

## Archaeology on the front line: digging politics in Asia Minor 1919–1922

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*(Dear sirs) ... Supervisors of military units informed the government that Greek soldiers came across ancient reliefs and inscriptions in many villages, as they were going through, ... used by the villagers in various ways ... ; this was the reason that the director of the Archaeological Service K. Kourouniotes and the stewards N. Laskaris and Str. Paraskevaides were sent to collect and dispatch the antiquities back to Smyrna, to be deposited in the great Museum for Asia Minor ... These archaeologists travelled along the front line and visited various villages, from the Maeander (Büyük Menderes Nehri) to Uşak, Afyon Karahisar, Eskişehir, Prussa, to Moudanya on Bosphorus. The nearby military authorities were notified for any significant antiquities ... and were assigned to dispatch them back to Smyrna. Inscriptions and antiquities of minor value were catalogued and left in situ, while the military authorities were charged to secure them in a public building. (Kourouniotes 1924: 2)*

This is part of the report written by K. Kourouniotes, the director of the Greek Archaeological Service in Asia Minor in 1922, describing his efforts to collect and protect cultural heritage in the area. But, what were Greek archaeologists doing in the crossfire, a few months before the collapse of the Asia Minor front line and the sweeping counter-attack of the Kemalist forces?

My research examines the years after the end of the First World War, when Greece, having joined the victorious Entente powers (Britain, France and Russia), annexed new lands and was seeking to materialise the contradictory promises about post-war territorial gains made by the Allies. Specifically, at the Paris Peace Conference (1919), E. Venizelos, the Greek Prime Minister, lobbied hard for the vision of an expanded Hellas. This *Megali Idea*, a notion deeply rooted in the political and religious consciousness of the Greeks, expressed the goal of uniting the lands on either side of the Aegean, incorporating Greek-speaking populations of neighbouring countries into an expanded Greek state. Such lands included the coastal area of Asia Minor, considered one of the cradles of ancient Greek civilisation: ‘the holy land of Ionia’.

### *Archaeologists at war*

Following the landing of the Greek army in Izmir on 15 May 1919, the newly established Greek government of Asia Minor, backed by mainland Greece, organised and funded a number of cultural and social activities in the occupied area. This was

an attempt to solidify Greek identity and establish the infrastructure for the final incorporation of the ‘liberated’ lands into a Greek state ‘of the two continents and the five seas’.

Great care was given to the establishment of an Archaeological Service, the express purpose of which was the protection of ancient monuments, principally the remains excavated and the collections organised by foreign archaeological institutes. These were remains that had been ‘abandoned and left unguarded by the Ottoman government after the end of World War I, with considerable losses’, as the Greek sources of the time report.

The Greek archaeologists surveyed, excavated, restored buildings, collected antiquities and curated collections; they employed guards and stewards from local communities to protect large archaeological sites and handled excavation permits for foreign archaeological institutes. The main project, as noted in Kourouniotes’ report, was the establishment of an ‘Asia Minor Museum’ in Izmir containing antiquities of ‘explicit beauty and importance’, which reflected the continuous presence of Greek civilisation in this ‘primordial’ Hellenic land of Ionia (Kourouniotes 1924: 73–87).

Undoubtedly, the most impressive project of the Asia Minor Archaeological Service was the excavation of the basilica of St John in Ephesus. During the summer of 1921, while the Greek invasion of Anatolia reached a climax, the Archaeological Society at Athens, following an invitation from Kourouniotes, took up a rather impressive endeavour: the excavation of the basilica of St John, a famous pilgrim site of the Byzantine period. The Greek government of Asia



The basilica of St John in Ephesus, after the end of the 1922 excavation season.

Minor funded the project to the tune of 15,000 drachmas and provided 20 or 30 prisoners from the Smyrna prison as workmen. The findings were so impressive that in its second season, while the military expedition was moving towards catastrophe, the excavation received 20,000 drachmas in funding, 60 prisoners as a workforce and was visited by the Greek governor of Asia Minor and the king of Greece. The remnants of the 60m-wide basilica were arranged, a guard and a Greek steward from the local community were employed, while the moveable finds were sheltered in a renovated mosque nearby (Sotiriou 1924: 97, 115).

#### *Pasts revisited*

The activities and the role of the Greek Archaeological Service in Asia Minor remain largely unresearched. Even though some publications exist – most of them rather emotionally or ideologically orientated – discussion of the archaeological projects in Asia Minor undertaken by the Greeks has been pushed to one side thanks to a focus on the military events of 1922 and the emergence of the modern Turkish state. These archaeological projects have never been examined in the context of contemporary political and archaeological developments, let alone in relation to Ottoman practices and policies or through the endeavours of western powers in Asia Minor.

It appears that archaeology in Asia Minor in the early 20th century did not differ much from such endeavours across much of Europe, where the past became a battleground between various stakeholders who strived to align cultural heritage to their own national-identity narratives. The supposedly decadent Ottoman Empire, busy seeking to incorporate its own emerging identity within a pan-European one, was probably an easy target (Özdoğan 1998: 114–15; Shaw 2004: 132).

The Greeks, on the other hand, had already established their connection with the classical past for nearly a century. They commenced their projects in Asia Minor with a determination to ‘document the 2,500 years of Greek history in the land of Ionia’, while broadening the boundaries of their homeland. The Ephesus project emphasises the newly explored Byzantine self of the Greek state that concluded the tripartite national narrative, forming a middle/medieval pillar between the glory of antiquity and the modern national state. It also acted as a unifying element, referring to the Christian identity of the local populations of Asia Minor who were also involved in the project.

Broadening the scope, these Greek archaeological activities were only one part of a wider heritage project – with a political tinge – taking place at this time in Asia Minor. The great powers of the time – Germany, Britain and France – were also busy excavating archaeological sites following large-scale public works in the area, often critiquing the ‘Christian-Greek Ionian’ endeavours for their own benefit (Scherrer 2000: 37).



Monastirakia and Karantina island (to rear), Urla (2018). Both sites were excavated by the first Ephor of the Greek Archaeological Service in Asia Minor, G.P. Oikonomou.

#### *Future paths*

Nearing 100 years on from the landing of the Greek forces in Asia Minor, what is to be gained from historical research such as this, apart from discussing an interesting and largely unknown story and the use of heritage in a turbulent era? To a certain extent, examining cultural politics in times of political crises can provide a solid paradigm by which to discuss the formulations of national identity, in this case of the Mediterranean/Balkan states in the interwar period, and the role of heritage in the illumination of specific parts of national histories. However, most importantly, it can create a platform from which to discuss rapprochement between Greece and Turkey through heritage projects, by exploring the hidden biographies of contemporary touristic areas, such as Urla and Ephesus, and, in contemplating conflict and trauma, by considering the potential role of heritage in their eventual resolution.

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