

Interview with Kostas Kotsakis

Douglass W. BAILEY*

Kostas Kotsakis is Professor of Archaeology in the Faculty of History in the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki. He is widely acknowledged as the foremost authority on the Neolithic and wider prehistory of Greece.

Douglass W. Bailey: What is particular in the way that the study of prehistory fits into the archaeology of Greece?

Kostas Kotsakis: That's an interesting question. You must realize that Greece is a country that is dominated by the Classical tradition. Greece as an ideological structure has been built on the Classical past and therefore there has been very little room for prehistory. Prehistory in Greece is mainly the prehistory of the Greeks, of Greek culture, and of the Greek civilization. Until only a few decades ago, prehistoric archaeology in Greece was limited to the study of the Bronze Age civilizations such as the Minoans and the Myceneans and that was it. This situation started to change in the 1960s when a significant amount of work started to focus on the Neolithic. Work by Theocharis and work by foreigners such as Milošević. So, with this there was an impetus for the study of the Neolithic, but it is always a subject which, in many senses, was peripheral. You can see this in the structure of education. Prehistory is covered by a smaller portion of the university staff, and the programme for the study of the Neolithic is even smaller. In fact, for many years, only the University of Thessaloniki was teaching the Neolithic. Theocharis started it in the 1950s when he was a state archaeologist working for the Archaeological Service. He had experience digging prehistoric sites and working with foreign groups as he did in Mycenae and Pylos. From the mid-1950s he started his work at Sesklo and then in the 1970s he moved to a position at the University at Thessaloniki. There he created an academic space for the study of prehistory, a space for his students to work in; I was one of those students. After Theocharis' death, Hourmouziades took over his position and the Neolithic came into very sharp focus. This created a tradition that characterizes Thessaloniki: the combination of the Neolithic with theoretical interests.

DWB: A common western perspective on archaeology in Greece and in southeastern Europe as a whole is that it is very untheoretical, that it is a tradition that does not engage theory. Is this true?

KK: This perspective is related to the international distribution of academic labour. You must understand that Theocharis was known to the international audience not because of his concepts of the Neolithic but because he was producing and delivering archaeological knowledge and evidence. It is like the Third World countries producing the materials which go to the industrial countries who work with them in the industrial process. Theocharis was producing information about the Neolithic in Thessaly at a time when no one else was producing any evidence. With Hourmouziadis, the process moved on to a second stage which not only used the information but which also involved the use of theory. Hourmouziadis was very interested in theory in the 1970s at a time when there was a lot of theory and discussion. Unfortunately, no foreign archaeologist would go to the trouble of reading the theoretical ideas of a peripheral archaeologist. Because of this, Hourmouziades is well known to the people who specialized in the Neolithic of Greece; they know Hourmouziadis and his work. Though he is now retired, he was a very prominent figure and was very active. People know of Hourmouziades as the first one to open up the theoretical discussion. Theory was implicit in what he wrote, and theory was much more explicit.

Another aspect which we need to consider is the difference between local and international archaeology. It is true that international Aegean archaeology is not very theoretical; it is very factual. It deals with the factual evidence of archaeology. This is true of the study of the Myceneans and Minoans and, despite the fact here we had evidence for the appearance and the collapse of civilizations, there were no theories about such processes and events until the 1990s.

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Greece was always a region in which the archaeology was factual. The local, indigenous scholar had concerns that were global, but global in the sense that they were trying to give a full description, global as a holistic and complete understanding. They were trying to give a complete understanding to the different aspects of heritage.

DWB: What happens when you have a foreign archaeologist coming into a local area, which has its own tradition of doing work? Greece is the country which appears to be defined by its own and others' interests in its past and in the ancient history of democracy and of philosophy. What happens in the Neolithic archaeology of Greece when someone comes from another country with his or her own research agenda or theory and wants to do work in Greece? Is this different in different parts of Greece, for example for Thessaloniki or for Athens where the foreign schools are located?

KK: Greece is a special case because we have a huge amount of foreign interest in the Greek past. There are more than 20 foreign schools in Athens. This is not something that happens in other countries. Maybe in Italy, but I don't know of any other country where foreign archaeology is so focused and has been so institutionalized. This creates a false conception of the relationships between the local archaeologists and the foreign archaeologists. This is something that is very complicated, and it is difficult to describe. In some ways, it is a love-hate relationship. There are mutual interests, but it is very complicated for both sides and for the way that both sides exploit each other. At present, with the general post-colonial atmosphere, there has been a lot of discussion about what sort of relationship we (as Greek archaeologists) have with foreign archaeologists.

