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The presence of the Istituto Centrale del Restauro at the Heraklion Archaeological Museum in the 1950s: introducing a modern conservation approach

Abstract

Archaeologist Nikolaos Platon was appointed head of the 9th Archaeological Ephorate in Crete on the eve of World War II, a position he held throughout the promising 1950s. The Greek post-war reconstruction model was largely based upon the development of tourism and the exploitation of the country's archaeological resources, the care and enhancement of which were a *sine qua non* in meeting modern challenges. In the field of archaeological conservation, the period was marked by international breakthroughs. In Europe, the activity of the Istituto Centrale del Restauro, founded on the threshold of the War, intensified. It focused on the care of war-torn European monuments and the establishment of a sophisticated educational system that would offer upcoming generations of conservators a new perspective on communication in their professional activities. In the inescapable post-war conditions, Platon, an inquiring and extrovert scientist, explored new approaches towards the protection of Cretan antiquities and the improvement of their preservation state. Keeping up with contemporary developments, he pursued contacts with the international scientific community and initiated a potentially subversive collaboration for conservation on the island, between the local Archaeological Service and the Istituto Centrale del Restauro. At the core of the project was the conservation and presentation of the prehistoric frescoes kept at the Archaeological Museum in Heraklion. The Italian conservators shared their knowledge and experience with the Cretan empirical conservators and introduced innovative conservation methods. This paper chronicles the collaboration and attempts to evaluate its impact on the development of conservation methodologies and ethics in 1950s Crete. It also addresses a reasonable question: whether this original and somewhat revolutionary conservation endeavor – given its time and place – actually overturned the status quo of archaeological conservation on the island.

Keywords: archaeological conservation, reconstruction, empirical conservators, Heraklion Archaeological Museum, Istituto Centrale del Restauro, Nikolaos Platon, Émile Gilliéron, Minoan frescoes, Cesare Brandi, Amnisos, Knossos, Haghia Triada, fixatif, casein, shellac

Introduction

In the 1950s, a collaboration of great significance for the historical course of archaeological conservation in Greece developed between the Istituto Centrale del Restauro in Rome and the local Archaeological Ephorate, on the initiative of Ephorate Director Nikolaos Platon. The subject

of the then revolutionary endeavor was the conservation and restoration of the prehistoric frescoes of Crete at the Archaeological Museum in Heraklion, an inherent feature of Aegean material culture and findings of great archaeological significance.

The project prioritized two issues: the conservation of each fresco as an entity, and the introduction of a new reconstruction and presentation technique, intended to gradually replace the previous one introduced by the Swiss artist Émile Gilliéron the elder (1850-1924) in the early 1900s. Case studies for the discussion will be part of the Lily Fresco from the prehistoric settlement of Amnisos and the painted sarcophagus from the palatial center known as Haghia Triada.[1] The discussion aims at highlighting what was at the time a unique partnership by Greek standards, and at evaluating the degree to which conservation and restoration practices in Crete were affected by it in the long term. Moreover, the paper aspires to enrich our current knowledge of the materials and methods applied during conservation interventions in the past.

Two periods are crucial to the discussion: the early 1900s, when archaeological research, conservation and restoration practices in Crete were established, and the period during which the collaboration evolved, in the 1950s.

Fresco conservation in the 1900s

Archaeological investigations on the island of Crete had begun before autonomy, which came in 1898, and were motivated by European archaeologists who were already there longing for the right conditions to converge in order to establish their archaeological work. They were also promoted by the representatives of the Filekpedeftikos Syllogos (Educational Association) and particularly the Syllogos' head, Iosif Hatzidakis (1848-1936).[2] Excavations were initiated during the period of the Cretan State (1898-1913), the exception being those at Knossos originally conducted by the Cretan Minoas Kalokairinos (1843-1907) in 1878,[3] and continued by Arthur

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1 Amnisos was excavated by the archaeologist Spyridon Marinatos. On the excavations at Amnisos, see Σπυρίδων Μαρινάτος (1932), «Ανασκαφή Αμνισού Κρήτης», in: *Πρακτικά της εν Αθήναις Αρχαιολογικής Εταιρείας*, 76-94. Haghia Triada: the site is named after the nearby village of Haghia Triada, as its ancient name remains unknown. The sarcophagus was found during excavations at the hilltop cemetery near the site of Haghia Triada. For more on the sarcophagus and its revelation, see Roberto Paribeni (1908), «Il sarcofago dipinto di Haghia Triada», *Monumenti Antichi*, 19 (1908), Tip. della R. Accademia dei Lincei, 7-86.

