‘Excavating’ Cultural Landscapes. Practicing Archaeology as a Creative Discipline

Diamantis Panagiotopoulos

Institute of Classical and Byzantine Archaeology, Heidelberg University (Germany)

Abstract Following the parabolic growth of the notion of cultural heritage in recent years, archaeological sites and landscapes, as two of its key manifestations, have gained pivotal scientific and societal importance. They pose now a complex and demanding challenge that requires innovative research methodologies and management strategies. This article examines current issues related to the archaeological exploration and modeling of such places, drawing on both theoretical perspectives and a case study from southern Crete. Its main objective is to demonstrate that archaeology has the potential not only to observe but also to intervene in the diachronic trajectory of heritage places, thus evolving itself from a destructive to a creative discipline.

Keywords Archaeology, excavation, heritagization, archaeological sites, cultural landscapes.

Introduction

One of the most remarkable recent developments in archaeology is its gradual shift from a discipline focused on antiquity to one centered on cultural heritage. This emerging field is broader and more dynamic than the traditional archaeological understanding of the past, since it also includes the dimension of the present as a main field of enquiry and action, and consequently, offers numerous opportunities for archaeologists to engage with contemporary issues at the intersection of science, politics, economics, and society. Archaeology’s new role, amid current developments in this and related fields, leverages its untapped potential to remain relevant in today’s world and—more important still—to justify its existence in a modern society that constantly redefines its priorities. However, this shift not only presents opportunities but also necessitates a fundamental reassessment of traditional archaeological methods and objectives. Archaeology can no longer be limited to the destructive process of excavation or the passive study of ancient artifacts; it must evolve into a more active and creative ‘applied discipline.’

Panagiotopoulos, D.: “‘Excavating’ Cultural Landscapes. Practicing Archaeology as a Creative Discipline.” In: D. Panagiotopoulos et al. (eds.), *Cultural Landscapes as Resource for the Revitalization of Cultural Heritage and a Sustainable Regional Development.* Heidelberg: Propylaeum-eBOOKS 2024, pp. 65–74. https://doi.org/10.11588/propylaeum.1466.c21619

The best indicator of this transformative process—along with its challenges and opportunities—is the involvement of archaeologists with sites and landscapes, beyond the traditional task of excavating them that still represents the core of this discipline (Erickson 1992; Downum and Price 1999). Acknowledging the pressing necessity that archaeology in the 21st century has to define itself as an open academic discipline with a social dimension, the modeling and stewardship of archaeological sites and landscapes pose one of its greatest challenges. Aside from major sites developed to serve as major touristic attractions, many lesser-known and peripheral sites are often neglected and at risk due to structural issues and competing interests. Protecting and conserving these sites has understandably been the top priority for state archaeologists and current archaeological legislation, especially given the threats posed by natural deterioration and modern development in both urban and rural areas. However, achieving even these basic goals is hindered by numerous challenges, primarily financial. Many archaeological sites either deteriorate post-excavation, face threats from real estate speculation, or are destroyed by looters. Effective protection requires significant investment, yet the limited budgets of governing institutions fail to ensure sustainable management practices for conservation and revitalization efforts.

Under these circumstances, state archaeologists often find themselves operating under constraints rather than creatively engaging with cultural heritage, thus focusing mainly on preservation with limited capacity to integrate heritage sites into modern society. This situation is mirrored even at major archaeological places that attract thousands of visitors each year; due to financial limitations, their management typically extends only to essential protective measures. Nonetheless, in recent years, state archaeologists in Greece and Italy have successfully implemented major conservation programs and master plans to enhance the accessibility and visibility of heritage sites through European initiatives, showcasing the potential for a 'creative approach.' Among several examples for an exemplary management and modeling of archaeological sites/parks, one could highlight Messene and Nikopolis (Greece) as well as Selinunte and Agrigent (Italy). Yet, such initiatives remain the exception rather than the norm.

Additionally, academic archaeologists conducting fieldwork in Greece and Italy often focus almost exclusively on scientific endeavors, thus limiting the relevance and impact of their work on local communities and regions. This issue is compounded by a pressing threat to Mediterranean cultural heritage posed by the private sector, particularly during financial crises, when entrepreneurs seize opportunities to undertake ambitious projects that often lead to the irreversible damage of cultural and physical heritage. The economic exploitation of some of the Mediterranean's most ecologically sensitive areas rarely delivers the promised benefits for sustainable regional development or improvements in the quality of life for local populations.