Another aspect is that foreign archaeologists came to the prehistory of Greece with particular agendas, for example, about the Greek civilization. In some cases this is explicit, as with Carl Blegen. In other cases it is more implicit, as with Milošević. On the first pages of Milošević's report about his work in Thessaly, he explicitly places Thessaly in the wider world. Why Thessaly in the wider world? Why not some other place? Then you realize that it is part of Greece and it is part of the legends of Greece. This creates a kind of agenda that defines the type of archaeology that developed in the Aegean. With this type of archaeology, you do not need to have much of an anthropological approach because the subject of study is high culture. You don't need anthropology to understand high culture, and you don't need to have all of those sophisticated theories and methods for analyzing the environment (among other things) which developed in other parts of Europe. Instead, you have a more historical archaeology. This gives Greek archaeology a very particular character.

As a center of archaeology, Thessaloniki developed because it was far away from all the institutions in Athens, and away from the areas where most people were working. With the exception of the French working in Thasos and (briefly) at Dikili Tash, and of the British work at Nea Nikomedeia, there was no work done by the foreign schools in northern Greece (i.e., Thessaly and Greek Macedonia). There was no major work done in this region and because of this the northern part of Greece went out of the vision. It was not part of the Greek civilization and cultural excellence. This left a lot of leeway in which Thessaloniki could develop in areas of prehistory with approaches that were not really available in the south or in which the people in the south were not interested. This has given archaeology at Thessaloniki a particular character. It is the consequence of a succession of particular people working at Thessaloniki. This did not happen in Athens with the other major Greek university. Thessaloniki, therefore, has a lineage within the Neolithic and a close relationship to theoretical archaeology. It is a question of people and personalities, but even more it is because we are away from the climate of Athens, of the Myceneans, the Minoans. The north is on the periphery. It is something else. It is an alien area. This position has given us a lot of leeway. It is a more political thing as well. When you are away from the decision makers it is different. When you are near them, you cluster around them, and you lobby them, but you don't actually do very much.

DWB: In Greece, there is a system for regulating foreign fieldwork projects by issuing a limited number of excavation permits to each of the foreign schools. Because of this restriction in excavation permits, there developed in Greece, methods for field-survey and field-walking which are now widely used around the world. Has this system of limited numbers of permits for foreign projects been a good thing or a bad thing?

KK: This is a tricky subject. There are many foreign schools (over 20 now) and the current law says that each school has three permits for excavation, three for survey, and three for *synargosia* (i.e., collaboration with a local *ephoria*). So, that is a total of nine permits per school. For a big school with a lot of resources and academic capital behind it, maybe nine permits are not enough. This is particularly the case when many projects go on longer than originally anticipated. However, for the smaller schools nine is not a small number.

There was a time when the field survey remained outside of the permit system (i.e., in the 1980s), and there was an explosion of field survey projects. The question is whether or not this was a problem. I can understand the need to have a regulation of the quality of the work that people are doing. In certain forms, surface survey is not a purely descriptive method; if the survey collects all the surface materials that it finds, then the method is a destructive one. I can see that this would be a problem. However, if the project is only measuring and counting material on the surface and not picking anything up, then I do not see a problem. Because of this, I would like to see some relief in the regulation of field survey.

Excavation is another situation as it is a destructive process. This is more serious. Here, there is the need for protecting what is excavated; unfortunately, this has not been the experience of all archaeological projects. In the 1970s, some foreign schools would just dig up something and then leave. Basically, this was the destruction of a site. In recent times, things have changed. Excavation projects require a form of control; survey projects require a quality control. These decisions are very delicate. If you are very relaxed, then you allow irresponsible damage to the country's heritage. Heritage is a limited resource, much more than oil and other natural resources. On the other hand, if you are very strict, then you discourage international interest and scholarship; this is not good, especially in the university environment where I would prefer to leave open research activities. However, if I was an administrator, I would be reluctant to let people do work without any constraint.

DWB: Are there Greek archaeological projects that go abroad and dig in foreign countries?