2 The Educational Association (Φιλεκπαιδευτικός Σύλλογος – Filekpedeftikos Syllogos) was founded by members of the local bourgeoisie in 1878. However, its impact on Cretan archaeology and conservation grew after the well-connected doctor and amateur archaeologist Iosif Hatzidakis was elected president in 1883. Hatzidakis not only involved the *Syllogos* in archaeological activities, but also acted as a mediator between European archaeologists and the local administrator. He argued that the Syllogos ought to have the exclusive right to grant archaeological excavation permits, making it the first official Archaeological Authority in Crete under Ottoman law (ιραδές – irades). For more on early archaeological activities in Crete and the European influence, see Vincenzo La Rosa (2001), «Οι απαρχές της Κρητικής αρχαιολογίας ή η πολιτική διορατικότητα του Ι. Χατζιδάκη», *Πεπραγμένα Θ' Διεθνούς Κρητολογικού Συνεδρίου – Προϊστορική Περίοδος, 1(4), 1-6 Οκτωβρίου 2001, Ελούντα*, 381-387, Nicoletta Momigliano (2002), "Federico Halbherr and Arthur Evans: An archaeological correspondence (1894- 1917)", *SMEA*, 44(2) (2002), 263-318 and Vasilis Varouhakis (2015), *L' archeologie enragée: Archaeology and national identity under the Cretan State (1898-1913)*, Thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Southampton, Faculty of Humanities.

3 For Kalokairinos's excavations at Knossos, see Κατερίνα Κόπακα (1995), «Ο Μίνως Καλοκαιρινός και οι πρώτες ανασκαφές στην Κνωσό», στο: *Πεπραγμένα Ζ' Διεθνούς Κρητολογικού Συνεδρίου*, Α1, Ρέθυμνο, 501-511.

Evans (1851-1941) from 1900 to 1935.[4] All excavations brought to light unique yet fragile antiquities that were in need of immediate protection. Therefore, the narrative of archaeological conservation in Crete begins in the late 1800s and early 1900s, with the initiation of large-scale archaeological excavations throughout the whole island.

Painted frescoes are amongst the most significant treasures of Cretan archaeology, due to their high aesthetics, their sophisticated construction technology, and the great wealth of information provided by their pictorial imagery, especially in the absence of written sources. Their origins lie in Final Neolithic (4500-3200 BC) and Early Minoan Crete (3200-2100 BC), when the floors and walls of important buildings were coated with a lime and clay plaster and colored monochrome. The construction of the first Minoan palaces on the island brought technical advances in fresco construction, such as the introduction of high purity lime plaster, the addition of improved pigments and the creation of abstract designs, imitations of stonework etc. Pictorial painting first appeared in Middle Minoan IIA Crete (≈1900-1800 BC) (Chapin: 2012).[5]

The perishable frescoes were found in a fragmented state during excavations. They were collected by the empirical conservators at the local Archaeological Periphery, who were assisting excavations on behalf of the Ephorate, and transported to the premises of the newly founded Archaeological Museum in Heraklion.[6] Conservation and restoration of them began in the early 20th century, when Evans contacted the Swiss artist É. Gilliéron to work on the frescoes from Knossos. The materials, techniques and general approach he suggested were established without debate.[7] According to his conservation and reconstruction method, matching fragments were joined within a framed wooden surface and the voids amongst them were filled with plaster of Paris. The plaster surfaces were flattened in order for the reproduction of the missing motifs to be accommodated by means of painting. Finally, a protective coating was applied to all surfaces.

The method facilitated the interpretation of the ancient paintings brilliantly, but doubt was eventually cast on its accuracy.[8] In terms of contemporary conservation ethics actually being expressed in Europe at the time, the technique was characterized by lack of concern for the flexibility of the final system, since the fragments were literally trapped in the plaster. Moreover, the whole system was quite heavy and therefore hard to handle. The method reflects the priorities established at that time and place, proving the fact that conservation and restoration

4 Evans worked at Knossos until 1935, and his work included not only excavation but also large-scale conservation and restoration of the site. For more on the restoration and reconstruction work that Evans carried out at the architectural remnants of Knossos, see Peter Kienzle (1998), *Conservation and reconstruction at the Palace of Minos at Knossos*, Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Architecture, University of York.

5 On Minoan fresco construction technologies, see Anne Chapin (2012), "Frescoes", in *The Oxford Handbook of the Bronze Age Aegean*, http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199873609.013.0017, accessed 17/08/2023.

6 AMH-Heraklion Ephorate Archive, Folders: Outgoing 1902, Ref.No.:135-15/02/1902, Outgoing 1910, Ref. No.: 129/28-08-1910 and Incoming 1903, Ref. No.:-, 24/04/1903.

