and its mnemonic impact for the future: the cooking and consumption of food on site, along with the music and communal dancing.

In-corporation: sharing a meal

While the two performers were enacting the narratives of the script, not far from the spot where the crowd had gathered and next to our deepest trench which had exposed the longest stratigraphic sequence of the site, two large cauldrons were boiling. Inside them, several kilos of lamb meat and bulgur were being cooked by two elderly men who were some of our closest interlocutors during our ethnographic endeavours. They had volunteered to help, but they also

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served a similar role in the annual village feast (held at Neo Monastiri), cooking that very same dish. In some ways, this event was citing that annual feast: the same dish, cooked by the same people, and shared amongst all the participants. At the same time, a group of women from the other village nearby, Vardali, were in charge of preparing side dishes, and deserts.

Rather than being a side event or a post-theatre activity, the cooking of food on site was central to the performative event as a whole, which had after all made eating its central theme. In fact, in their prepared script the main actors made references to the dish being cooked, and at a certain moment a supporting actor served them two plates filled with the cooked food. When the first, more 'formal' part of the performance had finished, all participants flocked to the cooking area to share the cooked food, while local amateur musicians who had come to the site with their instruments started playing music. Eating is in-corporation. The participants took over from the main actors, and enacted the second part of the performance, through the sharing of food and drink. At the same time, they were in-corporated into a new collectivity, they produced a new trans-corporeal landscape which had the excavation and the archaeological site as its centre. Prospective, sensorial memories were generated, emotions and feelings were exchanged, materiality, through its activation by bodily senses was centre stage (cf. Sutton 2001; papers in Seremetakis 1994). And after eating and drinking came dancing: dances and music of different backgrounds and traditions, staged next to the trenches by the new collectivity of spect-actors who were animating, through their kinaesthetic performances, an archaeological site.

There are plans to continue this effort with more performances. In 2012 a group of school-children from the area will join the excavation team and, based on their interaction with the site, will co-author and take part in the staging of a performance around the concept of the house, which is a central element in our site, and in Balkan and Near Eastern Neolithic societies in general.

Enacting multiple times, reclaiming archaeology

Reclaiming archaeology is not only a matter of producing counter-discourses, of intervening in the broader intellectual production of the present. It is also a matter of producing new spaces, of enacting diverse times, and of creating the material possibilities for alternative forms of public cultural production to emerge. At a time when all urban and rural spaces are being fast colonized by capital and the forces of the market, archaeological sites and excavations can be much more than places which can foster 'an interest in and awareness of the past', as Tilley suggests in the paper which acts as the epigraph to this chapter. Rather than projecting them as monumental locales or heritage spaces, they can (and should) be constituted as alternative spaces of shared communal interaction, sociality, creativity and cultural expression. As in many other cases, our excavation was always a contact zone, not only of different times (the Neolithic, the later pre-historic and historic periods, the contemporary) but also of different communities, nationalities, social backgrounds. But such contact, whatever its benefits, was not enough. It would not have produced an alternative conception of materiality and temporality, especially when essentialist ideas on identity and ancestry are prevalent, and professional hierarchies and roles so entrenched. The space of the excavation had to be constituted anew. Its *sense of place* (cf. Feld and Basso 1996), its materiality and mnemonic power, its diverse temporalities needed to be re-activated. In our case, the place was both the 'host and the ghost', only that the 'ghost' needed to be conjured up and recalled. That act of re-collection became a collective, shared experience.

Place is produced through sensorial practice, performance and memory. Through the iteration of different times from the Neolithic to the present, and the embodied co-shaping of this event by all its participants, a shared performative space was produced, a space where not only

material memories were re-collected, but also new prospective remembering was generated, new mnemonic traces were created, and dispersed in the bodies of the participants and the surrounding landscape. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, a small but important step was made in abandoning linear temporality, ancestral and static mono-chrony, and the obsession with the archaeo- of archaeology, without resorting to presentism. An archaeological site, and archaeology as a whole was collectively reclaimed by archaeologists and non-archaeologists alike as a multitemporal ground, an open space which could allow various ontological and political possibilities to emerge.

Acknowledgements

The Koutroulou Magoula Archaeology and Archaeological Ethnography Project is directed by Nina Kyparissi-Apostolika and Yannis Hamilakis and is a collaboration of the University of Southampton – British School at Athens and the Greek Ministry of Culture and Tourism – Ephoreia of Palaeoanthropology and Speleology and 14th Ephoreia of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities. Funding comes from the University of Southampton, Greek Archaeological Service, Institute for Aegean Prehistory, the British School at Athens, the Psychas Foundation and the local municipalities. Aris Anagnostopoulos (2009) and Kostas Kalantzis (2010–present) contributed substantially to the archaeological ethnography part of the project. We are grateful to all colleagues who work at the project, staff and students, for their contribution to the success of this event. Above all, we would like to thank the Municipality of Domokos for funding it (especially Makis Dimoudis), and the people of Neo Monastiri, Vardali and other villages in the area who embraced this initiative so warmly and continue to support it. Photograph 1 is by Thanasis Deligiannis, 5, 6, 8, 9 and 10 are by Tom Loughlin, our field director; photographs 2, 3, 4 and 7 are by Anjali Kundi, a graduate of the University of Southampton who completed her undergraduate thesis (2012) on experimenting with photography at Koutroulou Magoula.

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