KK: Yes. I had a project that went to Turkey for three years to work at Catalhoyuk, and I think that there is a project in Syria run by a colleague in Ionnina University. So, there are some but not many. There are two reasons for the limited number of Greek archaeologists working in foreign countries. First, it is true that Greek archaeology is very focused on the Greek past. On the other hand, the practical problem of taking a research team abroad is so huge that it negates any benefit that might result. Finding money to do this is difficult, as is finding the people to be part of the team. Then, there is the problem of moving the team into the field. However, this is something that changes rapidly and there is a new generation of archaeologists in Greece now, and they have a much more international aspect and attitude. People are publishing in foreign journals now. This was not the case before; it was not easy to publish in foreign journals.

DWB: One could say that, in general, there are two types of archaeological countries: those that go out and dig in other countries and those that receive foreign teams of diggers. This is an imbalance. How would you describe Greek archaeology's position?

KK: I would be unwilling to give a single definite answer as my interests might be very different from those of other archaeologists in Greece. For example, I firmly believe in the historical aspect of archaeology. In this sense, we are dealing with a specific historical expression or phenomenon, something that happened at a specific time or place. I am not fascinated (as I once was) with generalizations or in making the rules (i.e., the production of a normative archaeology in the sense of setting the rules for phenomena on an international scale, as happens with the laws of physics). I am not interested in doing this and, in fact, I do not believe that one can do such a thing. To generalize and make such rules, one abstracts too much.

I am interested in focusing on particular areas and in understanding a place in depth. This is what we gain from archaeology, a depth of understanding. So I am satisfied to be doing archaeology in Greece in places that might be considered peripheral. While it is interesting to see how the Neolithic developed in Syria, for example, with a Natufian village, it is also interesting to see it developing in Greece. We need space for indigenous archaeology to develop in depth relations with local history.

I am not talking about a provincial archaeology with knowledge restricted by the borders of a political area. You have to have an overall knowledge of what is happening in other areas because you are always comparing. So, it is interesting to know how the Neolithic was developing in Bulgaria, or in Romania, or in Serbia, or in Syria, and it is valuable to compare it to your own experience. However, I do not need to go to Bulgaria to do research. I can do it where I am and I can use the information that comes from that place.

DWB: I understand that in Greek universities, archaeology sits in the History Faculties, that it is one subject (of many others) that a History student takes. How does archaeology sit within the wider academic environment in Greece?

KK: In Greece there are no departments of archaeology. Students who study archaeology have many other subjects to learn as well. Regardless, everyone who has a degree from the faculty of history can actually become an archaeologist by taking an exam and getting a job as an archaeologist. Of course, someone who has done nothing more specific than getting a degree in history has no real chance of becoming an archaeologist. Many people get into the Archaeological Service by getting contracts to do archaeological work and usually these are students who have studied more archaeology than other subjects. After a while, after some years of contract archaeology, they can become archaeologists in the Archaeological Service. It is not ideal, but things are starting to change. There is now a trend to choose students who have completed postgraduate studies in archaeology and thus who have chosen to specialize in prehistory or in the Neolithic. This happens at the Masters level. I doubt now that someone only with an undergraduate degree has enough experience to become an archaeologist. At the Masters level, students get a lot of experience in fieldwork as well as in course work. They are well prepared to work as archaeologists in the field. But this is only after the Masters. We have many undergraduates, 100s and 100s, and it is impossible to educate them to the level of expertise that they get with the Masters training. Most of the archaeology graduates find jobs as high school teachers.

DWB: Where does archaeology sit in relation to the social sciences? What is the relationship with subjects such as social anthropology?

KK: In Greece there is not a big tradition of the social sciences. In general this is for political reasons based on our political past. There was no social science until quite recently. In Greece, the civil war ended in 1950. After that there was at least 12 years of a quite oppressive situation, and then there was a dictatorship for seven years. In 1974, Greece returned to normal democracy. Because of this history, everything that was related to the social sciences and the questions that are part of the social sciences had to wait until 1974. Before that there was only the pretence that social reality was as it should be. This was not science. For the social sciences, one needs openness and a context which allows openness.

Archaeology was alive because it was related to the use of historic evidence; it was very much part of the national ideology. I wouldn't say that archaeology was a self-reflective discipline at this time, but to be realistic, archaeology was not self-reflective anywhere in the world then. Archaeology had a particular ideological history within the state. Part of the dominant ideology of the state was based on historical descent; this was a place in which archaeology could work.