7 For more on the Gilliérons' work on the Knossos frescoes, see Sean Hemingway (2011), "Historic images of the Greek Bronze Age", *The MET Museum* [online] https://www.metmuseum.org/blogs/now-at-the met/features/2011/historic-images-ofthe-greek-bronze-age, accessed 17/08/2023.

8 For criticism on the accuracy of the reconstructions, see Maria Shaw (2004), "The 'Priest-King' Fresco from Knossos: Man, Woman, Priest, King or someone else?", *Hesperia Supplements*, 33 (2004), 65-84, JSTOR, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354063, accessed 17/08/2023, and Hemingway, 2011.

practices in Greece and in Crete evolved in a context where archaeology prevailed, and were motivated by a keen desire for legibility of the ancient world.

Initiation of the conservation partnership in the 1950s

In the 1950s, Greece was struggling to recover from the aftermath of WW II and the ensuing Civil War. Tourism played a key role in the economic recovery plan for the country, with national cultural treasures as the cornerstone, making the protection and enhancement of antiquities a priority. It was the perfect time for the Greek Archaeological Service to upgrade archaeological conservation practices by exhibiting extroversion.

At the same time, Gilliéron's restoration method for the frescoes was considered outdated. The Istituto Centrale del Restauro, a globally renowned center for conservation at the time, was representative of contemporary principles and trends in heritage management in terms of conservation. Archaeologist and Head of the Cretan Archaeological Periphery Nikolaos Platon was aware of the new demands in the field. His correspondence and published works on the preservation state of Cretan antiquities reveal his concern and demonstrate his vision for the establishment of a conservation framework based on the monuments' needs, bound and regulated by modern scientific trends in Europe.[9]

In 1954 Platon decided to establish contact with the Istituto Centrale del Restauro in Rome, with the assistance of Doro Levi (1899-1991), Director of the Italian Archaeological School in Athens, with a view to conserving the frescoes. Cesare Brandi (1906-1988), the famous theoretician of conservation and co-founder and director of the Istituto Centrale del Restauro, arrived in Crete to establish a framework for collaboration.[10]

The first step would have to be the delivery of fresco samples to Rome for analysis, as an essential preliminary to the project. Platon succeeded in arranging for authentic material to be sent to Italy so that the expert conservators would be able to work towards determining ancient construction technology and identifying the frescoes' constituents.[11] They would also test a variety of modern and traditional conservation materials in order to plan their conservation strategy. The remaining samples would be sent back to Crete.[12]

Actual work in Crete began in 1955 and lasted until 1959, during which time the local staff were trained by conservators from the Istituto.

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9 Nikolaos Platon's efforts to advance science-based conservation projects in Crete and foster collaboration is evident in his correspondence with the Greek Archaeological Service, foreign universities and other foreign institutions. It is available in the historical archive of the Archaeological Periphery of Crete and the Archaeological Museum of Heraklion (folders for 1952, 1953 and 1954).

10 Historical archive of the Archaeological Periphery of Crete/Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, Folder: Outgoing Correspondence 1954, Ref. No 854/06-03-1954 and Ref. No 950/86-87/11-06/-1954.

11 Historical archive of the Archaeological Periphery of Crete/Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, Folder: Outgoing Correspondence 1954, Ref. No 950/86-87/11-06/-1954 and Folder: Incoming Correspondence 1955 II Ref. No 113974/5231/2369/11-10-1955.

12 Historical archive of Istituto Centrale del Restauro, *Frammenti da Haghia Triada* (not dated).

Conservation of the painted sarcophagus from Haghia Triada

The painted sarcophagus was a vessel made of porous limestone, covered with painted lime mortar created using the same technique as the frescoes. It had been brought to light in 1903 by the Italian archaeologist Roberto Paribeni (1876-1956), during his excavations at the hilltop cemetery near the site of Haghia Triada; the painting on it depicts a complex narrative scene of burial and sacrifice.[13] The conservation strategy applied to the painted sarcophagus is indicative of that taken by the Istituto and the mentality that Platon wished the staff of his periphery to adopt over time.

The sarcophagus had been conserved before the 1950s, according to the report by the Italian conservators, in which they refer to the detection of old materials and interventions. Lack of written records on early conservation practices by the local staff limits our knowledge of the conservation and restoration materials and methods. In his 1956 article titled "The Sarcophagus of Haghia Triada restored",[14] Doro Levi implied that previous treatment had been carried out in a careless manner (Levi, 1956: 193-194).