All these involved stakeholders—state authorities, local governments, the archaeological service, academic institutions, entrepreneurs, and communities—comprise a complex social conglomeration. In this field of interaction, which is marked by divergent and sometimes conflicting interests, several challenges arise. The first is the crucial question whether we can develop sustainable management models for

protecting, preserving, and promoting heritage places without risking commercialization (Timothy 2011; Bendix 2018; Pacelli and Sica 2021). A further challenge refers to the potential role of archaeology in the 21st century: Can this academic field contribute to sustainable development of heritage sites and landscapes by embracing an 'applied discipline' approach? Is it possible for archaeologists to acquire relevance and significance in modern society through practical applications of their theoretical concepts (Erickson 1992)? Finally, one should focus on the active role of citizens and local communities which have to participate as active agents in every effort relating to the present and future of the cultural heritage of their own region (Arnstein 1969; Stroulia and Sutton 2010; Mergos and Patsavos 2017).

By striking a balance between archaeological theory and practice and committing to a participatory approach that includes all stakeholders, archaeological sites and landscapes can be innovatively modeled, thus contributing to sustainable development in peripheral Mediterranean regions. The scientific and social potential of such an approach is discussed below, where the concept of archaeological *entopias* and an ongoing archaeological project in south-central Crete as a case study are briefly presented.

Archaeological sites/landscapes as entopias

To ensure the ongoing relevance of archaeological remains in modern times, their historical value alone is insufficient. Monuments and sites must be actively modeled, ideally through interdisciplinary projects that engage archaeologists, historians, ethnologists, architects, and geographers. Within urban environments, design interventions should focus on revitalizing spatial and temporal connections, enhancing both physical and cultural accessibility by constructing, 'translating,' and communicating heritage. Concepts like porosity and permeability (Wolfrum 2018), along with multifunctionality (Labadi and Logan 2016; Williams 2015), offer ways to reintegrate heritage sites into modern cities, transforming them into dynamic spaces for social interaction. On the other side, for archaeological sites in rural regions—often referred to as 'emptyscapes' due to their lack of social activities and memory (Campana 2017, 2018)—the main challenge lies in developing landscape-oriented strategies that counter isolation. These strategies should aim to foster dialogue with the present and integrate these sites into the social and economic life of local communities. One innovative approach is to transform rural archaeological sites into spaces that merge temporal and biological diversity, using creative conservation methods like integrating cultivation within these landscapes (Donadieu and Inzerillo 2014). A biodiversity-driven masterplan could serve as a design tool to link past, present, and future, as well as culture, ecology, and economy. In both urban and rural contexts, the goal should be to move beyond mere spatial coexistence toward 'cohabitation,' creating an interface between the past and the present.

This conscious 'placemaking' can operate on both symbolic and practical levels. First, it has the potential to transform monuments, sites, and landscapes into living

spaces of memory, belonging, and collective identity at a local or national scale. Second, it can shape these spaces as heritage sites with economic potential, such as tourism or urban renewal. A key element for successful placemaking is solidarity, which can bridge social divides between the different groups involved. Consequently, a pressing need in modern heritage management is the principle of 'commoning,' which establishes frameworks for managing shared resources through participatory methods. Bollier (2016, 2) describes commoning as the "acts of mutual support, conflict, negotiation, communication, and experimentation necessary to create systems for managing shared resources" (see also Bollier and Helfrich 2015; Roued-Cunliffe and Japzon 2017). Engaging with heritage should always follow a participatory approach, or 'commoning heritage.' The Structured Democratic Dialogue (SDD) methodology offers a scientific framework to facilitate forward-thinking discussions with all relevant stakeholders, including public institutions, academia, economy, and society (Kakoulaki, Flanagan, and Christakis 2023). By applying the SDD approach, it becomes possible to identify shared concerns, develop common agendas, and create a shared language that transcends social boundaries and bridges the gap between scientific and indigenous knowledge (Nakashima 2010; Raina 2019).

To define a clear objective for a heritage plan for archaeological sites or landscapes, it is essential to start from their current state—how they are perceived by visitors and local communities today. Many archaeological sites are experienced as 'heterotopias' (Foucault and Miskowiec 1986), or 'different places' separated from real-world contexts. Within the confines of these sites, they often appear as 'landscapes of ruins,' spaces fossilized in time, devoid of activity except for visual observation. A central challenge for modern archaeology is to develop strategies for transforming these spaces into 'entopias' (Doxiadis 1966, 1975), or places 'within'—distinct, authentic locations that are simultaneously ideal, existing, and functional. Archaeological entopias can serve as living places of collective memory and as foundations for the sustainable development of local communities.