Social anthropology is almost non-existent in Greece. The only person who introduced the ideas of social anthropology was a professor in Thessaloniki in the 1930s; he introduced the ideas of functionalism, Malinowski, and similar concepts. Apart from that, there was folklore and the study of the primitive within the urban culture and the rural aspect; it was about the survival of the ancient Greek culture. At present, social anthropology is developing gradually. There is a Social Anthropology Department in Athens and in a few other places. They are not dealing with continuity of the Greek state; they are dealing with other aspects. In any event, there are very few relations between archaeology and social anthropology.

DWB: In different countries and in different intellectual traditions, archaeology has had different historical trajectories. What has been the trajectory in Greece? Has there been a series of critical moments (e.g., processualism or post-processualism) that archaeology has gone through?

KK: In Greece, for example, the post-processual movement did not happen. Hourmouziadis had introduced aspects of processualism in his work. But he did this with a very different theoretical language, and it was based on very different theoretical concepts when compared with processualism in America or the UK. Hourmouziadis' work had nothing to do with the processual positivist ideas of those other traditions. Greece followed a different trajectory. The main part of this was the relationship with history and a very strong historical perspective. This is why the ideas of Gordon Childe and of culture-history were privileged in Greece. There is a distinct part of Classical Archaeology that is historical, for example in defining your sources. This is a strong tradition in Greek archaeology. This tradition ties in very well with post-processual ideas although from a very different angle from that which was prominent in Britain for example. This sense of a historical archaeology contains this idea of interpreting things in view of their historical depth in a way which is pretty much the same as the post-processual approach to archaeology: but it does not do it with all of the philosophical elaboration that comes through with British post-processualism and its reaction against positivism.

When a classical archaeologist discusses a relief sculpture in Homer for the 286th time, he is actually reinterpreting that in view of historical contingency. Often, I say to my colleagues that even though they do not realize it or even dream of it, and even though they do not know the meaning of the concept, their work is actually very post-processual. You take all of the texts that survive from the ancient world; it is a limited number. These texts are re-read again and again, and each time someone finds something different in them. This creates the sort of continuous reinterpretation which is very much at home with the post-processualist way of thinking. So the whole thing makes a circle back to its beginning.

I often wonder what happens in the German tradition of classical scholarship, because the hermeneutic aspect of philosophy is pretty much a German tradition in central Europe; these things are strands that actually tie together. The German case is of trauma after the Second World War. Because of the abuse of archaeology that took place before the war, all of the concepts in German archaeology became very factual and very realist; in a sense most people were terrified to make any sort of generalization of any type. However, I think that this has changed now. The new generation of German archaeologists is different and is very much excited about interpreting things. I have the feeling that there is a young generation who will rise to the top. They may be the types of people who reconnect the ties with the very important and long tradition of central European hermeneutics that goes back to the eighteenth century. Of course there are many shades of this tradition: the more factual, where you have the interpretation of a reality; or you have more relativistic approaches where interpretation continues. In any event, you have everything there and you can just choose which strand of this tradition you want to tie up with. I would expect that the younger generation who are theoretically exposed (because there is a theoretical discussion going on now) and who have the privilege of reading these texts in their mother language will exploit this potential.

For France it has always puzzled me that the archaeologists have not engaged with the rich tradition of French philosophers, especially as non-French archaeologists have found inspiration in these philosophers. Why do we have a country that has produced all of these interpretations and interpreters like Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Paul Sartre, and all those phenomenological philosophers, yet in which archaeologists, who know of these traditions, just don't care. Why this happens I do not know. Perhaps, the reason is that French prehistoric archaeology grew up from Palaeolithic studies and that Palaeolithic studies had no room for interpretation. What I mean by this is that they were strongly modeled on the Earth Sciences. There is a lot of scope for interpretation in Earth Science of course. Modeling the Palaeolithic tradition on the Earth Sciences and on stratigraphic excavation gave French archaeology a very positivist aspect; thus, French archaeology is part of the sciences and not of history or philosophy.

DWB: We are now living in a new Europe with the expansion of the EU and archaeology has a pan-European scope (e.g., the European Association of Archaeologists). In these contexts, is it unavoidable that the different strands of local, indigenous traditions will be watered down or lost? Or will some strands of practice and method from one place be picked up and become dominant in

another? Is there a worry about a globalized Europe or a federal Europe, and thus of a general European approach to archaeology?