The detailed documentation of the new conservation process by the Italian conservators, which for the purposes of the present research was accessed via the Institute's archives in Rome, outlines the multi-dimensional analysis of the samples:[15] the composition of the mortar and consistency of the ancient pigment were established and their reaction to several cleaning agents and solvents was tested. Two potentially harmful encrustations between the coating and the painting were analyzed: although one of them was of calcium carbonate and in immediate contact with the painting, the expert conservators decided against its removal, as any such attempt could damage the pigments. Previous interventions such as traces of scalpel blades were detected and documented, the substrate's cohesion to the stone surfaces was observed and, finally, the weathering of the old coating was evaluated with regard to the extent it could endanger the pigments.

As the conservators were unable to determine the precise consistency of the coating, they assumed that its basic substance must have been wax or paraffin. I propose it is safe to assume that the local staff had applied materials designated by Gilliéron the elder, who had been a powerful presence for Cretan empirical conservators from the start, since the time of his collaboration with Arthur Evans on the conservation and restoration of the Knossos frescoes. Therefore, the methods and materials used are most certainly linked with his presence. Thinking in this direction is reinforced by recent and ongoing research and data derived from meticulous study of the historical archives, as part of my investigation into Gilliéron' s activities in restoration and conservation projects elsewhere in Greece. The data also allow us to make certain correlations regarding the actual identity of the materials. There is strong evidence to suggest that the coating may well have been so-called *fixatif*, a painter's material that Gilliéron

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13 For more on the sarcophagus and excavation of it see Paribeni, 1908.

14 Doro Levi (1956), "The Sarcophagus of Haghia Triada restored", in: *Archaeology*, 2(3) (1956), 192-199 http://www.jstor.org/stable/41666051, accessed 17/08/20223.

15 Historical archive of Istituto Centrale del Restauro, *Sarcofago di Haghia Triada* (not dated).

and his son after him frequently used and recommended, particularly for consolidating ancient pigments.[16]

The conservation strategy planned and followed by the Italians included an aqueous solution of ammonium stearate as the main cleaning medium, shellac – a natural resin – for consolidating the painted surfaces, and casein for filling the void between the lime substrate and the stone, a milk protein that was channeled through openings deliberately made on undecorated areas. The openings were sealed with plaster of Paris and the missing patterns were reproduced with watercolors.

The new reconstruction method for the frescoes

The reconstruction method for the frescoes introduced by the Istituto Centrale del Restauro was applied to part of the Lily Fresco from Amnisos, among other works. The fresco bore a floral decorative pattern and had been brought to light by Spyridon Marinatos (1901-1974) in 1932. The method involved wrapping the fragments in tin foil and placing them on a wooden surface; the tin foil isolated the fragments from the filling material and accommodated their removal or readjustment. The voids around the fragments were filled with paper or fabric in an effort to keep the weight of the whole system low, and the fragments were left in a slightly projecting position. Finally, a thin layer of plaster of Paris was applied to the paper/fabric, and missing motifs were reproduced by means of painting.[17]

The Lily Fresco from Amnisos had not been restored prior to the 1950s. In his publication of the Amnisos excavations in 1932, Marinatos informs us that it was unearthed by Emmanouel Saloustros and Zacharias Kanakis (1903-1971), the two empirical conservators working for the Ephorate (Μαρινάτος, 1932, 82-83). We also know that Gilliéron the younger created a painted restoration of it, which appears in the 1935 volume of *The Palace of Minos* (Evans, 1935, 1002, plates LXVII a and b).[18] The fragments showed discolorations and traces of fire. According to the reports written by the Istituto' s conservators during conservation, removal of these traces was only attempted to a limited degree, as the pigments proved to be extremely friable. They were consolidated with casein, while the wooden frame was impregnated with creosote, a tar product used for waterproofing. Matching fragments were joined together, and voids were filled with fabric soaked in a mixture of lime and casein, with final aesthetic interventions completed on the neutrally coloured surface.