This concept can be applied to both urban and rural sites, albeit with different tools and objectives. In rural areas, the key challenge is to expand the focus from the fenced archaeological site to the broader cultural landscape. For a long time, archaeologists concentrated primarily on material remains, often neglecting the natural environment and its influence on ancient societies. However, recent advancements in landscape archaeology, digital documentation of spatial data, and societal concerns have shifted the focus from the 'site' to the 'landscape,' offering new opportunities for archaeologists to engage with regions rich in cultural and natural heritage. Their basic aim must be to integrate heritage places into the daily life, economy, and social activities of local communities. In every effort, the main objective should be to foster 'cohabitation,' creating a bridge between past and present. The implementation of the 'entopia' concept and the challenges it presents are explored in the last part of this paper, using the ongoing archaeological project at Minoan Koumasa (south-central Crete) as a case study.

Figure 1 The archaeological site of Koumasa (south-central Crete) from southeast. © Mario Carvalhal (2022)

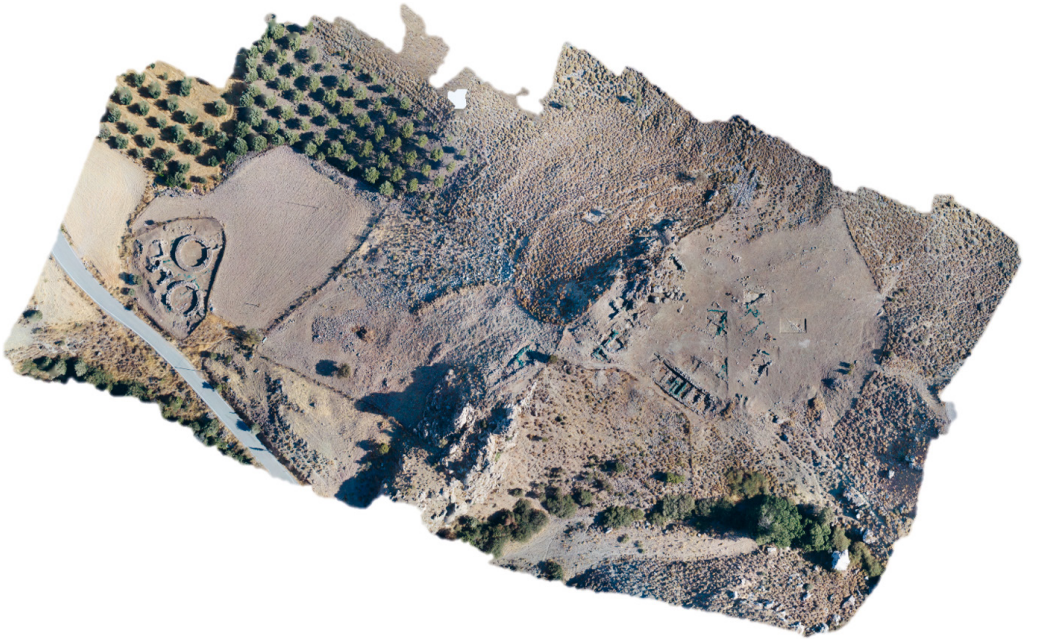

Figure 2 Orthophoto of the archaeological site of Koumasa. © Martin Kim (2022)

Reconstructing an archaeological landscape

Since Stephanos Xanthoudides' excavations from 1904 to 1906 and the publication of their results in 1924 (Xanthudidēs 1924), Koumasa has held a significant place in Minoan Archaeology. Situated strategically on the foothills of the Eastern Asterousia mountains, overlooking a large portion of the Mesara plain (fig. 1–2), Koumasa was predestined to be a key regional center during the social transformations that led Early Bronze Age Crete to develop into a palatial society. This prominence was highlighted by the remarkable finds from the early excavations, which included hundreds of clay and stone vases, seals, amulets, jewelry, and ritual objects.

More than a century after this first period of archaeological work, a new research project began in 2012, under the auspices of the Archaeological Society at Athens and in collaboration with the Institute of Classical Archaeology and Byzantine Archaeology, University of Heidelberg, and the Heraklion Ephorate of Antiquities (Panagiotopoulos 2023, 194–98 with further bibliography). Initially, this interdisciplinary project aimed to thoroughly investigate the nearby settlement and correlate the new excavation data with Xanthoudides' earlier findings. This endeavor was promising, as the systematic excavation of a southern Cretan settlement connected to a cemetery has long been a major desideratum in Minoan archaeology.