KK: I don't know if this is a worry, but Europe is definitely moving towards a more unified scene. It is very easy now for a lot of younger people from different countries to find a place in international journals, to find an international stage for their work, and to find international publishing houses for their books. This is bound to happen. All of my students publish in other languages than Greek, and before they finish their PhDs they have published papers in English in international journals.

DWB: But is it dangerous to write articles and books according to the style-sheets and programs of an international (English or otherwise) editorial and intellectual format? One has to write in a particular way to be accepted for publication in particular journals; one writes differently for a local indigenous journal than for a pan-European one. Is this a problem?

KK: I agree. I suppose that this is something that needs to be discussed in each particular country. In Greece we had a tradition of international contact; we have never been isolated from the international scene. There was a time when all of the scholars who worked in Greece wrote in Greek. This is not the case any more. I was always aiming at an international audience more than for a Greek audience that is first of all very small and second which is dominated by a particular structure (at least when I started my academic life). I was not interested in participating in that and I am not interested now either, though things have changed. There was always an internal scope. For example if I was to write for *Archaïologikē Ephemeris* which is a very tradition and conservative journal and which (out of choice) I did not to write for, I would have had to write different things in different ways; this was one of the reasons that I never wrote for them.

DWB: Do you think that the journals and the grant-givers have a very powerful role in the ways in which people do research and publish?

KK: Our responsibility in Greece is to support Greek archaeology and to preserve its integrity and its character, and to ensure that it is not assimilated into the global idiom; this is a very clear danger. When the Greek students come back from Britain, having completed their MAs and PhDs, they seem to be assimilated into the British model. The wording that they use is the appropriate wording that they have to write with if they are to be accepted in the British system. This phenomenon is so recognizable that it becomes amusing to see. One very important thing that we try to make our students do (though this is relevant for other countries as well) is to support the local tradition of archaeology without letting it be appropriated by the international scene. They need to support explicitly the indigenous tradition as a viable and correct one. People from this local tradition have said very important things and sometimes they have done so much earlier than anyone else in any other countries. We have to respect this and we have to underline this. As Greek archaeologists, it is our responsibility. We have to support the local traditions. We have to persuade our students to project their ideas with Greek reference and ideas. The local tradition in Romania or anywhere else should not try to imitate the Greece one. There was a time when a lot of value was attached to foreign legitimation and thus people wanted to gain their credentials from outside their own country, from the international community. On the internal scale, this is fine, but one must remain conscious of the local tradition, one has to support it and respect it as heritage.

DWB: For your students, if there were three things that you would insist that they read (in any language) what would they be?

KK: As at this stage of my career I am feeling more theoretical. I would tend to suggest something broadly theoretical, something about our relation with the past, probably David Clarke's *Analytical Archaeology* (Methuen, 1968), which reminds me of my early days. Also I would include Ian Hodder's *Reading the Past* (Cambridge University Press, 1986) but also Theodoridis' *The Dawn of Thessalian Culture* (Thessaloniki, 1967).

DWB: Of your own work, what are most proud of? Are there articles that people have not talked about that you feel have been overlooked?

KK: There are some papers that I wrote about the organization of space in the Neolithic, and I think that this has been one of my most important contributions to the ideas of site and the use of space. Also, there are papers that I have written more recently about the beginning of the Neolithic in Greece and about the beginnings of domestication that I would choose. There are many misunderstandings about these things in Greece and I have tried to set these things right. Last year I wrote a paper that presents a general overview of the situation not only in Greece but also in the eastern Mediterranean (including Cyprus) and I think that this gave a good argument about how these things develop, in my opinion at least. My arguments are very different from the dominant views that one can find in the papers of Colin Renfrew on the Indo-European languages and in others peoples' papers about gradual diffusion from the Near East.

DWB: What papers would you write in a different way now than you did when you originally wrote them?

KK: There are many things that I would do differently now, but that is how it should be. For example a lot of things that I wrote in my PhD, I would not underline them now, let along say them.

DWB: There is a popular British interview program called Desert Island Discs, and the final questions ask if you were left on a desert island (and you could have some say in what you had with you), then what book and what luxury item would want .

KK: I don't think that there is a single book; I would need a library not one book. For the luxury, I would want a sail boat.