The new method provided a lightweight and easily transportable system, and immediate and thorough mobility of each fragment. Although the method for attributing aesthetic cohesion

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16 For more details on Émile Gilliéron *père* and his son's participation in other conservation projects in Greece: Μαρία Δελή (υπό έκδοση), *Η συντήρηση των αρχαιοτήτων στην Ελλάδα απο την ίδρυση του νέου ελληνικού κράτους έως τη Μεταπολίτευση. Το παράδειγμα της Κρήτης.*

17 Historical archive of the Archaeological Periphery of Crete/Archaeological Museum of Heraklion, Folder: Outgoing Correspondence 1954, Ref. No. 296/457/24-09-1955, *'Ινστιτοῦτον ἀποκαταστάσεων, νέα τακτοποίησις τῶν τεμαχίων Μιν. [sic] Τοιχογραφιῶν.*

18 Arthur Evans (1935), *The Palace of Minos: a comparative account of the successive stages of the early Cretan civilization as illustrated by the discoveries at Knossos*, London: Macmillan, https://doi.org/10.11588/diglit.1752, accessed 17/08/20223.

remained the same – i.e., painted reproduction of the missing patterns – the approach now differed: the color shades selected by the Italians were lighter than the ancient ones. The purpose of this choice was twofold, ensuring that the the ancient art was not overshadowed, and that even an untrained eye could easily distinguish between the ancient art and the modern additions.

Conclusions

Conditions in post-war and post-civil war Greece were socially and economically appropriate for the Greek Archaeological Service to take steps towards developing a scientific framework for heritage conservation. However, the absence of trained conservators with a theoretical and practical background was a serious obstacle. The situation was even more acute in Crete, an island far from the mainland, with an already entrenched status quo in the management of its archaeological wealth. Nikolaos Platon was hoping to overcome this problem by establishing an international collaboration, notably with the only specialized conservation institute in the world at the time: The Istituto Centrale del Restauro.

The data derived so far by archival research has brought to light no evidence of other similar activities in 1950s Greece, indicating that this was a unique endeavor that combined the introduction of innovative conservation and restoration approaches, materials and methods, the simultaneous training of local staff, and the sharing of expertise. The significance of the innovative reconstruction technique for the frescoes must not be underestimated; it was the Istituto's sophisticated suggestion for their presentation, which was intended to relieve the fragile ancient fragments of harmful stresses while enhancing and keeping them safe.

The collaboration introduced the detailed and systematic documentation of monuments and treatments both in terms of practice and as a mentality, the significance of preliminary studies and analytical techniques prior to works, the abolition of the notion of "recipes" for conservation and the establishment of a more conservative and hence modern approach to cleaning interventions.

The project was organized by leading scientific figures of the time and was planned and implemented methodically. The Istituto's conservators shared their knowledge and experience with staff at the Archaeological Service of Crete but, as it appears, very little of it became routine for the museum staff after the cooperation ended. The documentation of conservation works in the museum's workshop, for example, would not be accomplished until the 1970s, with the arrival of Antonis Fountoulakis, the first Cretan conservator with a degree in conservation. Thankfully, Platon never refrained from documenting all works from an archaeological perspective of course, leaving us with a valuable source of historic data.

Some of the conservation materials applied by the Italians, such as casein and shellac, were incorporated into the local conservation routine, and the painter Thomas Fanourakis (19155-1933) seems to have adopted the Italian approach to the reproduction of missing motifs – that is, by painting in lighter shades. The most crucial part of the endeavor, however, concerning the reconstruction of the frescoes, was abandoned and forgotten after the Italians left. The restorations by the Gilliérons were not replaced, and are today protected for their historic value

and preserved as evidence of the history of archaeological conservation, restoration and means of interpretation.

By the 1950s the Gilliérons' restorations had already become inextricably linked with the frescoes and had contributed to their popularity. This fact alone had major implications, such as a dynamic role in the country's tourism development and indirect economic value. Equally significant was the social value of the reconstructed frescoes; they have always been an endless source of national and local pride, are universally recognizable, have become commercial emblems and are an enduring inspiration for art.

Yet the factor that determined not only the impact of the cooperation but the advances in conservation on the island in general, was the degree of receptiveness – or lack of it – on the part of the local staff. Data collected via study of historic sources and invaluable personal contact with many representatives of archaeology and conservation in Crete reveal a narrow field, and one dominated by nepotism. It was hostile to alterations that could upset the status quo, and despite the motivation and initiatives of the authorities represented by Platon, the passing on of knowledge among conservators was never self-evident, being defined by subjective criteria.

In conjunction with the implications of the Gilliérons' reconstructions discussed above, the empiricism that prevailed in the field of archaeological conservation in Crete until the mid-1970s contributed to the slow development of its practices on the island. The resultant narrative is indicative of how highly influential a specific mindset may be on the advancement of things, especially when combined with priorities dictated by economic and social factors.

Nevertheless, the outcome of the project does not diminish its significance. Even if its benefits were not as immediate or as radical as one would expect, the interaction of local staff with the Italian conservators played its part in the maturing of conditions for the inevitable changes the future would bring. Last but not least, the whole endeavor captures one moment in a period of powerful changes, and one man's successful effort to address the challenges of his time: that of Nikolaos Platon.

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