However, as the project progressed, the impact of the Asterousia region and its people on the archaeological team became more profound than anticipated. Living, working, and forging relationships with the local community led the team to reconsider their initial objectives (Fig. 3). It became clear that traditional archaeological approaches—focusing solely on the site and its historical importance—would be one-sided, if not naïve, especially in a period of a severe crisis during which the region was grappling with unprecedented economic difficulties. To address the current challenges, which the local population was facing, and unlock the full potential of archaeological research in this untouched landscape, a significant shift in the project's overall concept was necessary. This shift broadened the scope of the research in both time (diachrony) and space (landscape), prompting rethinking at both scientific and social levels.

At the scientific level, the project expanded its focus beyond the site itself, considering the broader landscape and its diachronic development. Koumasa is uniquely positioned at the border between two contrasting regions: the fertile, densely populated Mesara plain and the barren, sparsely inhabited Central Asterousia mountains (fig. 4). The diverse landscape of mountains, valleys, and coastlines around Koumasa provided an opportunity to explore the dynamic relationship between human activity and the natural environment in Bronze Age Crete. This approach revealed the hermeneutical potential of the site as a key location for understanding long-term patterns of human-environment interaction in the Mediterranean.

At the social level, it became, as already mentioned, evident that it would be both unjust and ineffective to focus solely on Koumasa's significance in Minoan times or the long history of the Asterousia region while expecting local communities to

Figure 3 Working together with three generations of the local population.
© Andreas Neumann (2017)

Figure 4 The Mesara plain and the Asterousia mountain range.
© Diamantis Panagiotopoulos (2011)

preserve this heritage amid an economic crisis. These communities, struggling with issues like low olive oil prices and rising grazing costs, faced more immediate concerns. Experiencing this situation, the following question arose almost inevitably: can archaeologists play a more active role, not just documenting central and non-central places, but helping generate processes of regional importance?

Given that archaeological projects are planned as long-term endeavors, they have the potential—if not the responsibility—to impact the development of isolated regions. The challenge is to find ways to align scientific goals with the needs of local communities, working together toward shared objectives. Archaeology's primary concern in the 21st century should be integrating knowledge of the past and heritage preservation into an innovative strategy for landscape stewardship, merging local experiential knowledge with scientific expertise into a participatory planning process (Spek 2017). A holistic approach should encompass all key aspects of the region's diachronic history, from its geology, geography, flora, and fauna to its material remains and the authentic practices of the local population.

The Koumasa project aims to meet these challenges by developing a master plan for the sustainable development of the wider region, grounded in the aforementioned concept of *entopia* as a framework for studying and shaping a spatial entity based on its identity, relevance, and uniqueness. In collaboration with other archaeological projects, disciplines, local communities, and authorities, the goal is to preserve, study, and promote this unique landscape, seeing it not as a static, protected archaeological site, but as a vibrant space where the past and present coexist.

The outdated model of a museum where material relics are displayed in isolation from their original context must be replaced by a new vision: the landscape itself as the museum (fig. 5). The experience of visiting should not be limited to gazing at artifacts in sterile settings but should involve a journey through space and time, engaging all senses in an unspoiled region where the traces of human-environment interaction can be seen and understood in context. Visitors should be able to perceive ancient and modern realities of the landscape as a unified whole—experiencing the sights, sounds, and smells of both past and present in a genuine, multisensory manner. This approach offers a more meaningful way to connect with the past than artificial reenactments, as all stimuli—what visitors see, touch, hear, taste, and smell—are authentic and form part of a continuous historical narrative. This multisensory perception of the landscape also offers a chance to incorporate local communities and their traditions as integral parts of the experience, creating opportunities for sustainable economic development that respects the region's unique character and fragility.

For these reasons, the Koumasa excavation sets a goal that may seem paradoxical at first glance: to be a project that will never be fully completed, but one that will continue for decades, becoming an integral part of the landscape's cyclic rhythms. In this context, Koumasa will not be a fossilized archaeological site, but a living 'co-laboratory' of research, where both the local population and visitors will be given the opportunity to witness the core of the archaeological process, i. e. the transformation of a find into an exhibit through the implementation of cutting-edge scientific methods

Figure 5 The cultural landscape is an open museum that can offer a unique multisensory experience. © Diamantis Panagiotopoulos (2014)

and the generation of archaeological knowledge. Through this work, the project seeks to activate the power of the place, contributing to a collective effort to make Asterousia a region of unique aesthetic and scientific significance.

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